

Parashah Mikeitz usually falls during Chanukah, and Chanukah always straddles the months of Kislev and Tevet, but Rosh Chodesh Tevet does not always fall on Shabbat. When it does, renewal – the common denominator of our Torah and Haftarah portions – truly comes to the fore. Rosh Chodesh is the epitome of renewal. The waxing and waning of the moon teach us that even in the darkest of times, *am Yisrael* will emerge into new light and once again grow strong. This is especially important at Rosh Chodesh Tevet, which occurs near the winter solstice. A midrash in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Avoda Zara 8a introducing a discussion on the origin of the pagan winter solstice festivals Saturna (8 days before) and Kalanda (8 days after the solstice) explains: “Regarding the dates of these festivals, the Sages taught: When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively diminishing, ... he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore said, ‘Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven, as it is written: And to dust shall you return.’ He arose and spent 8 days in fasting and in prayer. Once he saw that the season of Tevet, i.e., the winter solstice, had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening he said, ‘Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this is the order of the world.’ He went and observed a festival for 8 days. Upon the next year, he observed both these 8 days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these 8 days of his celebration, as days of festivities. He, Adam, established these festivals for the sake of Heaven, but they, the gentiles of later generations, established them for the sake of idol worship.” Our parashah tells the story of Joseph’s meteoric rise from slave and prisoner into a position of authority second only to that of Pharaoh. He has finally shed his youthful callowness and matured into a responsible adult with the wisdom, discernment, and gratitude necessary to renew his true identity and with it, the ability to help his shattered family heal and begin to establish the great nation HaShem promised Abraham. The Zechariah part of our Haftarah reading deals with the third Temple dedication (Chanukah is the fourth). Moses dedicated the first one, the *mishkan*, in the desert; the second was the First Temple, built by Salomon; and the third was the inauguration of the Second Temple and its menorah under the auspices of High Priest Yehoshua and Zerubavel, who led the first group of Jews returning from Babylonian captivity. (Zerubavel is mentioned in the third verse of the traditional Chanukah song *maoz tzur*.) Zechariah is given a vision of a golden menorah with a reservoir of oil on top and a tube leading to each of the seven lamps; and on either side of the menorah an olive tree – in other words, a self-supporting system symbolizing HaShem’s continual renewal of all of nature, and of the Jewish People. The angel who shows Zechariah this vision tells him, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubavel, saying, ‘Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,’ says the Lord of Hosts.” (Zech. 4:6). This concept of spiritual over physical strength was especially important during Talmudic times. The Mishnah, the earliest part of the Talmud, was written during the Roman occupation, when memories of the failed revolt in 70 CE, and the disastrous Bar Kokhba revolution of 132-134 were still fresh. The rabbis were understandably eager to suppress the unlikely victory of a small band of guerillas over the Greek war machine, and Chanukah was pushed into the background. During the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, The rabbis of the Talmud, who had to contend with the expansion of Christianity and the increasing efforts of the Church fathers to render Judaism obsolete, sought creative ways to avoid confrontation and ensure our further existence in an increasingly hostile world. Tractate Shabbat 21b discusses the kindling and positioning of the Chanukah lights at great length, ending with the story we know so well (and one that is highly reminiscent of the stories of Elijah in I Kings 17:10.16 and Elisha in II Kings 4:1-7, both about oil miracles performed for impoverished widows): “When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the sages instituted those days and made them holidays with the recitation of Hallel and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.” When we light our Chanukah candles and Shabbat candles and celebrate Rosh Chodesh Tevet, we are confirming the spirit of renewal that infuses us with the will to find the strength to regroup and rebuild after each of the countless attempts to extinguish us. From generation to generation we have drawn upon the strength and resourcefulness of our ancestors and used our own ingenuity to adapt and thrive in new surroundings and new conditions, continually renewing ourselves as we renew the eternal covenant that sustains us.