

Hanukkah in a New Light

by

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Ask anyone to tell you how Hanukkah began or why we celebrate this festival for eight days and they are sure to repeat the story of how Syrian Greeks defiled the Temple, and how, after Judah the Maccabee and his brothers recaptured and cleansed it, they found a little jar of oil that miraculously burned for eight days. “Did that really happen?” you probably wondered as you grew older. Most of us quickly suppressed our doubts, after all, where would Hanukkah be without that miracle?

In fact, Hanukkah was observed for 600 years before the “jar of oil” story made its first appearance in Jewish literature. The Maccabees recaptured and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 B.C.E. The first mention of the “jar of oil” miracle appears in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat, 21b), which was written down in its final form about 500 C.E., 664 years later.

Where did the story of the “jar of oil” come from?

More important, why do we celebrate Hanukkah?

Let us go back to the oldest written sources. Forty-four years after the first Hanukkah, two books were written about the Maccabean Wars and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The First Book of Maccabees

The First Book of Maccabees, compiled sometime after 120 B.C.E., was probably originally written in Hebrew. Today all we have is an early Greek translation. Its intended audience was the Jews of the Land of Israel. Chapter 4 describes the recapture of the Jerusalem Temple, its purification and rededication.

They also made new sacred vessels, and they brought the lamp stand ... into the Temple. They burned incense on the altar and lit the lights on the lamp stand, and the Temple was filled with light.... For eight days they celebrated the dedication of the altar. ... Then Judah, his brothers and the entire community of Israel decreed that the days of rededication of the altar should be celebrated with a festival of joy and gladness at this same time every year beginning on the 25th of the month of Kislev and lasting for eight days. (First Maccabees 4:49-59)

Astonishingly, this most ancient source does not mention the “little jar of oil miracle.” Apparently the author knew of no such story. At the time, the miracle was the victory itself, that God had enabled the Judeans to overcome the far mightier Syrians. This source leaves us with some unanswered questions:

Why did they celebrate for eight days? Why did the celebration become a permanent festival (Hanukkah)? Where did the “jar of oil” story originate? What was the miracle of Hanukkah for our ancestors? What is the miracle for us?

The answers to these questions will unfold as we proceed through the sources.

The Second Book of Maccabees

The Second Book of Maccabees, compiled at about the same time as *First Maccabees*, covers some of the same period but was originally written in Greek and clearly was intended for distribution to the Jewish audience outside the land of Israel. That community, whose primary language was Greek, was concentrated largely in the bustling commercial Mediterranean port city of Alexandria in Egypt. The purpose of *Second Maccabees* is clearly stated in the two letters that open the book, urging the Jews of Alexandria to adopt this new festival, which it appears, they were slow to accept. The author claims that his source for the history of the Maccabean war was a (now lost) larger five-volume history by one Jason of Cyrene. Chapter 10:1-8 of *Second Maccabees* describes the purification of the Temple, adding significant information that is not found in *First Maccabees*.

Judah the Maccabee and his men, under the Lord’s leadership, recaptured the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. ... After purifying the Temple, they made another altar. Then by striking flint they made a new fire and ... offered sacrifices and incense ... lit the lamps. ... On the anniversary of the very same day on which the Temple had been defiled, the 25th of Kislev, they now purified the Temple. They celebrated joyfully for eight days, just as on Sukkot, knowing that (a few months before) on Sukkot they had (been unable to celebrate at the Temple) and had spent the festival (hiding) like wild animals in the mountains and caves. That is why they came carrying stalks, wreathed with branches – palm fronds – and ripe fruit (the lulav and etrog), and sang hymns of praise (Hallel), to Him Who had given them the victory that had brought about the purification of His Temple. By a vote of the community they decreed that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate these festival days every year. (Second Maccabees 10:1-8)

This source also omits any mention of the “jar of oil.” Instead, it unravels part of the mystery for us. We now can understand what happened that first Hanukkah over 2,000 years ago (164 B.C.E.). The festival of Sukkot was once probably the most important holiday in the Jewish year, especially for Jewish farmers. In Jewish sources it is called “*HeChag*” – “*The Holiday*.” Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were not pilgrimage festivals and attained the importance they now have only after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.). On Sukkot, however, vast numbers of Jews traveled to Jerusalem to give thanks to God for the crops they had just harvested. But they were always more concerned about the future than the past, about next year’s crops, the grains and fruits that would sustain them for another year. On Sukkot, the most important prayer was the “Prayer for Rain” (*Tefilat Geshem*)—rain to soften the sun-baked soil so that it could be plowed and prepared for the planting of seeds, rain to help the seeds germinate, take root and grow during their mild winters. They hoped the

rains would taper off in the spring when the grains were ripe for harvest. Without rain they were lost. Thus, the Temple was usually crowded with worshippers on Sukkot as at no other time of the year.

When the Maccabees completed the purification of the Temple, they were faced with a problem. A few months before, in Tishri, they had been unable to pray for rain in the Temple at Sukkot. Pagans had overrun the holy shrine for three years, while the Jewish partisans gathered in the hills and caves. Now the Temple was theirs again, and their first act was to belatedly celebrate Sukkot two months later in Kislev. Praying for rain was so important, that it was “better late than never.” They carried the *lulav* and *etrog*, sang the Hallel Psalms as on any Sukkot, celebrating for *eight days*, the length of Sukkot. They participated in the Sukkot torchlight processions during which jars of water were carried up to the Temple and symbolically poured out onto the altar as part of the ritual for rain. The torchlight procession and large golden oil lamps burning in the Temple Courtyard lit up the entire city of Jerusalem. (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9-5:5)

The first eight-day celebration of the Maccabees was a belated Sukkot celebration. The following year, the new Festival of Hanukkah borrowed some of the rituals of Sukkot from that first celebration – the eight days, the recital of Hallel Psalms, the lights brightly glowing (eventually in every home).

The Name of the Festival

What was this new Festival called?

Second Maccabees (chapter one) begins with a letter dated 124 B.C.E. to the Jews of Egypt, inviting them to join in observing the new “*Festival of Sukkot in Kislev.*” “*From the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea to our brothers in Egypt. Shalom. May God bless you ... (there follow more blessings and an allusion to past historical events) and now we ask you to celebrate Sukkot in the month of Kislev.*” (Second Maccabees 1:1-9)

There follows another letter to the Jews of Egypt (Second Maccabees 1:10-36), purported to be from Judah the Maccabee himself, written in 164 B.C.E., after the victory, but before the first anniversary of the rededication of the Temple. “*Since we are about to celebrate the purification of the Temple on the 25th of Kislev; we thought it proper to inform you that you too may celebrate this Sukkot (in Kislev).*” ... (Second Maccabees 1:18)

Both of these letters indicate that, for at least forty years, until 124 B.C.E., the new festival was called “Sukkot in Kislev,” which supports the story in *Second Maccabees* 10, that the first eight-day celebration was indeed a delayed Sukkot.

We now know why Hanukkah lasts for eight days, why Hallel Psalms are recited and why lights are kindled. Still missing is the “little jar of oil.”

Megillat Ta’anit

Megillat Ta’anit (*The Scroll of Days on which Fasting is Forbidden*) was written sometime during the first century C.E. – two hundred years after the Maccabean purification of the Temple. All the holidays on this list, most of which commemorate Maccabean victories, have disappeared except for two: Hanukkah and Purim. “*On the 25th Day of Kislev, Hanukkah (begins) – eight days – mourning is forbidden.*” This is the first occurrence of the

name “Hanukkah” (“Dedication”) for the Maccabean Festival of Purification. Other people still called it “Lights.” Its original connection to a delayed Sukkot seems to have been forgotten. Yet there is still no mention of the “little jar of oil.”

Antiquities of the Jews

Antiquities of the Jews was completed by Josephus around 94 C.E., 258 years after the purification of the Temple. In this history of the Jewish people he writes:

So much pleasure did (the Jews) find in the renewal of their customs and in unexpectedly obtaining the right to conduct their own service after so long a time, that they made a law that their descendants should celebrate the restoration of the temple service for eight days. And from that time to the present, we observe this festival, which we call the festival of lights, giving this name to it, I think, from the fact that the right to worship appeared to us at a time when we hardly dared hope for it.” (Antiquities XII, Loeb Classical Library edition, Volume 7, p. 169)

Josephus is not sure why the festival is called “Lights,” is unclear about its exact original nature, but also clearly omits any story about a “little jar of oil.”

Two Prayers

Two ancient prayers, which are recited on Hanukkah, also contain no reference to the miracle of a “little jar of oil.”

- a) “Al Hanissim” declares that the miracle of Hanukkah was God’s enabling the weak, outnumbered righteous to prevail over their powerful evil enemy.
- b) “Hanerot Hallalu” affirms the wonders God performed in delivering our ancestors.

Neither of these prayers contains mention of the “little jar of oil.” The “miracle” of Hanukkah for all these sources is **the unexpected victory against a mightier foe.**

Hanukkah—A Haircut and a Bath

A story is related in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah, 18b) about an event that occurred sometime during the last years of the first century C.E. “Once the residents of Lydda declared a fast on Hanukkah. The two co-heads of the Lydda Academy and religious leaders of the community were Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. “*Rabbi Eliezer (ben Hyrcanus) returned there and bathed. Rabbi Joshua (ben Hananiah) also returned and had his hair cut.* (Bathing and haircutting were forbidden on fast days.) (Later) *they said to the residents (of Lydda). “Go now and fast in atonement for having fasted (on Hanukkah)!”*

This remarkable passage reveals that some Jews, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., were opposed to the celebration of Hanukkah (hence the declaration of a fast), most likely because Hanukkah represented the “activist” approach to dealing with one’s opponents, whether Syria or Rome, and “activism” would interfere with the very lucrative commerce for which Lydda was famous. The residents of Lydda wanted to play down the implied message of Hanukkah and the Maccabees—that, at times,

opposition to foreign rule is justified, and may even succeed with God's help. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, both opponents of Rome, and leaders of the Academy at Lydda, by their own example (bathing and cutting the hair) declared their opposition to the "passivists" who sought to eliminate Hanukkah and accept Roman rule. The "activist" approach later reached its peak at the time of Rabbi Akiba during the Bar Kochba (132-135 C.E.) revolt. (Note that both of them were among those present at the famous Passover Seder, in the Haggadah, with Rabbi Akiba at B'nai B'rak, which some historians have suggested was possibly a planning meeting for the Bar Kokhba Revolt.)

Activism versus passivism, opposition versus accommodation—these two diametrically opposed methods of dealing with hostile foreign domination were to divide Jews for the next two thousand years. At certain times and in certain places one view would dominate. The "activist" could even at times be a "pacifist," employing non-violent opposition against an autocratic governing power.

The "passivist" was afraid that even non-violent opposition could bring down the wrath of the autocrat, and so almost always sought the road to accommodation at any cost.

From the fifth century, in Palestine and Babylonia, one or the other of these views dominated. The Jews of Palestine, for a variety of reasons, continued to find a large number of proponents of activism among the population. (Exceptions include the previously mentioned story about the people of Lydda.) Often this took the form of subtle literary derogation of the oppressor. The Jews of Babylonia, on the other hand, perhaps because the ruling authorities often gave them the right to self-government, mostly favored accommodation—passivism, "**the law of the land is the law**" ("*deena de'malchuta, deena*"). (Baba Kamma 113a)

For the Jews of Babylonia, Hanukkah and the story of the victorious struggle presented a problem. They feared that their young people would be influenced by the model of the Maccabees and become "activist" opponents of authority. It was not possible to eliminate Hanukkah; it had become firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the people. But the miracle of the Hanukkah story could be changed from one of miraculous victory against overwhelming odds, to a miraculous story of a "little jar of oil."

Babylonian Talmud: Why Hanukkah?

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat (21b) (Completed around 500 C.E.)

*Why Hanukkah? Our rabbis taught: (in Megillat Ta'anit) "On the 25th day of Kislev begin the eight days of Hanukkah on which eulogies (mourning) and fasting are forbidden." (The following is a later commentary on Megillat Ta'anit) For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil; and when the Hasmoneans prevailed and defeated them, they searched and found only **one jar of oil** with the official seal of the High Priest, but which was only enough for one day's lighting; yet a miracle occurred, and they lit the lamp with it for eight days. The following year these days were decreed a festival with the recital of Hallel Psalms and thanksgiving.*

The real question of this text is not "why do we celebrate Hanukkah?" but rather "*on the authority of what miracle are we permitted to recite Hallel Psalms on*

Hanukkah, a custom usually reserved for biblical, God-ordained festivals?" The answer given is the miraculous "jar of oil," borrowed from some other tradition or invented for the occasion. It served its purpose well. The miracle was now not the victory of "activism" but of a "little jar of oil." This successfully defused many a budding Babylonian Jewish activist from going astray. "Passivist" peaceful accommodation would be preserved.

However, this story was not accepted by Jews everywhere. In Palestine 300 years later, with its long history of "activism," another explanation was given, offering authority for the recital of Hallel.

Palestinian Midrash: Why Hanukkah?

Pesikta Rabbati (Palestinian Midrash completed in the year 847 C.E.)

Why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? When the sons of the Hasmonean High Priest were victorious over the Kingdom of Greece – (as predicted) in the verse (Zechariah 9:13), "the men of Zion will fight the men of Greece" – upon entering the Temple they found eight iron rods (spears?), which they thrust (into the ground) and kindled lights in them. And on what authority is Hallel recited? Because (one of the Hallel Psalms) states "The Lord God has given us light." (Psalm 118:27)

This author is not at all embarrassed by the activism of the Maccabees. In fact he even assumes that the Hasmoneans were originally High Priests, which is not otherwise confirmed. For this Palestinian, writing 350 years after the Babylonian story of the jar of oil was "published," the authority for reciting Hallel is not the miraculous oil, but rather the authority of God, as predicted by two verses from the Bible.

For the next thousand or more years Jews in dire straits in different parts of the world usually chose the "passivist" route to accommodation and survival. There were many notable exceptions. Now, we are even becoming more aware of the many Jewish uprisings during the Holocaust.

The State of Israel, this modern miracle, would not have been created if not for the return, beginning in the 19th century, of Zionism and its restoration of Maccabean "activism" as a valid Jewish option.

In our own day the activist, often in the pursuit of peace and pacifism, has rekindled the light of the Maccabees and restored the meaning and message of Hanukkah—that to achieve our goals and dreams, to bring freedom to the oppressed, and hope to those who despair, we must be "active" pursuers of our cause. Our "miracle" will be achieved when the few, the weak and just, triumph.