

Light of the past and present, Chanuka and spiritual opportunities
Based upon the Teachings of the Sfas Emes (marking his 100th Hillula in Shvat 5765)

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov zt"l (1740-1809), in his Sefer Kedushat Levi on Chanuka (D'rushim l'Chanuka sof d"h 'B'nusach HaBracha') asks about the meaning of the phrase "Bazman Haze" in the bracha we recite over the Ner Chanuka. This was a Nes of long ago, he claims, why do we add this final phrase of Bazman Haze to the Bracha? He suggests that, in fact, Chazal wish to impress upon us that each year, we are given the opportunity to tune-in to the spiritual power of Chanuka and its special message.

The Sfas Emes, Reb Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger zt"l (1847-1905) amplifies this teaching in his characteristic, Hashkafic manner, reminding each of us of our personal responsibility within Torah and Avodah and ever-challenging us in improving our relationship with HKB"H. Using the Kedushat Levi's teaching as his point of departure, he suggests that, in order for each of us to feel the power of this spiritual opportunity each year, we must find a way to disconnect from the physical, natural environment in which we spend the majority of our time. In fact, to the extent that we push aside the physical, we can draw closer to the spiritual, for a Nes is characterized as "Me-Al LeTeva"- super-natural.

The Mitzva of Ner Chanuka teaches and reminds us, each year, that all the commandments of the Ribbono Shel Olam are focused on leading us to a closer relationship with the Infinite, to elevating us from a mundane, regular existence to a world of depth and promise, of eternity and elevation. We, as human beings, are charged by HKB"H to continue His acts of creation in this physical world, "l'Taken Olam B'Malchut Shakai" (Tefilat Aleynu). Even while we carry out our day-to-day work and our Shabbat-to-Shabbat lives, we are reminded to consider the Mitzvot that fill our days as windows into the supernal world, as opportunities to rise "Me-Al LeTeva", in recognizing the source of these directives and their ultimate purpose in our lives.

The Sfas Emes' grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim (1789-1866) and founder of Ger Chassidut, remarks on the phrase "kva-um yamim tovim b'Hallel v'Hoda-ah" (Shabbat 21b) that Chazal enacted this special dual mode of Tefila on Chanuka to help us awaken to the heightened spiritual opportunities of these days so that one might discover new gateways to spiritual strength and growth. It is not for naught that Chazal have us place the Menora at the gateway to our homes. These doorways are openings from the safety of our homes to the challenges of the outside world, from the days of BaYamim HaHeym to Bazman Haze, when we need added Chizuk as we continue our travels in Galut. This may be meant, adds the Chiddushei HaRim, by the pasuk in Tehilim "zecher asah l-nifliotov" - He creates opportunities for remembering his awesome deeds (Tehilim 111:4) . The Ner Chanuka, when we properly focus on its light and its unbroken connection to the flame of the Menorah in the Beit HaMikdash, serves to remind us each year of the great Nisim and Niflaot to which we have been and continue to be privileged to experience.

May the zechut of the teachings of the Sfas Emes continue to serve as a bright flame to our people in the dark days of Galut, may our learning of his Torah serve to raise his Neshama closer and closer to the Boreh Olam, and may his lessons of living Torah in the present with an eye towards the Infinite burn within us forever.

Dr. Jesse Hefter, Brookline, MA (father of Jonathan Hefter, YC '07).

