

Light from dark

Rabbi Avigdor Blumenau

During the consecration of the *Beis HaMikdash* in the times of the *Maccabim*, the small amount of pure oil which was found burned for eight days.¹ To commemorate this miracle, *Chazal* instituted the *mitzvah* of candle lighting on *Chanukah*. What is the deeper meaning of this *mitzvah*? How can we appreciate its relevance to us?

The *Chumash* tells us that on Yaakov's return from Aram to *Eretz Yisrael*, Devorah, Rivkah's wet-nurse, passed away.² The family buried her under the *alon* [Ed: plateau or oak] and mourned for her. As a result, the place was named Alon Bachut. *Rashi*, citing *Chazal*, explains that at the same time Yaakov received news that Rivkah herself had passed away and her family mourned for her. This is reflected in the *pasuk* since the word *alon* in Greek means 'another', implying that there was an additional cause to mourn. The family kept the passing of Rivkah quiet in order to avoid people cursing her, upon her death, as the one who had borne Eisav. Therefore, the *Chumash* itself only conveys her passing by way of a subtle hint.³

Looking more deeply into the words of *Chazal*, several questions arise. Firstly, who were the people who hated Eisav so much, that upon Rivkah's passing, would be prompted to comment that she had been the one who had brought Eisav into the world? Granted, Eisav had been disliked or even hated for his actions, but is there a deeper meaning to this? Secondly, is it logical and fair to attribute Eisav's negative behaviour to Rivkah? She certainly did not approve of his ways and even ensured that he would be spiritually disinherited? Thirdly, besides for the fact that the word *alon* most conveniently means 'another' in Greek, is there a deeper reason for the Torah choosing to inform us of Rivkah's death specifically in the Greek language?

The enemy of Eisav is Greece. It was Rome, the embodiment of Eisav, who conquered the Greek Empire. This was not by coincidence. The battle between Greece and Rome for world dominion was a manifestation of something deeper. The Greeks, the descendants of *Yavan*, represent achievement in cultural and intellectual pursuits. Eisav represents brute physical force. The very soul of Greece, even prior to becoming a formal nation or power, detests what Eisav stands for. This was the standpoint of the people *Chazal* refer to as those who would find opportunity in Rivkah's passing to express their hatred of Eisav.

Ancient Greece was the cradle of science, which is founded upon careful observation of the natural world. However, all too often, immersion in the observation of natural processes can lead to conclusions which are technically accurate, but which fail to take into account the full picture. Technically speaking, it is true that Rivkah gave birth to Eisav. The fact that she had abhorred what he stood for and that she had brought about his eternal disempowerment would have been meaningless to *Yavan*.

The absolute truth, the *Torah*, is possessed by the Jewish People. The nations of the world possess limited variations of the truth, which manifest in their specific languages. This explains why a *Torah* scroll needs to be written in Hebrew. The Greek language also represents a distortion of the absolute truth of *Torah*. However, the Greek distortion is unique. It takes the form of adopting only a thin, external layer of *Torah* and discarding the true meaning and depth. But that layer, the scientific

¹ Shabbos 21b

² Bereishis 35:8

³ Rashi citing Bereishis Rabbah 81:5

observational layer, remains pristine, unadulterated. It makes sense, then, that the *Torah* may be written in Greek.⁴ It is a beautiful language in the sense that it is superficially accurate. It accurately represents the external aspects of the truth.

When an individual passes away people are prompted to survey the deceased's life achievements. Therefore, the mere mention of Rivkah's death incorporates the fact that she bore Eisav. Mentioning her death in Hebrew would suggest a deep connection between her and Eisav. The *Torah* avoids this by hinting to her death in Greek, implying that the connection between her and Eisav is as superficial as the layer of *Torah* truth which the Greek language is able to express.

HaGaon HaRav Yitzchak Hutner *zt'l* explains that much like the Jewish People can never be destroyed, because spiritual entities endure, the force of Greek civilization can never be destroyed.⁵ Greek culture was adopted by the Romans and lives on in the modern world. This means that today we are actually contending not only with the force of Eisav, but with the joint forces of *Yavan* and Eisav. Eisav provides the physical temptation, but *Yavan* infuses it with cultural and intellectual meaning. *Yavan* turns the physical into an impure form of spiritual, he uplifts and beautifies it.

Our response is to imbue our physical activities such as eating and family life with true spiritual meaning, providing life experiences just as appealing as those which the modern world has to offer. Additionally, we do not settle for the technical performance of *mitzvot* by complying with the basic requirements, rather we enhance them by beautifying the *mitzvah* experience, *hiddur mitzvah*.⁶

When it comes to the *mitzvah* of lighting *Chanukah* candles, we ensure the totality of the *mitzvah* experience. We opt for *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, the most ideal way possible to perform the *mitzvah*. Each male member of the family lights his own *Chanukiyah*, the number of candles corresponding to the night of *Chanukah* on which he is lighting. Perhaps this is linked to the fact that *Chanukah* corresponds to the spiritual defeat of the Greeks at the hands of the Jewish People. We could only have defeated them through accessing our own true spiritual beauty, embracing *mitzvot* in totality.⁷

The power of our enemy forces us to bring our potential to the fore. *Chanukah* represents not only light *in* the darkness, but light *through* the darkness. It inspires us to keep *mitzvot* in the most meaningful manner. The *Chanukah* candles provide enough light to last all year round, making it possible for us to thrive during the long exile of Eisav, despite the fact that it is coupled with the darkness of *Yavan*.

⁴ Megilla 9b

⁵ Pachad Yitzchak, Ma'amar 6

⁶ Bava Kamma 9b

⁷ There is a distinction between the concepts of *hiddur mitzvah* and *mehadrin acharei mitzvot*, however, in this context they may be viewed as comparable.