

A Hanukkah Teaching

This Shabbat, we are studying the customs of Hanukkah, in preparation for its celebration beginning Sunday night, December 2. And really, the timing couldn't be better. We'll start with a joke, and a story – a universal Jewish custom!

So my friend found this t-shirt in the Signals.com catalogue, and sent me the picture. It was a nice dark blue 100% cotton shirt with white and gold embellishments, and the picture of a fully lit Hanukkah menorah on the front. Underneath the *hanukiah*, it read: "Imagine if your cellphone was at 10%, but lasted eight days. Now you understand Hannukah."

This set my rabbinic mind off in several directions all at once. My first thought was "What has happened to our society, that technology has become so dominant in our lives that it is being used to explain the sacred?" But then I remembered the Jewish theological concept that everything has its place in the world. Which led me to recall a wonderful story from the Chasidic masters. This put an instant stop to my grumbling, and I want to share the story with you. It takes place in the 1900's and has to do with the (then) new technology.

Reb Avraham Yaakov of Sadigora was once sitting with his Hasidim. Their conversation was light and covered many topics. Almost as an aside, Reb Avraham Yaakov said, "You know my friends, it is possible to learn great truths from even inanimate things. Everything can teach us something."

Taking the rebbe's statement as a challenge, one Hasid asked, "Tell me, Rebbe, what might we learn from a train?"

"That because of a single second you might miss the whole thing."

"And from a telegraph?" another student asked. "What might we learn from a telegraph?"

"That every word is counted, and that every word carries a cost."

"And the telephone, Rebbe," yet another Hasid asked. "Tell us what we can learn from this."

"That what you say here," Reb Avraham Yaakov said, "can surely be heard there."¹

¹ From *Hasidic Tales Annotated and Explained*, by R' Rami Shapiro.

The collector of these stories, R' Rami Shapiro, explains further in his commentary to the story:

Life is our rebbe. Ordinary things are our teachers . . . The train reminds us that each moment is precious and unique. If you are asleep to what is happening now, you cannot reclaim it later. The telegraph reminds us that words matter. A single word uttered in anger or spite can sour years of love and trust. Weigh the value of your words before speaking them. The telephone reminds us that there is no defense against foolishness. "Here" and "there" are two ends of a single stick; do not think you can wave it here and not do damage there.

R' Rami goes on to say,

But there are other "rebbees" lurking in the ordinary things of everyday life. . .

A television: that the foolishness of some can capture the imaginations of many.

Advertising: that the full can be made hungry simply with images.

Internet: that wisdom can be lost in too much information.

Religion: that disease must be learned before cures can be sold.

Politics: that serving leaders is much easier than servant leadership.

And he gives this charge:

Look around you. Who are your "rebbees"? What are they teaching? What are you learning?

These are excellent questions as we move into the holiday that celebrates reclaiming the locus of our spiritual lives from a dominant culture. Excellent questions during a time of cleansing and the reorganization of the ancient Temple – eight days dedicated to clearing out whatever may be polluting our thoughts, our time, our lives. Eight days dedicated to reorienting our priorities through honing our sensitivity to the miraculous and choosing to rededicate ourselves (the word Hanukkah comes from the root meaning "to dedicate") to what really matters most: living wisely through our connection to our traditions, our community, and to G-d – and living in the spirit of freedom and dignity for all.

Going back to our cellphone joke: would that we were all as wise as our good Reb Avraham Yaakov and Reb Rami! Then, underneath the humor, what deeper messages can we find?

Central to both the joke and the story of Hanukkah is the miracle of a little bit of something lasting longer than one would think possible. Our

tradition has much to teach us about “the power of small” – for example, the small band of Maccabees that were able to defeat the mighty Syrian army. And how exactly did they accomplish this? Through wisdom, and by faith. We can do the same in our own time, and in our own ways, as is needed.

This is because all the hidden bits of wisdom in our faith tradition – in our stories, in the Torah, our liturgy, in our customs, are like precious gems. Though small, a gem has a great deal of sparkle and light, and a value that is quite disproportionate to its size. So, too, does a little candle have the power to dispel darkness and offer guidance to those who may be feeling lost. If you think about it, the miraculous often resides in the small, the mild, and the everyday.

Take, for example, our thoughts and feelings. Thousands of them come and go during a day, their power untapped and untrained. Neuroscience is teaching us that the brain has a negativity bias, developed over millennia to help us survive. However, this negativity bias can also work against us. It is easy - especially in our world where we are bombarded with 500 times more news and information than people who lived 100 years ago – to sink into despair, depression, or just become numbed out. (Or feel like a cellphone with very little charge left!) Yet neuroscience is also finding that just a few good thoughts and feelings have tremendous power to purify and dispel the negative. Researcher Dr. Rick Hansen at UC Berkeley writes in his latest book, *Resilient*:

Nearly everyone has many positive experiences each day, most of them mild and brief. For example, it feels good to drink water if you’re thirsty or put on a sweater if you’re chilled. It’s hard to get through a day without feeling friendly toward at least one person. Do you notice any of these experiences and highlight them in your awareness? Or do you pass by them and just move on to the next thing?

Each day is like a path strewn with many little jewels; the small, ordinary beneficial experiences of life. It’s easy to overlook these and step right over them. But then we get to the end of the day and ask, “Why don’t I feel richer inside? Why does it feel like I’m running on empty?”

He goes on to say that not only are we missing the small miracles, we can actually create them, as well:

Noticing enjoyable or useful thoughts, perceptions, emotions, desires or actions that are already occurring is the primary way to have a beneficial experience. The experience is here, and it’s authentic and real. Why not gain something from it?

Additionally, you can create beneficial experiences, such as getting some exercise or thinking about someone who likes you. There are several ways to create these kinds of experiences.

And this is where spiritual creativity and the celebration of a holiday can have such power. Hanukkah can be a marvelous opportunity to, in Hansen's words, "reestablish ourselves in the positive". In fact our entire tradition is a veritable treasure trove of opportunities to both learn to notice and to create, on a daily basis, the minor miracles that can strengthen, uphold and fill us with hope and positivity.

Ultimately, Hanukkah is about resilience – and the timing couldn't be better; resilience is a quality that is greatly needed at this time. The tragedy of the fires here in California, coming on the heels of the recent tragic shootings around our nation, have most of us too close to the borders of despair, or and likely feeling as if we are 'running on empty' because the needs of the world around us are so great.

However, as our great Rebbe Nachman used to say, "*Gevalt!* Never give up!" He could say this because he knew just what a tremendous source of strength we have in our tradition, and he knew the secrets of seeing things differently, and mining the wisdom, just like Reb Avraham Yaakov.

So, as we enter into Hannukah, let us ask ourselves: how we can celebrate in ways that allow us to maximize its gifts, and to be purified and strengthened the power by its focus on small miracles. This will bring both joy and a renewal of our strength so that we can continue being a light to those around us in need. Our tradition offers us no less than the great secrets of resilience. It's all about how we choose to see things; we must remember that things are not always as they first appear, and that we have more power to make things better than we often realize. It is implanted inside our tradition, and inside each of us, sourced by the Divine. Let us not overlook the power of small, but rather know that by wisdom and faith, much more can be accomplished than is commonly believed. This is one of the many beautiful secrets of Hannukah.