

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

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## **The Miracle of the Oil and the History of Chanuka**

**By Rav Ya'akov Medan**

### a. What is the Question?

The classic talmudic source regarding Chanuka begins as follows:

"What is Chanuka? Our Rabbis teach: 'On the 25th of Kislev begin eight days of Chanuka, during which no eulogies are to be delivered and one is not to fast' (Megillat Ta'anit, Mishna 23). When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils that were there. After the Hasmonean leaders prevailed and were victorious over [the Greeks], they checked and found only a single container of oil that still bore the stamp of the Kohen Gadol, and it held sufficient oil to light the menorah only for one day. A miracle occurred, and they lit from it for eight days. The next year they established these [eight days] as festive days with praise and thanksgiving." (Shabbat 21b)

One is immediately struck with the strangeness of the opening question: is it possible that the questioner had not heard of this festival? And the answer is even more puzzling: is there nothing more to be said about Chanuka than the story of the miracle concerning the oil? What about the great and no less miraculous military victory? Why is there no mention of the reinstatement of Israelite sovereignty "for more than two hundred years" (as the Rambam teaches in Hilkhos Chanuka 3:1)?

### b. The Prophecy

Based on this question posed in the Gemara and other sources, some historians (e.g. Simon Dubnow) have concluded that the festival of Chanuka was not commemorated in Eretz Yisrael in ancient times because of the opposition of the Pharisee sages to the deeds of the Hasmonean dynasty in later generations.[1]

This opinion is utterly rejected by R. Yitzchak HaLevi [2] and Gedalyahu Alon [3], who bring several proofs demonstrating clearly the positive attitude of Jewish Sages throughout the ages towards the war of the Hasmoneans and their miraculous victory.

The Gemara's focus on the miracle of the oil (and not the military victory) has likewise been explained as an attempt on the part of the Sages to base Judaism on religion alone, since "their ultimate ideal was a religious republic." [4] In the words of R. Menachem Hacohen:

"The Sages of Israel, in establishing the festival of Chanuka for all generations, did not choose as the central theme the heroic deeds and the victory on the battlefield, but rather emphasized the spiritual aspect... This was done in order to avoid a situation whereby human deeds of heroism would be turned into a personality cult." [5]

The prophecy of the menorah in the Book of Zekharia would appear to support this thesis, since its message - according to the angel who appears to the prophet - is:

"This is God's word to Zerubavel, saying: Not by strength nor by might, but rather by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." (Zekharia 4:6)

This would appear to imply that the menorah represents the opposite of military heroism, and serves to emphasize "spirituality" instead.

But I propose that this prophecy does not constitute any proof at all. The biblical expression (also used by the Sages), "Not... but rather..." is not meant as a complete negation of the subject, but rather serves to emphasize that it does not stand alone. In this instance the prophet is teaching that victory will come not ONLY by might and not ONLY by strength, but rather ALSO by God's spirit.

But putting aside the question of the relevance of this prophecy, the claim would still lack foundation. It is true that throughout the Midrash, Chazal follow in the footsteps of the prophets and oppose strongly any hint of personality cult or worship of human strength by emphasizing the concept of "God's war," His heroism, and the revelation of God's presence in the wars of Israel. But they never try to cover up historical facts or blur their details, nor do they ignore the significance of God's appearance in history through wars and acts of heroism. [6]

c. Then "What is Chanuka?"

We propose three solutions to the two questions posed above.

1. G. Alon, in his article quoted above, focuses on the uniqueness of the mishna of Chanuka out of all the mishnayot in Megillat Ta'anit. Many other mishnayot here were established in commemoration of the victories of the Hasmoneans, but in each instance only a single day was set aside in memorial. Chanuka is unique in that eight days are established for the commemoration. And for this reason the Gemara questions, "What is Chanuka?" - i.e., why is it unique? - and then goes on to explain the length of the festival based on the eight days of the miracle of the oil.

This explanation seems reasonable enough, but one cannot but point out that other ancient sources provide alternative explanations for the length of the festival:

i. the fact that they spent eight days purifying the Temple (Megillat Ta'anit, *ibid.*);[7]

ii. in memory of the eight days that King Shelomo celebrated the dedication of the First Temple (Makkabim 4, 2);

iii. in commemoration of the eight days of the festival of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, which they were not able to observe properly under Hellenist rule (Makkabim 2, 10).

Thus, we come back to our question: Why does the Gemara see fit to emphasize specifically the miracle of the oil?

2. R. Yoel Bin-Nun [8] follows in the footsteps of several other scholars in emphasizing that, following the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile, the taste of the Hasmonean victory and their war for freedom became bitter, for little remained of them. Therefore, the meaning of the question in the Gemara is: What is the nature of Chanuka during the period of exile?

The innovative answer that R. Bin-Nun proposes is that Chazal reinstated the original character of Chanuka from the period preceding the Hasmoneans - as an agricultural festival related to the olive harvest (end of Cheshvan) and the oil press (Kislev), and their transportation to the Temple as part of the mitzva of "bikkurim" (first fruits).[9] Also, this was instituted as a continuation of the eight days of the "festival of light" instituted by Adam, as recounted in the Gemara (Avoda Zara 8a).

Thus R. Bin-Nun sees the crux of this festival as a combination between the annual agricultural celebration and the celebration of the one-time miraculous historical victory, both finding expression in the miracle of the oil.

3. My father, R. Meir Medan of blessed memory, taught that the question posed by the Gemara and the answer that it presents are related to a halakhic discussion concerning Shabbat - specifically, the laws of wicks and oils that are mentioned there. It is against this background that the Gemara asks, What is the nature of the mitzva of lighting on Chanuka? And the Gemara answers and explains that the mitzva relates to the miracle of the oil. All the explanations of Chanuka found in the Books of the Hasmoneans and other sources pertain to the reason for praise and thanksgiving or to the length of the festival. But the ancient sources contain no satisfactory explanation of why specifically the mitzva of candle-lighting was chosen to commemorate the festival. After all, the principal element of the festival (according to the Books of the Hasmoneans) was actually the rededication of the altar. So here, in the midst of the discussion about wicks and oils, the Gemara reveals the tradition concerning the miracle of the oil as a reason for the lighting of the Chanuka lights.

#### d. Why Lights?

It would seem that the same reservation applies to this third option as did to the first: just as there are several explanations for the establishment of eight days, so are there many different explanations for the mitzva of kindling lights. Let us examine the two most important among them:

- a. The Sefat Emet (5644) regards Chanuka as a rabbinically-ordained festival that comes to extend the illumination of the festival of Sukkot.[10]
  - ii. R. Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin [11] expounds at length on the Maharal's idea of the connection between oil and wisdom (Torah), and between a candle and a person's soul. "God's candle is the soul of man" - he sees the light of the candles as an expression of the victory of the Torah philosophy of the Hasmoneans over the philosophy of darkness of the Hellenists. Chazal explain the verse, "The land was void and chaos, and darkness over the face of the deep" as alluding to the darkness of the kingdom of Greece, which "darkened the eyes of Israel by their decrees."

A hint at the importance of the candles and the menorah in the Temple is to be found in the prophecy of the menorah and its lights in Zekharia chapter 4, which - according to the prophet - alludes to the dedication of the Second Temple in the days of Zerubavel and Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak.

But in contrast to the additional explanations brought above for the establishment of eight days - all of which are ancient, dating back as far as the festival of Chanuka

itself - these reasons for the establishment of the mitzva of lights are relatively new. They are in fact no more than auxiliary proofs for the principal reason for the mitzva of the lights - i.e., the commemoration of the miracle of the oil.

#### e. Ancient Hints at the Miracle of the Oil

Scholars have been greatly puzzled by the question of why the miracle of the oil is not mentioned in any sources earlier than the Gemara Shabbat, which was compiled some four hundred years after the miracle occurred. Many offer the answer mentioned earlier - that the miracle of the oil pales next to the miracle of the victory and the rededication of the Temple; after all, "Ten miracles occurred in the Temple daily." Even the Second Book of Hasmoneans mentions supernatural miracles related to the Chanuka victory. It was only in exile, when the light of the miraculous victory had dimmed, and only after the destruction of the Temple, when the light of the rededication of the Temple was similarly extinguished - that the miracle of the oil assumed new significance, as I explained above.

It should also be borne in mind that during the period under discussion, religious traditions were transmitted orally for the main part, and many statements of the Tannaim and their predecessors were committed to writing only hundreds of years after they were uttered. Accordingly, we cannot know when the beraita concerning the miracle of the oil was first introduced, prior to the compilation of the Gemara.

It would seem, though, that "Although there is no proof, there is some mention." There are three ancient hints at the miracle of the oil.

- i. That which we mentioned above - the fact that the special mitzva of the day specifically involves kindling of lights. This means that the salvation was somehow connected to lights.
- ii. The Second Book of Hasmoneans expounds at great length, in the introduction to the story of Yehuda Makkabi, on the importance of the miraculous fire in the dedication of the Temple. Here we learn of the fire of the altar that was hidden by the prophet Yirmiyahu, later miraculously discovered by Nechemia, who used it to kindle the altar fire using water. Then the Book goes on to describe the rededication in the days of the Hasmonean dynasty. Although no mention is made of the miracle of the oil, there does seem to be some indication that the author was curious or troubled about the miraculous fire.
- iii. The Gemara (Shabbat 22b) brings the following beraita:

"Does the Holy One have any need for the light of the [Temple] menorah? During all of the forty years that Bnei Yisrael wandered in the wilderness, did they not walk by His light? Rather, this is a testimony to all the peoples of the world that the Shekhina dwells among Israel."

We may ask, why is the beraita troubled specifically by the need to kindle the menorah? After all, the same question could be asked concerning the incense, the showbread or the sacrifices - surely God does not need any of these things. In what way is the kindling of the menorah different from any of these other elements of the Temple service?

It is possible that this text relates to an ancient Mishna discussing the miracle of Chanuka and posing the question: what need was there for this miracle? The answer provided is that "It is a testimony to all the peoples of the world that the Shekhina dwells among Israel." The mishkan in the wilderness, and later King Shelomo's Temple, both housed the Ark of Testimony containing the Tablets of Testimony, with the two keruvim, testifying that the Shekhina dwelled among Israel. The Second Temple had no Ark, no Tablets and no keruvim; here the menorah itself served as testimony to the presence of the Shekhina. And its testimony concerned the miracle that had been performed through it - the miracle of the tiny amount of oil that sufficed for eight days, testimony that the Shekhina dwells among Israel.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

#### FOOTNOTES

[1] Support can be drawn for this position even from the writings of some recent rabbinic scholars. For example, R. Yitzchak Sperling of Lvov (*Ta'amei Ha-minhagim U-mekorei Ha-dinim*, p. 365) reports that the Chatam Sofer believed that Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi did not include the laws of Chanuka in the Mishna since he was a descendant of the House of David, and opposed the Hasmonean usurpation of the throne. However, since Mar bar Rav Ashi is quoted in this gemara, I don't believe the Chatam Sofer actually said this.

[2] *Dorot Rishonim*, vol. 3, p. 91, etc.

[3] "Ha-hishkicha Ha-umma Ve-chakhameiha et Ha-Hasmoneans?" in *Mechkarim Be-toldot Yisrael*, Tel Aviv, 5727.

[4] *Dubnow*, vol. 2, p. 84.

[5] R. Menachem Hacoen, *Chagim U-mo'adim*, Chanuka.

[6] Our teacher Rav Amital has expressed this point well in his book, Ha-ma'alot Mi-ma'amakim.

[7] Compare the purification of the Temple in the days of King Chizkiyahu (II Divrei Ha-yamim 29:17). There, too, as in the period of the Greeks, an altar of the king of Ashur was constructed in place of the original Temple altar, and there too the incense was no longer offered and the lights of the menorah were extinguished, just as in the days of Menelaus. In fact, King Chizkiyahu was similar in many respects to the Hasmoneans. And, as stated, in his time the Temple courtyard was also purified during a period of eight days; for a further eight days the inner chamber was purified. Afterwards, the purification of the Temple was celebrated for eight days (the day of Pesach and the seven days of the festival of Matzot, in the second month, just as the Hasmoneans celebrated the festival of Sukkot on Chanuka).

[8] "Yom Yisud Heikhal Hashem," Megadim 12.

[9] According to the Gemara, bikkurim may be brought until Chanuka. The Rambam (Hilkhos Bikkurim 2:6) would seem to imply that this is the proper time for them to be brought even according to the Written Law, since Chanuka is the conclusion of the annual season for fruits that grow on trees.

[10] The ingathering of the olives is a continuation of the ingathering of the harvest and the vine on Sukkot. Compare also II Hasmoneans, which portrays Chanuka as the continuation of the Simchat Beit Ha-sho'eva on Sukkot. At the latter, righteous people used to dance with flaming torches in their hands (Sukka 5:2); "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel would dance with EIGHT flaming torches, and none of them would touch the ground" (Tosefta Sukka 4:4). The Simchat Beit Ha-sho'eva celebration is almost certainly a commemoration of the dedication of the Temple in the days of King Shelomo during the festival of Sukkot, and the Hasmonean tradition of eight lights is likewise a memorial to the flaming torches in the Simchat Beit Ha-sho'eva.

[11] Peri Tzaddik, "Chanuka," and also in his work Resisei Laila.