

Channukah: Miracles on Display  
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The celebration of Channukah carries a distinction: Celebrants must demonstrate and proclaim the 2000 year old miraculous events. The halachik value of *Pirsumei Nisa*, publicizing the miracle, is present in other holidays as well – i.e. Pesach and Purim. This outline of sources examines some of the relevant texts which invoke ‘publicizing the miracle’ and, through these sources, I hope we will be able to assess how *Pirsum Hanes* is used to express connection to our miraculous history and to shape its usefulness during the days of Channukah.

**Sources #1-3a The Function of Pirsum Hanes**

<p><b>TB Brachot 14a</b>          Achi, a student in R Chiyah’s study hall, asked R Chiyah: Should one [if given salutations] interrupt the recitation of Hallel or the Megillah?          We might suggest: since we interrupt the recitation of the Shema, which is a biblical command, then certainly Hallel [and Megillah] which is rabbinic [you can interrupt] or, maybe, publicizing the miracle is preferred? He responded: interrupt it...          Raba said: on days when one completes the [entire] Hallel, he may interrupt in between paragraphs, but not mid-paragraph. But days when the Hallel is abridged, he may interrupt even mid-paragraph</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות יד.</b>          בעא מיניה אחי תנא דבי רבי חייא מרבי חייא: בהלל ובמגילה מהו שיפסיק? אמרינן קל וחומר: קריאת שמע דאורייתא פוסק - הלל דרבנן מבעיא, או דלמא פרסומי ניסא עדיף? אמר ליה: פוסק ואין בכך כלום.          אמר רבה: ימים שהיחיד גומר בהן את ההלל - בין פרק לפרק פוסק, באמצע הפרק אינו פוסק; וימים שאין היחיד גומר בהן את ההלל - אפילו באמצע הפרק פוסק.</p>
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How does the issue of publicizing the miracle function in this text?  
 R Chiyah seems to overlook the concern of publicizing miracles or, at least, favors returning salutations, since we will interrupt the Shema to offer our greetings. This would set a limit on publicizing miracles when competing with biblical commandments. Since we interrupt the recitation of our Shema, we can *certainly* interrupt the rabbinic commands of Hallel [and, presumably, Megillah] at any point of those services.  
 But Raba’s position is stunning. On any of the days when we recite full Hallel, we must minimize the interruption. What about those days encourages Raba’s view?

Those are days when publicizing the miracle is manifest. The importance of publicizing the miracle props up the Hallel [and Megillah] so we try to avoid interruption. This sensitivity to interruption raises the quality of the Hallel, likening it to the Shema.

This text draws a basic parallel between the Shema and Hallel. What about these two recitations during our prayer service makes Raba and R Chiyah consider the question of interruption? Full Hallel is specifically recited on days when there is a historic event which demands that we publicize the miracle. Similar to the Shema, Hallel is a declarative statement: Shema declares my understanding and fealty of the foundational principles of Jewish life and Hallel declares my belief that G-d intervened in the natural course of events. Then the question posed in this text is much broader: Can I interrupt my affirmative declaration of my essential connection to Judaism?

Source #1a offers additional support to the view of *Pirsum Hanes* as a declarative act.

### Source #1a

<p><b><u>Rambam, Laws of Channukah, 4:7</u></b>          There is a mitzvah to place Channukah candles at the outside of the door of one's home...on the left as one enters so that the Mezuzah will be on the right and the Channukah candles on the left.</p>	<p><b><u>רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ד:ז</u></b>          נר חנוכה מצוה להניחו על פתח ביתו מבחוץ בטפח הסמוך לפתח על שמאל הנכנס לבית כדי שתהיה מזוזה מימין ונר חנוכה משמאל</p>
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In his comments to the *Shulchan Orech*, the *Mishna Berurah* explains the value of putting the *Menorah* opposite the *Mezuzah* so that we be surrounded by mitzvot. (See MB on ShO, OC, 671:7.33)

But when we consider *Pirsum Hanes* a declaration of our commitment to Jewish faith, Rambam's ruling – setting the lights on the left hand side of the doorway – becomes more meaningful. Rambam suggests an ideological bond between publicizing the candle lighting and *Mezzuzah*.

After all, the scrolled text in our *Mezzuzah* is the *Shema*. Putting the Channukah candles at the door, opposite the *Mezzuzah*, suggests a likeness of function and expression.

Interesting to note, were the doorway to stand without a *Mezzuzah*, the Channukah candles would stand on the right hand side of the door, in a sense replacing the *Mezzuzah*, i.e. the *Shema*. (See *Hagahot Maymoniot*, Laws of Channukah, 4:7) Given that *Pirsum Hanes* acts as a declarative

statement of affiliation and connection, we can explain Source #1b.

### Source #1b

#### Shulchan Orech, OC, 672:2

*Mechaber*: One who did not light at sunset, can light until people have stopped traveling from the market, which is a span of half an hour, when there is foot traffic and publicity of the miracle...this is the ideal, but if he missed the time frame, he may light all night...

*Rama*: There are those who say that nowadays, since we light inside we need not be light based on the market schedule. Nevertheless, it is good to be careful to adhere to this time frame, even today.

#### שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תרעב: ב

שכח או הזיד ולא הדליק עם שקיעת החמה, מדליק והולך עד שתכלה רגל מן השוק, שהוא כמו חצי שעה שאז העם עוברים ושבים ואיכא פרסומי ניסא... ומיהו ה"מ לכתחלה, אבל אם עבר זה הזמן ולא הדליק, מדליק והולך כל הלילה...

**הגה:** י"א שבזמן הזה שמדליקין בפנים א"צ ליזהר ולהדליק קודם שתכלה רגל מן השוק (ד"ע וטור בשם תוספות), ומ"מ טוב ליזהר גם בזמן הזה

If *Pirsum Hanes* were to be performed in its ideal manner, we should demand that it exclusively be done in public. Yet in the above text, the *Shulchan Orech* rules that publicizing the miracle need not take place exclusively in public. We still publicize the miracle, well after the shoppers are home and streets are empty. How so? The *Mechaber*, R Yosef Karo, intimates it, but the *Rama*, R Moshe Isserles, says it more directly: The publicity of the miracle happens in private. Though a private-publicizing sounds oxymoronic, the sense of this publicity is to bring *oneself* into harmony with the significant meaning of this historic event. Though the public is the preferred audience for *Pirsum Hanes*, the individual can serve that function too. (See Igrot Moshe, OC, 4:105.7 who offers this assessment in another context)

### Source #2

#### TB Megillah 3b

Rava asked: [On Purim] If faced with reading Megillat Esther or burying an untended-to body, which of these is preferred? Megillah, because of publicizing the miracle or, burying the corpse, because of human dignity? After he asked the question, he then responded: burying the dead is preferred. As Mar said, great is human dignity, it pushes aside *the* negative command of the Torah.

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה ג:

בעי רבא: מקרא מגילה ומת מצוה הי מיניהו עדיף? מקרא מגילה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא, או דלמא מת מצוה עדיף - משום כבוד הבריות? בתר דבעיא הדר פשטה: מת מצוה עדיף. דאמר מר: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה.

This text further stresses the halachik significance of publicizing the miracle. Rava contemplates: Does the strength of Megillah reading, with its attendant value of publicizing the miracle, overpower the biblical command of *met mitzvah*, burying the dead. Though Rava comes back with support for burying the dead, rejecting his theory, he tests the operational limits of this halachik device, *Pirsum Hanes*, as it relates to Purim.

[See Rambam, Laws of Megillah, 1:1 where he rules that, indeed, the Megillah reading trumps essentially every other ritual act, even a priest's service in the Temple, except for burying the dead. Presumably, publicizing the miracle lends the Megillah the *gravitas* to enable it to take precedence over other commandments.]

Again, we wonder what compels Rava to compare *Met Mitzvah* and *Megillah*, i.e. publicizing the miracle of Purim? The two are seemingly unrelated? Yet again, a deeper value is at play. In this context, the purpose of publicizing the miracle is for the sake of communal cohesion: As a community, we experienced a great miracle; G-d intervened in history to guarantee the destiny of the Jewish people. In that case, the reading of the Megillah/*Pirsum Hanes*, is a public reading aimed at unifying the community. This value may carry such weight as to overpower burying a dead body. After all, the dead body is of the past, now we must proclaim G-d's role in the *present*.

However, Rava rules on the contrary: Ironically, leaving the corpse unburied violates human dignity. [Where there can be no shame, i.e. by the corpse, how can human dignity be invoked?!] The *halacha* of human dignity serves as an inclusive principle: Even the corpse has a stake in Jewish destiny. [See Source #3a for an example of *Pirsum Hanes* operating as a community unifying act.]

Until now, we have seen the extent and limits of *Pirsum Hanes* as it relates to other holidays and ritual scenarios. *Pirsum Hanes* serves as a declarative statement of commitment and as an effort to unify community. Our next source deals with publicity of miracles as it relates directly to Chanuukah.

### Source #3

#### **TB Shabbat 23b**

Rava asked: If [you have only enough money for] either Channukah candles or Shabbat Kiddush wine, which do you favor? Perhaps Kiddush is best since it is regularly performed or, maybe, Channukah candles are better, because of publicizing the miracle? After he asked this question, he responded: Channukah candles are preferred because of publicizing the miracle.

#### **תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת כג:**

בעי רבא: נר חנוכה וקידוש היום מהו? קידוש היום עדיף - דתדיר, או דילמא: נר חנוכה עדיף, משום פרסומי ניסא? בתר דאבעיא הדר פשטה: נר חנוכה עדיף, משום פרסומי ניסא.

Rava weighs lighting Channukah candles against using wine for Shabbat *Kiddush*.

As in source #2, Rava compares publicizing a miracle to another mitzvah. And again the choice is not a random one. Kiddush, with wine in hand, announces the Shabbat as sacred time. The lighting of Channukah candles sanctifies the day as a new day of Channukah. (Consider the words we recite after lighting: *Haneirot Hallalu Kodesh Hem*, These lights are *holy*. Channukah candles serve as a form of Kiddush)

Taken alone, it is unclear which of these two would be preferred. Rava then invokes the operant values underlying these particular mitzvot: The power of Kiddush lies in its regularity; we do Kiddush every Shabbat. Kiddush is *Tadir*. But Channukah is of a different quality. Regularity is not its virtue. While Shabbat encourages us to look more deeply at the everyday, Channukah, as a time of miracle, proclaims that this day is a new day altogether, unlike other days.

The miraculous nature of Channukah sets it apart and gives it primacy.

[The two blessings we recite every night during the lighting reflect this dual concern. 1. The blessing for the lighting of the Channukah candles, *Lehadlik Ner Shel Channukah*, suggests *Kiddush Hayom*, sanctification of the day and 2. The blessing that G-d performed miracles in those days, at this time of year, *Sheasah Nisim La'avoteinu Bayamim Hahem Bazman Haze*, suggests *Pirsum Hanes*.

When lighting the candles, we initiate the day as Channukah, but we also announce the miracle of the day]

*Pirsum Hanes* in this context acts as an expression of the importance of breaking from our routine. Put differently, breaking from our routine takes primacy over upholding the routine. See the Tosafot, below, who recommends another example of favoring the break from routine in our services as it maximizes *Pirsum Hanes*.

### Source #3a

<p><b><u>Tosafot, TB Shabbat, 23b</u></b> “Channukah candles take precedence because of publicizing the miracle...” It appears to the Rashb”a that when Rosh Chodesh Tevet falls out on Shabbat Channukah that the Haftorah should be from Zecharia, since that refers to the lights and it publicizes the miracle, and not from the standard Haftorah for Rosh Chodesh.</p>	<p><b><u>תוספות מסכת שבת דף כג:</u></b>  הדר פשטה נר חנוכה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא - ונראה לרשב"א כשחל ר"ח טבת להיות בשבת שיש להפטיר בנרות דזכריה משום פרסומי ניסא ולא בהשמים כסאי שהיא הפטרת ר"ח</p>
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When Shabbat Channuka coincides with the New month of Tevet, instead of reading the normal, *Tadir*, Rosh Chodesh Haftarah, we should read the Haftorah from Zecharia, maximizing the publicity of the miracle. This suggestion encourages that the sanctification of the day be expressed by the special Chanukkah reading vs the Rosh Chodesh reading, favoring the break from routine.

[It is interesting to note further parallels between this practice and an above mentioned model of *Pirsum Hanes* aimed at community cohesion. This practice aims to reach large masses of people, actively participating in Shabbat services.]

### Sources #4 – 6: The Origins of Pirsum Hanes

<p><b><u>Rambam, Laws of Channukah, 4:12</u></b>  The commandment of lighting Channukah candles is extremely beloved and a person must be diligent in this so as to make the miracle known and to give excessive praise to G-d and thanks for the miracles, even if he has nothing to eat but from charity, he must borrow or sell his clothing to buy lighting materials and light.</p>	<p><b><u>רמב"ם הלכות חנוכה ד:יב</u></b>  מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח האל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו, אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק.</p>
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### Source #5

<p><b><u>Maggid Mishna, on Rambam’s Laws of Channukah, 4:12</u></b>  It appears that Rambam learned this rule [going to charity for the candles] from the laws of Pesach, where even a poor person must have no less than four cups of wine. (even if he must take money from the town coffers; see Mishna Pesachim, 10:1)</p>	<p><b><u>מגיד משנה הלכות חנוכה ד:יב</u></b>  נראה שלמדו ממה שנתבאר פ' ז' מהלכות חמץ ומצה שאפילו עני שבישראל לא יפחות מד' כוסות</p>
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## Source #6

<p><b><u>TB Pesachim 112a</u></b> “Even from the coffers...” This is obvious?! [of course, he must take from the coffer for the 4 cups on Pesach]. Rather, even according to R Akiva, who asserts: ‘Better to make your Shabbat a weekday, than to be reliant on others.’ Here, [by the 4 cups] because of publicizing the miracle, he would agree [despite R Akiva’s general protestation toward reliance on communal support].</p>	<p><b><u>תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים קיב.</u></b> ואפילו מן התמחוי וכו'. פשיטא! - לא נצרכא אלא אפילו לרבי עקיבא, דאמר: עשה שבתך חול ואל תצטרך לבריות - הכא משום פרסומי מודה.</p>
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Rambam, Source #4, derives that the value of publicizing the miracle on Channukah, through the lighting, is of such significance that even if it means borrowing from charity, we must do so.

This value of putting ourselves into financial straits in order to publicize the miracle uses the four cups for the Pesach Seder as its precedent: Every person, no matter how meager his means, must have four cups of wine at the Seder. Publicizing the miracle is so serious a demand that it encourages us to borrow from charity, depleting our communal resources.

[Though it lacks this demand of borrowing from coffers to observe the day, Purim highlights, on the other side, the mitzvah of *giving* money to the poor, *Matanot La'evyoniim*. (See Rambam, Laws of Megillah, 2:16-17) Interestingly, the dollar amount is meant to be substantial enough to provide a Purim meal, *Seudah*. In a sense, the charity enables observance and expression of the miraculous events of Purim. (See ShO, OC, 694:1)]

Taking from charity for our Pesach and Channukah observance is even more enigmatic when we consider the next two sources...

## Sources #7 and #8

<p><b><u>Rambam, Laws of Shabbat, 30:7</u></b> What is ‘Pleasure of Shabbat’? Our Rabbis said: one must arrange fatty cooked foods, incensed drink for Shabbat, all according to his means...but if he can only afford some leeks for the honor of Shabbat, this too is the pleasure of Shabbat. He need not afflict himself and ask others for money to buy extra food on Shabbat, since the first Rabbis said ‘Better to make your Shabbat a weekday, than to be reliant on others.’</p>	<p><b><u>רמב"ם הלכות שבת פרק לז:</u></b> איזה הוא עונג זה שאמרו חכמים שצריך לתקן תבשיל שמן ביותר ומשקה מבושם לשבת הכל לפי ממונו של אדם ... ואם אין ידו משגת אפילו לא עשה אלא שלק וכיוצא בו משום כבוד שבת הרי זה עונג שבת, ואינו חייב להצר לעצמו ולשאול מאחרים כדי להרבות במאכל בשבת, אמרו חכמים הראשונים עשה שבתך חול ואל תצטרך לבריות.</p>
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**Rambam, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:18**

A person should always push himself, and go around in anguish rather than rely on others; he should not throw himself upon a community. And so the Rabbis commanded 'Better to make your Shabbat a weekday, than to be reliant on others.' Even a distinguished scholar who became poor, he should toil in a trade, even a lowly one, rather than rely on others...

**רמב"ם הלכות מתנות עניים י:יח**

לעולם ידחוק אדם עצמו ויתגלגל בצער ואל יצטרך לבריות ואל ישליך עצמו על הצבור, וכן צוו חכמים ואמרו עשה שבתך חול ואל תצטרך לבריות, ואפילו היה חכם ומכובד והעני יעסוק באומנות ואפילו באומנות מנוולת ולא יצטרך לבריות...

Though the Jewish community discourages over-reliance on communal resources in the realm of personal ritual observance, i.e. Shabbat meals, and for basic life subsistence, yet when it comes to Pesach and Channukah [arguably, the candles and the wine are personal ritual observances], since publicizing the miracle abuts these practices, we encourage one to take money out of the communal coffers and to request support. Publicity of miracles alters our general communal stand on personal responsibility and the value of living within our means.

But the comparison of Channukah candles to the four cups of wine is not mere coincidence. When we consider the quality of *Pirsum Hanes*, as expressed in sources 1-3, we see that the Pesach Seder serves as an archetype of the meaning of *Pirsum Hanes* as expressed on Channukah and Purim:

The four cups are most plainly used as: 1. Means of sanctifying Pesach as a holy day, *Kiddush*. 2. The four cups carry a declarative message, where we affirm our freedom from slavery and commitment to the Almighty. "In every generation a person must view himself as though he left Egypt." (Mishna Pesachim, 10:5) 3. And the four cups are an attempt to unify community. Consider the Mishna, encouraging 100% communal involvement in the Pesach celebration, no matter one's means. Pesach serves as the foundational redemption narrative for the collective Jewish consciousness. [Consider the association of the four cups with the four languages of redemption. The cups announce G-d's role in the freeing of the Jewish people] Raising our glasses demonstrates our national freedom.

**Conclusion:** The use of *Pirsum Hanes* in these selected rabbinic sources offers a model of celebrating miraculous, historic events.

The majority of material of *Pirsum Hanes* centers around three holidays: Pesach, as the archetype and Purim and Channukah, as the offspring. These are the moments in Jewish time which affirmed [Passover] or reaffirmed [Purim and Channukah] the purposeful march of history. To use Rabbi Soloveitchik's language, these holidays

assert that Judaism is a religion of destiny, not fate. (See R Soloveitchik's essay,  
"Kol Dodi Dofek")

Often, the distance from our past creates a chasm in our present. In response, *Pirsum  
Hanes* calls out to each of us – collectively and individually - to tune our souls to the  
unending reverberations of our history and our heritage and to continue to thrum  
that melody, loudly and without shame.