



Jewish Justice Resources

BY AJWS

Eight Days of Oil and Seven Years of Famine

What the Maccabees and Joseph teach us about miracles, perseverance, and what it takes to change the world

SHABBAT CHANUKAH – PARASHAT MIKETZ

Chanukah, with its story of one day of oil that lasts for eight days, always falls on Parashat Miketz, the part of the Joseph story about ensuring that the food from seven years of plenty lasts through seven years of famine. Each of these stories presents a different response to adversity and future uncertainty. When taken together, they may illuminate (pun intended) something about how we can and should respond to the moments of deep darkness and challenge in our world today.

FRAMING QUESTION: Making change requires careful planning—and sometimes a leap of faith. What does Jewish tradition say about miracles, perseverance, and what it takes to bring about change in the world?

EIGHT DAYS OF OIL

Shabbat 21b (Adapted from William Davidson Talmud)

The Talmud asks: What is Chanukah? The Sages taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, starts eight days of Chanukah. ... When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one pot of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest. There was sufficient oil there to light the menorah for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the menorah from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.

מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן בכה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה
תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות
בהון שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים
שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום
בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה
מונה בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא
להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו
שמונה ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאו ימים
טובים בהלל והודאה

QUESTIONS

- Why did the priests in the temple light the menorah even though they didn't have enough oil to keep it lit continually? What did they have faith in?
- How would you characterize the Hasmoneans response to adversity?

Continued >>

SEVEN YEARS OF PLENTY

Genesis 41:25 – 49 (Excerpted from JPS Translation)

(25) And Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do... (29) Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. (30) After them will come seven years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, (31) no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe. (32) As for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out. (33) Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. (34) And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. (35) Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh’s authority as food to be stored in the cities. (36) Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine.” ... (41) Pharaoh further said to Joseph, “See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt.” ... (47) During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in abundance. (48) And he gathered all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt was enjoying, and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city the grain of the fields around it. (49) So Joseph collected produce in very large quantity, like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

(כה) ויאמר יוסף אל־פַרְעֹה חֲלוֹם פַרְעֹה אֶחָד
הוא את אשר האֱלֹהִים עֲשָׂה הַגִּיד לְפַרְעֹה: ...
(כט) הִנֵּה שָׁבַע שָׁנִים בָּאוֹת שָׁבַע גְּדוֹל בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם: (ל) וְקָמוּ שָׁבַע שָׁנֵי רָעַב אֲחֲרֵיהֶן וְנִשְׁכַּח
כָּל־הַשָּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְכִלְהָ הָרָעַב אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ:
(לא) וְלֹא־יִנְדַע הַשָּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָרָעַב הַהוּא
אֲחֲרֵי־כֵן כִּי־כָבֵד הוּא מְאֹד: (לב) וְעַל הַשָּׁנֹת
הַחֲלוֹם אֶל־פַרְעֹה פִּעְמִים כִּי־נִכּוֹן הַדְּבָר מֵעַם
הָאֱלֹהִים וּמִמֶּהָר הָאֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: (לג) וְעַתָּה
יָרָא פַרְעֹה אִישׁ נָבוֹן וְחָכָם וְיִשְׁיִתְהוּ עַל־אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם: (לד) יַעֲשֶׂה פַרְעֹה וַיִּפְקֹד פְּקֻדִים עַל־
הָאֶרֶץ וְחָמַשׁ אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשָׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע:
(לה) וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־אֶכְלֵ הַשָּׁנִים הַטֹּבֹת הַבָּאֹת
הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּצְבְּרוּ־בָר תַּחַת יַד־פַרְעֹה אֶכְלֵ בְּעָרִים
וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ: (לו) וְהָיָה הָאֶכְלֵ לְפִקְדוֹן לְאֶרֶץ לְשָׁבַע
שָׁנֵי הָרָעַב אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא־תִכָּרַת
הָאֶרֶץ בְּרָעַב: ... (מא) וַיֹּאמֶר פַרְעֹה אֶל־יוֹסֵף
רְאֵה נָתַתִּי אֹתְךָ עַל כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ... (מז)
וַתַּעַשׂ הָאֶרֶץ בְּשָׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע לְקַמְצִים: (מח)
וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֶת־כָּל־אֶכְלֵ שָׁבַע שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּתְּנֵם־אֶכְלֵ בְּעָרִים אֶכְלֵ שְׂדֵה־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר
סָבִיבָמֶּהָ נָתַן בְּתוֹכָהּ: (מט) וַיִּצְבֹּר יוֹסֵף בָּר כַּחוֹל
הַיָּם הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד עַד כִּי־חָדַל לְסַפֵּר כִּי־אֵין מְסַפֵּר:

QUESTIONS

- Why did Joseph feel the need to prepare storehouses for the famine? What did he have faith in?
- How would you characterize the way Joseph responded to adversity?
- How is the miracle of Chanukah similar to or different from the “miracle” of the people of Egypt surviving the famine?

RELYING ON A MIRACLE?

Pesachim 64b (Adapted from William Davidson Talmud)

Abaye said: We learned in the Mishna that when the courtyard was full, the doors of the Temple courtyard miraculously closed by themselves. Rava said: We learned in the Mishna that people would close the doors of the Temple courtyard at the appropriate time. What is the practical difference between them? The practical difference between them is with regard to whether we rely on a miracle. Abaye said: We learned in the Mishna that the doors closed by themselves; as many people as entered, entered, and we rely on a miracle to close the doors. Rava said: We learned in the Mishna that people would close the doors, and we do not rely on a miracle to ensure that the courtyard not become overly crowded.

איתמר אביי אמר ננעלו תנן רבא אמר
נועלין תנן

מאי בינייהו איכא בינייהו למסמך
אניסא אביי אמר ננעלו תנן כמה דעיילו
מעלו וסמכינן אניסא רבא אמר נועלין
תנן ולא סמכינן אניסא

QUESTIONS

- What's at stake in the debate between Abaye and Rava?
- What worldview or values might be motivating each rabbi to stake out his position?

WORKING FOR JUSTICE WITH HOPE AND FAITH

Fighting Kenya's Anti-Homosexuality Laws

LGBTQI people in Kenya live with the constant threat of arrest: Under multiple sections of the Kenyan Penal Code, having “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” is punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

In July 2016, a coalition called **Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK)** challenged this egregious law, filing a petition with Kenya's High Court. In the years of planning, litigation and advocacy that followed, the coalition brought hope to LGBTQI people across the country. Sadly, in May 2019 the court announced its decision to uphold the law, but the LGBTQI community refused to give up, and activists are already planning their appeal—if necessary, all the way to the Supreme Court. The day after the ruling, on May 25, Kevin Mwachiro, GALCK's board chair, wrote in [an article in the BBC](#):

“The pain of the loss stung... People started streaming out of the court room, glassy-eyed with rainbow flags draped over their drooping shoulders. But there was still fight in us. Maybe not today, but the fact we took on a system that is slow and scared to change is a victory in itself... To my 16-year-old self who thought he was alone in his feelings: I want to tell him that the battle for self and for same-sex love, is far from over.”

QUESTIONS

- In reading about the struggle for LGBTQI rights in Kenya, where do you see a “Hasmonean” response and where do you see a “Josephan” response?
- In your own life, how do you discern when an effort to respond to adversity demands strategic foresight and planning, and when it demands a leap of faith?

CONCLUSION

Working for social change requires organizing, planning and perseverance over time. But even with the best-laid plans, we don't always know what the outcome will be. Promoting social justice is also an act of faith—faith that a better world is possible.