

MIKEITZ (GENESIS, 41:1-44:17)

Vinegar Latkes??!

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

[This Friday, December 18, is my father's 48th Yahrtzeit. The concept of a Yahrtzeit is not that it is a time of mourning. Rather, it is a time of tribute. It is a time for the living to do Mitzvahs on behalf of those who are no longer able to. In that spirit, I humbly dedicate this message, and the Torah learning it generates, in memory of Tzvi Hirsch ben Rachmiel -- Harry Seplowitz]

The Pharaoh couldn't sleep. He had a dream that he couldn't understand. One of his servants remembered a Jewish kid in prison who could interpret dreams. Joseph was released from prison and soon rose to the second most powerful position in Egypt. (See "I Have a Dream".) With his new connections, Joseph was able to support his father and brothers during a devastating famine. And all because Joseph was unfairly sold as a slave, maligned, and thrown into prison. Aren't coincidences marvelous?

Chanukah is all about oil. That's why we eat greasy potato latkes fried in oil and deep-fried jelly donuts. (Those of us on Atkins prefer to drink our olive oil straight! :-))

We are all familiar with the Chanukah oil miracle. After throwing the Greek (actually, Syrian-Greek) marauders out of the Temple, the Jews found a one-day supply of olive oil. This oil was necessary for the daily kindling of the Golden Menorah. It would be eight days before they could make more oil. The Jews, defiled by battle, (someone who has been in contact with the dead, e.g., entering a cemetery, or killing an enemy soldier, needs to undergo a week-long purification process before participating in Temple ritual) needed that time to ritually purify themselves in order to press olives and produce ritually pure oil.

The story is well known. One day's worth of oil miraculously burned for eight days. Therefore, in commemoration of this eight-day miracle, we celebrate the eight-day holiday of Chanukah.

There's only one problem. It wasn't an eight-day miracle.

If a one-day supply lasts for seven days longer than it is supposed to, that is a SEVEN-day miracle! The first day's burning was natural. Chanukah should only be celebrated for seven days!

The Chanukah story is not the only record of a candle lighting miracle. The Talmud (Ta'anis, 25a) relates the story of Rabbi Chanina's daughter who was setting up her Shabbos candles. She inserted a wick into the lamp and poured in the oil. She lit the wick, recited the blessing, and welcomed the Sabbath. Suddenly, to her shock, she realized that she had accidentally filled her lamp with VINEGAR!

She was devastated. Once the flame would reach the part of the wick that was saturated with vinegar, the light would be extinguished. They would be forced to spend Friday night sitting in the dark!

Her father was unfazed. "What are you worried about?" he asked. "He Who said that oil should burn will also say that vinegar should burn!"

The Talmud goes on to relate that the fire burned all night and all the next day. On Saturday night they used the flame to recite Havdallah!

This is a difficult passage. I believe in miracles. If the Talmud relates that a flame burned through the night fueled by vinegar, I accept that. G-d can, and does, do whatever He wants. What surprises me is the matter-of-fact response of Rabbi Chanina in EXPECTING a miracle. His response was "He Who said that oil should burn will also say that vinegar should burn!"

Who says that G-d will make vinegar burn? He usually doesn't! To be sure, miracles do happen. But we are not supposed to rely upon them. How could Rabbi Chanina display such a cavalier attitude, presuming that G-d would change nature?

In order to understand Rabbi Chanina's response, I think we have to appreciate the contrast between nature and miracles. In reality, there is no such contrast.

One of the tenets of the Jewish faith is that one day, the righteous will live again. Impossible, you say? Consider the following. If you live in the Northern Hemisphere, you are now experiencing winter. (If those of you in Florida and Arizona call this winter!) The grass is brown and the trees have lost their leaves. A tree branch, pliable in the summer, snaps right off the tree. In other words, nature, as we know it, is dead. In the spring, G-d will revive the dead!

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler points out that if you plant a seed, the first thing that happens is that it decomposes and rots. The seed breaks down and falls apart. It dies. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a root goes down and a shoot sprouts up. G-d has revived the dead!

Rabbi Dessler observes that the only difference between nature and miracle is frequency.

G-d is not a "watchmaker" who produces a product and is no longer involved with the product he created. The factory worker who built my watch may no longer be in the watch business. He may no longer be living. But my watch keeps on ticking.

Did you ever see a bicycle generator? It has a cylinder that rubs against the bicycle tire. As you pedal the bike and turn the wheel, the cylinder spins and sends power to the headlight. As long as you pedal, the light stays on. Once you stop pedaling, the light goes out.

G-d created the world thousands of years ago. But He keeps on "peddling." The miracle of Creation continues unabated. Nature is that miracle.

The reason Rabbi Chanina expected vinegar to burn is that he understood that for oil to burn is also a miracle. Since every moment of life is a new act of Divine Creation, there is no difference between the "nature" of oil burning and the "miracle" of vinegar burning.

Thus, we can understand the EIGHT-day miracle of Chanukah. Seven days of Chanukah commemorate the miracle of the extra seven days that the oil burned. The "natural" event of a few scholars routing the Greek war machine was also a miracle. Finding a single jar of oil in a Temple that was ransacked by the Greeks was a miracle. The Six Day War was a miracle. Jewish survival is a miracle. The very fact that oil burns at all is a miracle.

Are you worried about the situation in the Middle East? Are you worried about growing anti-Semitism in Europe? Are you apprehensive about what the future will bring? "He Who said that oil should burn will also say that vinegar should burn." He Who took us out of Egypt and took us through the Red Sea will save us again. And again. And again.

The fact that we wake up in the morning is a miracle. Now we're left with only one question:

Why is Chanukah only eight days?

Have a great Shabbos and an illuminating Chanukah.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz