Hanukkah: Bright Lights, Big Cities

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The pace of technology grows so dizzyingday by day that it's likely we're now living more in the future than we are in the present.What were once mere imaginings of science fiction films -- the "futuristic" landscapes of Fritz Lang's silent classic Metropolis,the flame-belching towers of Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, and the gravity-defying dream scapes of Christopher Nolan's Inception, to name but a famous few-- have proven, in fact, to be visionary. They have become our actual homes, our daily workplaces, our shopping malls and amusement parks. Stepping out of the subway into the digital blitz of Times Square after dark, for example, we might feel much as though we werehurtling headlong into cyberspace itself. Doubtless, we already inhabit a world where, as one modern author has observed, "technology is visceral…pervasive…Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds." Standing herein the midst of this brilliant, hypnotic, infinitely distracting (and, one might argue, ultimately illusionary)21st century atmosphere, would any of us notice the unadorned glow of a Hanukkiyah, Hanukkah lamp?

I raise the question to make a simple point. As human beings, we are eminently fallible, always distractable. Rabbi Moses Isserles (the "Rema"),in a gloss on the Laws of Prayer (Hilchot Tefillah 101:1),clearly suggests as much when he questions whether we ought to repeat a section of the Shemoneh Esrei if our attention wandered when we recited it the first time.The Rema'sargument is straightforward.What's to prevent us from being similarly distracted the second time around? Still,though as physical beings we are all of us prone to distraction, as spiritual beings we try to transcend. As Jews in particular, we try to develop a capacity to hone in on a more truthful spiritual realm beyond the often-illusory

realm of distractions in the material world. And that is the metaphorical significance of the question about Hanukkah lights in Times Square.

As thinking Jews,with an abiding allegiance to Jewish ideas and ideals,we try to see beyond the big lights of the big city in order to discover a more permanent, a more honest beacon that shines true, no matter how hidden, no matter how small. As thoughtful beings, we come to recognize true worth in the quality of our experience not in its quantity. Perhaps that, too, is what the Rema above is getting at, cautioning us against mere repetition of a blessing without a concomitant unclouded concentration and a meaningful change in spiritual perspective.

In his essay“Maamar al ha’Emunah,”Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman wonders how the great Greek philosopher Aristotle – to whom the Rambam attributed genius just below the level of ru’ach ha’kodesh and nevuah, divine spirit and prophecy – could somehow, despite his great intellect, fail to see past the illusions of the material world. Rav Wasserman concludes that Aristotle’s failing was an overriding attraction to the very physical olam ha’zeh and a consequent reluctance to turn away from its many seductive attractions.

Among the many heirs to Aristotle,committed to the continued transmission of Greek thought and practices known as Hellenism, were the Seleucid Syrians, whose kingdom was established from a slice of the divided empire of Alexander the Great, himself a world conqueror tutored first-hand by Aristotle. It is against these Seleucid Greeks that the warrior Maccabees fought long and hard, their ultimate spiritual victory coalescing into the very essence of the Hanukkah holiday. If we examine the decrees issued against the Jews of the Seleucid Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes – as traditionally described in the discussion of Hanukkah by the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (139:1) – we find the inevitable battle lines of Hellenism versus Judaism being drawn. Unsurprisingly, Antiochus sought to annul the Covenant between Israel and its Lord, “And Antiochus decreed prohibitions against the Jews, forbidding them to study and practice their Torah Laws.” The ancient extra-canonical Scroll of Antiochus, Megillat Antiochus,specifies (in verse 11) three gezerot, prohibitions, in particular. The enemy king’s designs were to uproot and eradicate the practice of a) Shabbat, b) Rosh Chodesh, and c) Brit Milah.

What makes this precise choice of prohibitions so pointed, in light of the above discussion, is the symbolic spiritual value they possess. First, the light of the Shabbat candles is analogous to the light of the Temple Menorah rededicated by the Maccabees; indeed, the Talmud itself (Shabbat 21a) introduces this analogy

between Shabbat and Hanukkah candles in launching its locus classicus discussion of the Hanukkah holiday. Next, the so-to-speak “rekindled” light of the moon at Rosh Chodeshi s analogous to the renewal of the Menorah’s light after a period of spiritual darkness.Finally, the eight days of Brit Milah are analogous to the Talmud’s description of a tiny cruse of pure oil that, nonetheless, burned by divine miracle for eight days, exemplifying the transcendence of quality over quantity.

This theme of quality versus quantityi s reflected again in the Hanukkah “Al haNissim” prayer, which speaks of“the strong defeated by the assumed-to-be-weak,the many defeated by anacknowledged few.” The small burning “wicks” of Judaism outshone the bright lights of the imperial force of the Syrian army, the spiritual light of the Temple Menorah here dispelled the illusory darkness of the physical, earthbound Seleucid empire indebted in so many ways to Aristotle and Alexander. Despite the variety of traditional and ethnic culinary delights that have come to be associated with the “feast of lights,” there is no chiyuv of seudat mitzvah attached to Hanukkah, no obligatory festive spread. In celebrating the holiday, we acknowledge Israel’s rescue from spiritual annihilation. By contrast, because of the threat of physical annihilation that faced the Jews at the first Purim,we indeed rejoice n that holiday with the mitzvah of a substantive physical meal.

By publicizing the true meaning of Hanukkah, by placing the Hanukkiyah in the public eye – even in Times Square – we appeal to all humankind, Jew and non-Jew alike, to come and share, as an agudah achat,in the spiritual insights the Hanukkah lights afford us. The Talmud itself (Shabbat 21b) affirms this.Beit Shammai, the School of Shammai,maintains that we kindle the Hanukkah lights “keneged pri ha’chag.” The suggestion is that the lights correspond to the mussaf sacrifices of Sukkot that were brought specifically in consideration of the seventy gentile nations, meant to beseech Divine protection of the shivim umot ha’olam as our colleagues and compeers on this earth.

Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher quotes a midrashic parable on the Torah portion of Beha’alotcha. A king once asked a beloved subject to prepare his home for a royal visit. Rather than flushing with pride, the poor fellow grew mortified. How could he host in his humble cottage a king accustomed to glorious gifts, golden goblets, and bountiful banquets at court?When the king arrived, resplendent in his retinue, the subject nervously fumbled to hide in shame the simple meal he had prepared. Yet, the king declared, “For love of you, my humble servant, I prefer this simple, heartfelt offering to all the artificial trappings my palace provides.”

The lights of Hanukkah are the Jewish nation’s simple offering for all the world to wonder at and reflect upon. They are a gift to God from the heart and soul of the People of Israel. Is it any wonder that the Master of the Universe, Who created at will the blazing sun, the bright moon, the luminous stars and galaxies, nonetheless, like the king in Rabbeinu Bahya’s parable,prefers our tiny, flickering lights of the Hanukkiyah which continue to outshine, from the time of the Maccabees to this very day, the brightest lights and biggest cities of history’s greatest empires.