

by Rabbi Eli Mallon, M.Ed., LMSW

Hanukah gives us special hope.

On Hanukah, we recite “Hallel” -- a group of psalms (113-118) that are also recited in synagogue on Pesach, Sh’vuot and Sukkot (and in modified form on Rosh Hodesh).

The unifying theme of “Hallel” is a seemingly miraculous victory over apparently insurmountable odds.

Pesach commemorates the miraculous “10 Plagues” and parting of the Red Sea that overcame the “insurmountable odds” of Egyptian might. On Sh’vuot, commemorating Matan Torah, the “insurmountable odds” of sensory perception, which had kept us living as if separated from G-d, were “overcome” by Divine Presence, Power, Justice, Compassion and Wisdom revealed to us at Har Sinai. Sukkot commemorates miracles of Divine protection that overcame the “insurmountable odds” of the wilderness conditions in which our ancestors wandered for 40 years. Hanukah commemorates oil burning for eight days that miraculously overcame the “insurmountable odds” of having been enough to burn for only one.

In each case, it’s “Divine,” not “human” power that succeeds. The true theme of Hallel, then, is the superiority of Spiritual over material power; of “Spirit” over “matter;” of “Infinite” over “finite.” From the *human* viewpoint – “Israelites vs. Egyptians” or “Israelites vs. wilderness” or even “Israelites vs. nature” – the odds indeed seem insurmountable and the subsequent victory “miraculous.” But from the *Torah* viewpoint – “Egyptian power vs. G-d’s power” or the “power of nature vs. G-d’s power” – the outcome is never in question.

In later mandating the various mitzvot of Hanukah, the rabbis weren’t creating mere history lessons. They meant for us to affirm the supremacy of G-d’s power over any problem we might ever be facing. Reciting Hallel, lighting our hanukiah, we praise G-d for what G-d *did*, in order to remind our hearts what G-d *can do – is doing – now*.

This year (2008), “economic collapse” is our “pharaoh.” Just as the Israelites saw the chariots pursuing them, and the Red Sea – a boundary they couldn’t cross – before them, many of us see ourselves and our country (if not our world) “pursued” by financial problems that we can neither avoid nor overcome, with no apparent avenue of escape before us. We could as readily call “economic collapse” our “Greek army;” our “one day’s worth of oil,” if we see ourselves as bound by “economic” laws in a world absent of the Divine, with nothing to help us beyond our own efforts. In so doing, though, we’d be missing the Torah-lesson in Hanukah, Hallel and our hanukiah: Divine Power is *more real* than the world; always present with us, helping us at every moment, in every event, even *today*.

G-d led us out of Egypt; G-d can lead our world out of economic breakdown.

G-d was present with us at Sinai; G-d is present in our world today, too.

G-d sustained us in the wilderness; G-d can supply our world with abundance.

G-d caused the oil to burn for 8 days; G-d is helping our world, unfettered by limitation.

But Torah and the rabbis can do no more than *suggest* all this. It remains for *us* to choose to change our thinking (b’ezrat Ha-Shem – with G-d’s help, of course).

A Yiddish proverb says, “Der Innu-ha-din iz erger vi der din alain – Worrying about a problem is worse than the problem alone.”

In the Talmud, *Avot d’Rabbi Natan*, teaching that we should “Learn to receive troubles,” says, “Be like a bottle that has no opening to let air in”<sup>1</sup> [it’ll float in the sea, rather than taking in water and sinking]. Some of us, it’s true, tend to worry more; others – less. Life experience, or a

<sup>1</sup> Avot d’Rabbi Natan 41:11

good friend, teacher or therapist, can often teach us the uselessness – if not outright harm – of worry. In any case, anyone can learn to stay calmer, even gradually.

But how?

Growing up, some kids I saw seemed unflustered by anything that happened to them. I thought they were “cool.” How I wished I could be like them! But as time went on, I learned that many were merely keeping an outer appearance of calmness, while boiling inside with anger, worry or fear. “Looking calm” didn’t mean “being calm.”

To a large extent, our feelings are the products of our thoughts. Given any situation, we can choose thoughts about it that’ll create greater worry and tension, or less of those feelings. On Hanukah, this especially means thoughts about G-d.

In our present, apparently overwhelming economic crisis, can G-d help us?

Even a thousand years ago, the author of *Hovot ha-Levavot* had already answered this: “If you aren’t able to obtain the money you want in the manner you originally expected, the Almighty has many other ways and means by which you can acquire that money.”<sup>2</sup> We can also remind ourselves that if G-d could cause one day’s oil to burn for eight days, there’s no limit to the ways G-d can help us. What’s more, if G-d *would* make the oil last, is there anything G-d would *not* do for us? No!

Do we smile at the story of the oil, thinking that it doesn’t stand up to historical scrutiny? If so, we’ve missed its meaning: *There’s no need to ask how G-d can help!* G-d can help in infinitely more ways than human beings can expect or imagine! G-d’s help wasn’t only in the past – it’s *always* with us. There are no limits to the ways G-d *is* helping us, even today.

Telling ourselves – and seeing in our imagination – that despite the *appearance* of difficulty, G-d’s help is present and profuse, immeasurably greater than any perceived problem, will give us a calmness based on sincere, positive hope.

As to why we light one additional light on each night of Hanukah, Hillel’s school taught, “Ma’alin ba’kodesh v’ein moridin: We increase in holiness; we don’t decrease.”<sup>3</sup> If, as we light our lights, we declare G-d’s help and abundance in our mind and see it in our imagination, with greater sincerity and personal connection each night, we’ll shortly find the belief filling our heart, too.

You might ask: “OK. It’ll make us feel better. But will it actually change anything?”

Hasidut, based on the *Zohar*, teaches the immutable spiritual law of action and reaction: “It-ah-ru-tah d’l’ta-ta, it-ah-ru-ta d’l’e-la” – “An arousal below causes an arousal above.” The midrash also says that only after the first Israelite – Nachshon ben Aminadav – had entered the waters and they were up to his lips, did G-d part the Red Sea. We might say, too, that only after the Makkabee’im had first lit the oil, did G-d cause it to burn for eight days. Change begins with our certainty that G-d, with infinite capacity and good will, can do anything. If we doubt – the hanukiah in front of us is our reminder.

Let us, then, kindle increasing certainty in our hearts as we kindle one more light each night of Hanukah. And just as the light of our hanukiah is meant to radiate out into the world, kal v’homer, let our trust in G-d’s unlimited goodness and ability to help radiate out, too, healing the world’s worry along with our own.

### *Hanukah Sameach*

<sup>2</sup> Hovot ha-Levavot 4:4, quoted in “Gateway to Happiness” by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

<sup>3</sup> Shabbat 21b

God  
Made  
One  
Day's  
Oil  
Burn  
For  
Eight  
Days.

There are  
No limits  
To the  
ways  
God is  
Helping us.

