

The Secret of Chanuka as Revealed by the Prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia

By Rav Yoel Bin-Nun
Translated by Kaeren Fish

Introduction

The prophets Chaggai and Zekharia accompanied Zerubavel and Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak in the great return to Zion following the declaration by Cyrus, king of Persia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judea, restored the altar, and eventually rebuilt the Temple, at the beginning of the reign of Darius. A third prophet – Malakhi – is associated with the period of the later ascent by Ezra (the midrash asserts that “Malakhi is Ezra” – *Megilla* 15a).

Zekharia’s wondrous visions present a challenge to students and commentators alike. Yet, the essence of his prophecy – like that of his predecessor Chaggai – is clear and simple: it is a message of consolation and salvation to the nation just now returning from exile; a prophecy about the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of the Divine Presence to the redeemed Jerusalem, together with her children who are once again filling her streets.

One cannot read these prophecies today without a tremor of emotion, in view of the return to Zion in our times. Even the *menora* and the olive branch, as the symbols of the State of Israel, have their source in Zekharia’s visions.

I was drawn to explore these prophecies in greater depth when I once happened to notice that it was on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (Kislev) in the second year of the reign of Darius, that Chaggai began uttering his prophecy concerning the laying of the foundation of God’s Sanctuary. In other words, many generations before the Hasmonean’s rededication of the Temple, the 24th (or rather, the 25th, as we shall see) of Kislev was the day of laying the foundation of the God’s Sanctuary! Is there some connection here? How could there not be? Is it possible that no one, throughout all the centuries since then, was aware of Chaggai’s prophecy? And if it was noted, why was it never mentioned in relation to Chanuka?

I proceeded in my exploration of these prophecies, seeking answers, and heard some hints to this connection from Rabbi Yeshayahu Hadari, *shlita*. I also found that Rabbi Yaakov Emden, in his work *Mor u-Ketzi’a* (siman 670) “discovers” this prophecy of Chaggai, interprets Chanuka in light of it, and

asserts the authenticity of the lesson even though “the early masters never thought of it.” Another clue is offered by the *Sefat Emet* (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Gur) who, in his characteristic brilliant style, binds Chanuka to Sukkot.

At the same time, my journeys through the hills of Yehuda and Shomron offered clear evidence that the months of Cheshvan and Kislev are the season for olives and oil in *Eretz Yisrael*; hence the law that *bikkurim* can be brought to the Temple up until Chanuka. This represents the connection between the natural aspect of *Eretz Yisrael* (the oil season) and the miracle of Chanuka (the cruse of pure oil).

All of the above led me to an understanding of the festival that will be set forth below, concerning the prophecies of Chaggai and the visions of Zekharia, as well as a general account of the history of Chanuka.

Our journey begins with the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia, which – for the sake of clarity – will be discussed in order of the prophecies and their chronology.

A. Prophecies of the second year of Darius

1. 1st of Elul

In general, Chaggai – and Zekharia after him – deals with two main problems at three different periods of time. The first problem is unwillingness to build the Temple, even though Darius, king of Persia, is supportive of the returnees from exile and their endeavors (Ezra 5:7). This lack of interest and desire is cloaked in the righteous claim that the time is not yet ripe. “This people has said: The time has not come, the time for the House of God to be rebuilt” (Chaggai 1:2).

The prophet counters their “time” argument by pointing out that in their personal affairs they seem certain that the time is right for each of them to build his own beautiful home. If each is working on his own “wide house... with rafters of cedars” (cf. *Yirmiyahu* 22:14), then it cannot be that the time has not yet come to build God’s House, too. As King David expresses it: “See now: I dwell in a house of cedar, while the Ark of God dwells within a curtain?!” (*Shmuel II* 7:2). Therefore, Chaggai rebukes them: “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your well timbered houses, while this House lies in ruins?... Because of My House that lies waste, while you run off, each to his own house” (*Chaggai* 1:4, 7). Because everyone is inclined to build a fine and comfortable house for himself and to invest his efforts in his own private domain, everyone ignores

matters of communal importance, and certainly has no thought for Divine service.

God responds to this situation by striking a blow to the economic prosperity of the returnees, in the form of severe drought. In this way He seeks to shake them out of their complacent occupation with their homes and their fields, and to arouse them to soul-searching and a reevaluation of their ways (1:5-6; 9-11).

2. 24th of Elul

Chaggai's prophecy has an impact on the people:

Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, and Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak – the Kohen Gadol, and all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Chaggai, the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him, and the people were fearful before God... And God stirred up the spirit of Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, governor of Yehuda, and the spirit of Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and labored in the House of the Lord of Hosts, their God... (*Chaggai* 1:12-14).

This "labor" appears to have amounted to general preparations and a gathering of the materials and tools for the building of the Temple (see Rashi and Radak, and the parallel expression in *Shemot* 36:6-7), since the actual construction commenced only in the ninth month (Kislev), as I shall explain below.

3. 21st of Tishrei

The second problem that Chaggai addresses is the people's pervading sense of weakness and inadequacy. Regardless of how much work is invested in the building, the Temple that will arise cannot hope to approximate the splendor of the First Temple, since only a portion of the Jews have returned to the land, and they do not represent an independent, sovereign kingdom.

This realization finds expression in the first attempt to establish God's House during the reign of Cyrus, in the second year of the return of the exiles from Babylon:

And many of the kohanim and the leviim and the older heads of the households, who had seen the First Temple – when the foundation of this [Second] Temple was laid, before their eyes, they wept with a loud voice,

but many [others] shouted aloud with joy. And the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound could be heard from afar (*Ezra* 3:12-13).

The same phenomenon is the subject of Zekharia's challenge: "Who despises the day of small things?... The eyes of God – they rove about throughout the land" (*Zekharia* 4:10).

The sense of inadequacy and the sin of weeping are the focus of Chaggai's second prophecy, on the 21st of the seventh month (Tishrei) – the last day of the festival of Sukkot (known today as Hoshana Rabba):

Who of you that remain saw this House in its earlier glory? And how do you see it now – is it not in your eyes as nothing?! But now - be strong, O Zerubavel, says God, and be strong, O Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and be strong, all the people of the land, says God, and work. For I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts.

And lest they ask, "What should we do?" the prophet immediately specifies: "According to the word of My covenant with you when you came out of Egypt, and My spirit is present in your midst, do not fear" (*Chaggai* 2:3-5; see Radak and Ibn Ezra on verse 5).

The prophecy goes on to describe a great revolution in the world. There will be great honor for Israel, and a reversal of Israel's dependence upon the nations to a situation in which all the nations will come to give glory to Israel and to the House of God, and – ultimately – a true peace granted by God.

These promises, all uttered under the heading of "in just a little while" (verse 6), were never realized in Zerubavel's time. Indeed, they have not been realized in full to this day. Ibn Ezra (*Chaggai* 2:9) understands the promises as being conditional, based on the parallel prophecy of Zekharia (end of chapter 6) – a prophecy that concludes the series of Zekharia's prophecies uttered during the second year of Darius's reign, parallel to Chaggai and slightly later: "And [all of this] shall be, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God."

1st of Cheshvan – Zekharia's prophecy

Zekharia's first prophecy is recorded as occurring on Rosh Chodesh of the eighth month, within ten days of Chaggai's second prophecy. It conveys

God's anger that the people are not obeying the prophets (with apparent reference to the prophecy of Chaggai) and are repeating the behavior of their ancestors, who similarly failed to heed the words of the "early prophets" (the prophets of the First Temple). Zekharia beseeches them: "Do not be like your forefathers..." (*Zekharia* 1:4), and he reminds them that their forefathers had acknowledged their mistakes when they were finally exiled (1:6).

This explains the puzzling brevity of Zekharia's opening prophecy, which otherwise seems to lack any message. What is it that Zekharia is demanding of his listeners? The solution is simple: this prophecy rests upon Chaggai's preceding one, and urges its listeners to obey that prophecy immediately – as indeed happened on the 24th day of the ninth month. This view is further supported by the verses in Ezra, which mention Chaggai before Zekharia: "Then the prophets - Chaggai the prophet, and Zekharia son of Iddo, prophesied..." (*Ezra* 5:1); "And the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Chaggai the prophet and Zekharia son of Iddo..." (6:14).

24th of Kislev – "Now ask instruction of the kohanim, saying"

On the 24th day of the ninth month (Kislev), Chaggai returns to the problem he addressed earlier – the lack of desire to arise and build God's House, owing to the fact that everyone is busy with his own affairs. This is the reason why God has brought the drought: in order to awaken them and draw them out of their self-absorbed focus on their private prosperity.

This prophecy opens with a sort of "quiz" addressed to the kohanim concerning matters of *kodashim* and *taharot*:

Now ask a teaching of the kohanim, saying: if a person carries consecrated meat in the flap of his garment, and with that flap he touches bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any food – does it become consecrated? And the kohanim answered and said, No. Then Chaggai said: If a person who is impure, on account of [contact with] a dead body, touches any of these – will it become impure? And the kohanim answered and said, It will become impure (*Chaggai* 2:11-13).

While the Gemara (*Pesachim* 16b-17a) discusses these questions on halakhic grounds, Ibn Ezra takes a more literary view of the intention behind the questions:

That which is consecrated has no power to sanctify that which is not, by means of mediating contact, in the way that impurity resulting from contact with a dead body has the power to render something else impure. This is meant as a metaphor, like the technique of Natan, who spoke to David and caught him at his word (Shmuel II 12)... because they were building houses for their own needs, while God's House remained in ruins... (Ibn Ezra on *Chaggai* 2:14).

According to Ibn Ezra, then, the prophecy is returning to its opening argument: the laziness of the returnees and their absorption in personal matters are what invite the prophet's rebuke. This rebuke employs a halakhic metaphor: impurity spreads more easily than sanctity, or purity. If something that is ritually pure comes into contact with something that is ritually impure, the impurity spreads.

Hence we deduce that the manifestation of holiness in the world requires human effort and action. In the absence of this human investment, it will not appear miraculously from heaven. Only impurity and defilement can spread "on their own," as it were, without any human effort. Therefore, declares the prophet, all sacrifices that are now being offered upon the altar, in the absence of the Temple, are impure – because the people have no wish to build it; they are waiting for it to appear on its own, to descend from heaven. However, the heavenly response is a drought as a result of their apathy and self-centeredness.

End of Chaggai's prophecy

On that same day – the 24th day of the ninth month – Chaggai conveys a further prophecy – his last – complementing his message from the last day of Sukkot, declaring that the day of liberation from foreign rule is drawing close. Rashi interprets this as referring to the fall of the Persian kingdom at the hands of the Greeks, and as hinting to the salvation associated with the Hasmoneans, and he elaborates on this explicitly in commenting on the prophecy of Zekharia (see below). Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, maintains that there must have been some great and significant events that took place even during the Persian reign, but "we have not located the ancient texts."[\[1\]](#)

"The olive tree did not bear fruit"

For what reason does Chaggai's prophecy conclude on the 24th of Kislev? Why does the day of laying the foundation of God's Sanctuary fall specifically on that date, or on the day after it? Is there any connection between all this and

the rededication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans on that date (or the day after), generations later?

The verses that hold the key to answering all of these questions are connected to the severe drought that struck the land:

Consider now: from this day onwards, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of God's Temple was laid, consider it. Is the seed yet in the barn? And do the vine, and the fig tree, and the pomegranate, and the olive tree, still not bring forth? From this day I will bless you (*Chaggai* 2:18-19).

The simplest and most obvious reason for the promise commencing on this date in Kislev is that, as noted above, the olive season is the last in the yearly cycle of the "seven species" of Eretz Yisrael. Its duration, including the pressing of the olives, is from Tishrei until the end of Kislev.

At the end of the ninth month the season for olives and oil comes to an end. That year was a year of terrible drought. With regard to the grain and the wine, this dire situation was apparent already in the sixth and seventh months (Elul-Tishrei). The olive season, however, was only beginning then, and the harvest could not yet be measured. In chapter 2, verse 16, Chaggai conveys a detailed accounting of the average produce for the year from the threshing floors (fifty percent), and from the wine-presses (forty percent). Since the summary of the harvest is of great importance, the prophet waits until the end of the ninth month to include the olive harvest.

"From this day onwards I will bless you," promises Chaggai in God's Name. This does not mean that now the olive trees will suddenly produce all that they should have in the preceding months, but rather that from now onwards, with the laying of the foundation of the House of God, a blessed year has begun: a year which will produce a blessed harvest and a full ingathering. Only in Nissan would the people see that the year had indeed been a good one, but perhaps they took heart from the signs that would have been apparent already in Shevat, with the healthy rains falling.

The day of the actual laying of the foundation of God's Temple was apparently not the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (Kislev) but rather the next day, the 25th, for concerning the 24th Chaggai says, "*Before* one stone was laid upon another in God's Temple" (2:15).

24th of Shevat – Zekharia’s visions

“On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shevat,” two months after Chaggai’s final prophecy, Zekharia prophesied and told of his visions, which were prophecies of consolation and salvation. These ten visions, which all appeared on the same day, extend from Zekharia 1:7 to 6:8. The *menora* and the olive tree are at the center of all of them. In the following section of this article (b), we shall briefly examine these visions.

B. Zekharia’s visions as an overall *menora* structure

A careful review of Zekharia’s visions reveals that there are in fact five separate visions, each comprising two images.^[2] This article will focus on the central one (chapters 3-4), which is a vision of a *menora* with its seven lights, with a bowl on top of it and olive branches at its sides, and a vision of a stone with seven eyes, or facets, symbolizing God’s eyes which roam about the land. These two images comprise a single vision: the *menora* symbolizes Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol, while the stone represents Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, the governor of Yehuda. These two figures – Yehoshua and Zerubavel – are also the “two olive branches”; the “two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.” The building of the Second Temple, and the salvation of Israel, rest upon both of them together – as we see also in chapter 6, in the vision of the crowns, which concludes the series of visions.

In view of the above-hinted structure, I propose that all of Zekharia’s visions appeared to him in a prophetic revelation organized in the form of a *menora*^[3] and its branches, “its seven lamps upon it,” “and two olive branches by it – one on the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side of it.”

The visions come together to form a *menora* consisting of seven units. The central pillar – “the *menora*” – comprises two visions joined together: the vision of the stone that is addressed to Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol, together with the vision of the *menora* that is addressed to Zerubavel, the governor of Yehuda. This duality within the central pillar may be explained by the fact that the national leadership is indeed a dual entity: along with the monarchy there is also the *kehuna* (priesthood), as specified in the vision of the two crowns: “He (Zerubavel; see 4:9) will build God’s Temple, and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne, and there shall be [Yehoshua] the *kohen* at his throne, and a counsel of peace shall prevail between them” (6:13).

Horses	horns/plows	measuring line	Menorah/stone	flying
scroll	‘efa’/women	chariot		

Prophecy of the crowns

The prophecy of the crowns (*Zekharia* 6:9-15), which is also from the same day (24th of Shevat), follows immediately after the ten visions, but it is of a different character than the prophecy of the visions. It is earthly, brief, and to-the-point, like Zekharia's opening prophecy. It mentions names and actions, and foretells how Zerubavel and Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, will bring about the sprouting of redemption and peace (as implied by the words, "My servant, *tzemach*" – *Zekharia* 3:8).

The prophecy of the crowns should be viewed as the conclusion of the revelation of the visions. The closing verse of this prophecy, therefore, is the condition upon which all of the wonders and salvations of the visions depend: "And [all of this] shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God" (6:15). This formula, which usually serves as an introduction^[4] (like any statement of condition), is employed here as a final warning. In other words, all of the prophecies and Divine promises that have been uttered by Chaggai and Zekharia are dependent upon the behavior of Am Yisrael, and the critical test of whether they will obey God. The potential for redemption, salvation and great wonders is offered by God; its realization is in the hands of Am Yisrael.

Thus Zekharia concludes the prophecies of the second year with the same idea that introduced them, and he sets out a condition for the prophetic pronouncements of Chaggai, as Ibn Ezra explains in his commentary on Chaggai 2:9. The same idea is expressed by Reish Lakish in the Gemara (Yoma 9b), maintaining that if all of Am Yisrael had gone up "like a wall" to Eretz Yisrael in the days of Ezra, the Divine Presence would have returned to their midst and there would never have been another exile.

Rashi, in contrast (*Chaggai* 2:6; see also Radak who takes a similar approach), associates the promises of the "shaking up" of the nations with the honor and peace that will come to Am Yisrael with the era of the Hasmoneans.

It may seem difficult to suggest that the period from Zerubavel until Shimon the Hasmonean can be described as "just a little while." However, from a philosophical and historical perspective we may combine the interpretations of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and suggest that during the time of Zerubavel the people did not merit it – either because they were not worthy, or because not everyone had returned, and therefore this prophecy was fulfilled only in the days of the Hasmoneans. Even then it was not realized in full, for the kingdom of the House

of David did not return, as in the prophecy of the “*tzemach*” for Zerubavel, and in fact it was removed – perhaps owing to the sins of the earlier generation.

The connection between Chaggai’s prophecy and Chanuka, according to Rashi, is a direct one: it was the Hasmoneans who completed the foundation and the construction of the Second Temple, and were responsible for the Divine Presence dwelling inside it, by saving Judea from foreign rule during the time of Shimon the Hasmonean. Did the Jews of the Hasmonean generation understand and interpret their role in this light? We cannot be certain, but it would seem that they did. In any event, can it be coincidental that the rededication of God’s House, in the days of the Hasmoneans, on the 25th of Kislev, appears so well suited to the final prophecy of Chaggai, which was uttered in the 24th day of the ninth month (Kislev), on the eve of the laying of the foundation for the Sanctuary?

Zekharia’s revelation of visions, which is all about consolation and redemption, with visions of salvation accompanying it, testifies clearly that indeed, on the 25th of Kislev, construction commenced on the House of God, following immediately on from Chaggai’s (first) prophecy of the 24th of Kislev. It seems, then, that by virtue of the beginning of the construction of the Temple, the people merited the prophecies of consolation and salvation – Zekharia’s visions.

The content of the prophecy serves to emphasize the importance and centrality of olives and wine, the integration of the olive branches and the *menora* in the prophecy of redemption, and the return of the Divine Presence to the Second Temple.^[5] This message was conveyed many years prior to the Hasmonean rededication.

C. The foundations of Chanuka

The eight days of Chanuka present a multi-faceted riddle. Many explanations have been offered by many Torah scholars over the generations that address individual aspects of the holiday, without providing a single, all-encompassing explanation for the riddle of Chanuka in its entirety. Below, I propose such an explanation, based on the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia, which were uttered many years prior to the Hasmonean victories.

What is Chanuka?

Our review of the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia has led us to a double conclusion:

- a. The date of Chanuka is not coincidental, and its roots go back to the beginning of the Second Temple period, many years prior to the Hasmonean rebellion.
- b. The central place of oil and the *menora* in this festival transcends the context of the Hasmonean victory.

___ This connection is highlighted by the mishna (Bikkurim 1:6) that specifies Chanuka as the end of the period for bringing *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Temple: “From Shavuot until Sukkot, one brings [*bikkurim*] and also recites [the special recitation for the occasion]. From Sukkot until Chanuka, one brings but does not recite. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira says: One brings and also recites.” Apparently, while the holiday of Chanuka is a later development, this time of the year is agriculturally significant.

Period of darkness and the beginning of light

There is an additional element that is relevant to the time of Chanuka. This period of the year marks a turning point between darkness and light. The end of the month of Kislev is a time of diminishing light. At this point on the solar calendar, the days are at their shortest while the nights are at their longest, with the winter solstice (in late December) always falling very close to Chanuka, just as the spring and autumn equinoxes fall around the festivals of Pesach and Sukkot. (The Torah commands that this be maintained, and this is a determining factor for leap years in the Hebrew calendar.) To this diminishing sunlight we may add the effect of the lunar cycle, whereby the light of the moon diminishes to the point of disappearing at the end of every Hebrew month.

Therefore, the final week of the month of Kislev is a period strongly characterized by a diminishing of light: there are short days, along with the gradual disappearance of the light of the moon. Together, these conditions make for the week with the lowest natural level of light in the whole year.

This low point in the natural light of the world calls for an increase of light on the part of man – for there is a special need for illumination during the long, dark nights. This need exists throughout the winter months, but during the last week in Kislev the necessity is emphasized, on both the practical and the symbolic level, through the deficiency in both sources of light. The ancient pagans were aware of this natural fact, and they celebrated a cosmic festival of light and fire at this season. As the Talmud describes it (*Avoda Zara* 8a):

“These are the festivals of the idolaters: The New Year and the Saturnalia...” Rav Hanan bar Rabba said: The New Year takes place eight days after the solstice; the Saturnalia – eight days prior to the solstice.... The Sages taught: When Adam saw that the days were getting shorter, he said: “Woe to me; perhaps it is because I sinned that the world is getting dark and is returning to its primal chaos; perhaps this is a Divine death sentence.” And so he spent eight days in fasting and prayer. When he saw the beginning of [the month of] Tevet, with the days growing longer, he said: “This is [simply] the way of the world!” So he went and made an eight-day celebration. The next year he celebrated both the earlier [eight-day] period and the later period. He [Adam] instituted [these celebrations] for the sake of Heaven, while they [the pagans] commemorate these days for idolatry.

The Talmud is aware of the similarity between the respective winter solstice holidays. However, the conclusion that it draws is opposite that of scholars of comparative religion. Chanuka is not a monotheistic festival that grew out of a pagan one. Rather, the festival started out as a cosmic, universal one, established by Adam, who “instituted them [the eight-day periods] for the sake of Heaven.” Only afterwards did it become a pagan festival (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*, chapter 1).

The Talmud depicts Adam as lacking astronomical knowledge, but possessing impressive religio-intellectual profundity. First he notes the gradual shortening of the day, relative to the time of his creation (in Tishrei, when day and night are of equal length), and interprets this as a punishment for his sin – a slow death that has been decreed upon him. However, when he realizes that the days are once again growing longer, he does not become arrogant. He does not boast that God has accepted his prayer and commuted his verdict. Such a religious view (so familiar in our times) has no place, according to the Talmud, and it cannot imagine such a thought entering the mind of Adam, who was a religious believer. There could only be one explanation for the lengthening of the days: there are laws that govern nature, and Adam discovered, through his observation of nature, the law of periodicity according to which the world operates: “It is the way of the world.” The stars proceed in their heavenly paths – all according to the laws of nature. If the world operates according to its way, then it will not be influenced by prayers and fasting, or even by man’s sins. Seemingly, the jump from this perception to all-out heresy would not be a long one. But Adam is not a heretic, and therefore he celebrates eight festive days, “for the sake of Heaven.”

It is worth comparing the story in Massekhet Avoda Zara with the well-known explanation in Massekhet Shabbat for the miracle of Chanuka and the institution of the festival. The “eight festive days” celebrated by Adam, specifically at the time of month and the time of year with the least amount of light, obviously hint to Chanuka, though the name of the festival is not mentioned, since “Chanuka” did not yet exist.

The clearest expression of the connection between the story of Adam’s festival and Chanuka are in the Gemara’s statements that “the next year he made both (eight-day periods) into days of celebration,” and “He established them for the sake of Heaven.” These parallel the statements in Massekhet Shabbat, concerning Chanuka: “The next year they established them as days of celebration, with praise and thanksgiving.” This parallel leaves no room for doubt as to the connection between the two festivals, and the clear intention of the discussion in Massekhet Avoda Zara is to explain Chanuka as a cosmic, primal “festival of Adam”; a festival of light, at the time when the light is most restricted. It was the idolaters who defiled this festival, turning it into a pagan one that is celebrated at the same time of year.

As such, the agricultural aspect of *bikkurim* serves to purify the cosmic festival which had become a pagan celebration. The natural agricultural cycle of *Eretz Yisrael* is such that the end of the olive season (and thus the end of the *bikkurim* season) falls in the last week of Kislev. This creates a situation in which the celebration of the *bikkurim* with olive oil coincides with the natural, universally-recognized need to create light at this time of darkness. Thus the light of pure olive oil, from the produce of the land brought as *bikkurim* to the Temple, replaces the impure, pagan “light and fire,” thereby illuminating the world with purity emanating from the holiness of the land and of the Temple.

Here we arrive at a surprising and thought-provoking parallel. The Temple, built for the glory of God, was defiled by idolaters, transforming it into a place that would combine Israelite faith with a universal, Hellenistic vision. For this reason they placed their idol in the Temple, choosing specifically the twenty-fifth of Kislev as the day for this desecration, so as to correspond with the original day of the laying of the foundation of the Second Temple. This was a deliberate attempt to offend the religious public, which they defined as a group of zealots.

Three years later, Yehuda Maccabee and his brothers planned the rededication of the altar and of the Temple as a whole for the anniversary of its

defilement – the day of the oil – and they celebrated the festival of Sukkot in the ninth month, “with myrtle branches and citron branches and palm branches, for eight days, with joy and festivity (Hasmoneans II 10:5-7). They thereby instituted for all generations the parallel between the dedication of the Temple in the days of Shlomo, on Sukkot (*Melakhim* I 8:2; *ibid.* 65), and its rededication in Kislev in the days of the Hasmoneans, with a further parallel between the ingathering of the grain and the wine and the ingathering of the olives, as celebrations of equal weight.

“The next year” they instituted these days as holidays, with praise and thanksgiving, preserving the custom of kindling lights with oil, and the eight-day duration, so maintaining the parallel between Chanuka and Sukkot. This parallel was noted explicitly in letters that were sent out to all of Israel (Hasmoneans II 1:18; 2:16).

Similarly, the festival which had existed from the beginning of time as a universal, cosmic celebration was defiled and became a pagan holiday, until it was once again restored to purity by the Hasmoneans. This, then, is the link through which the Gemara explains Chanuka on the basis of Adam, presenting a model that is similar to but different from the more familiar one from Massekhet Shabbat.

According to what we have said above, the olive season – the ingathering of the oil – is the focus of the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia, which establish the date of the 24th of the ninth month as the day when the foundations were laid for the House of God, since this represents the conclusion of the previous cycle (the year of produce and *bikkurim* which has just ended) and the beginning of the new cycle (the new year of produce and *bikkurim*).

The first foundation of the festival of Chanuka is the end of the olive harvest, which in fact parallels *Sukkot*, which is the end of the ingathering of the grain and the wine. This idea is hinted at in the aforementioned Mishna in Bikkurim, which mentions both Sukkot and Chanuka as concluding dates for *bikkurim*.^[6] This mishna is not some sort of appendix that happens to make mention of Chanuka, the festival of the Maccabees. Quite the opposite: it is the first and most ancient expression of this festival, in the sense of the end of the season of *bikkurim*, with the conclusion of the time for bringing an offering of oil from that year.

The statements in the Books of the Hasmoneans and the hints in rabbinic literature that link Chanuka with Sukkot,^[7] presenting Chanuka as a sort of

“Second Sukkot” in the ninth month, are all based on this parallel, which is an essential feature of the agricultural year in Eretz Yisrael, and is given such clear expression in the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia.

Likewise, the name given by Josephus (Antiquities XII 7,7) - “the festival of lights,” a name which he was unable to explain - testifies to the essence of the festival being connected with the kindling of lights using oil at the conclusion of the period when it could be brought to the Temple as *bikkurim*. Eventually, the historical event, with the fulfillment of the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia – the victory of the Hasmoneans – led the festival to be instituted officially for all generations.

One final observation relates to the nature of the celebration of Chanuka. Most interpretations in rabbinic literature for the celebration of the eight days of Chanuka are connected to oil and kindling.^[8] All of these have their sources in ancient traditions and teachings, which connect the theme of the festival with its source – oil and kindling. Only during this part of the year could the miracle of the olive oil, with its strong connection to nature, have taken place, and all of the stories that are told around it are well suited to this season. Even after Chanuka had been established as a festival with a strongly historical character, it continued to be associated with the olive oil and the lights that were kindled, in addition to the recent historical event – the Hasmonean victory. Thus was established a “rabbinically ordained festival” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Megilla ve-Chanuka* 3:3), reminiscent of the three biblically-ordained pilgrim festivals. Its root is a religio-agricultural “season” - the conclusion of the ingathering of the olives, which is not a festival, but to it is added the dedication of the Second Temple, during the time of Zerubavel, followed by the rededication by the Hasmoneans, as national historical events.

In this sense, Chanuka resembles the festivals in the Torah which link the Exodus from Egypt with the spring (barley harvest), the wheat harvest with the giving of the Torah on Shavuot (hinted at via the third month – Shemot 19), and the ingathering of the threshing floor and of the vineyard with the *sukkot* in the desert (and perhaps also the great *sukka* of peace and redemption at the End of Days – see Zekharia 14). The event of Chanuka, however, took place during the Second Temple period, and therefore it is not mentioned in the Torah, nor does it have the same status as the biblical festivals (no prohibition of labor).

Following the destruction of the Second Temple, there was no tangible remnant of the achievements of the Hasmoneans, but the festival of Chanuka could not be abolished because of its unique character, which was far broader

than the historical event from the time of the Hasmoneans. Therefore the Gemara emphasizes the commandment of kindling and the miracle of the cruse of oil as the essence of the festival. The real meaning of the question that the Gemara poses – “What is Chanuka?” – is that following the destruction, the festival of Chanuka no longer has sufficient justification based on the Hasmonean victory alone, and that the continued observance of the festival is mainly related to the oil and the kindling. The miracle of the oil, the tale that has inspired generations of Jews, is the most faithful expression of the original, fundamental, agricultural reason for the festival. *Sefer Chashmonaim* I, which was written during the time of the Hasmonean dynasty, focuses – naturally – on the military victory, ignoring the matter of the oil, while it is specifically the rabbinical sources that reflect the festival’s primal, ancient, complex significance.

The Hasmonean victory imbued Chanuka with its dual nature – religio-agricultural and historio-national, and thus it was instituted as a festival for all future generations.

We began our discussion with a multi-faceted puzzle surrounding the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia, and we have concluded with a comprehensive reconstruction of the history of Chanuka, which illuminates the festival with the olive oil – the “*yitzhar*” – of Eretz Yisrael, and restores the tales of the oil to their rightful place.

It is amazing that the prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia, which were clear and relevant in the eyes of the Hasmoneans, disappeared from the consciousness of later generations (despite the fact that Zekharia’s central prophecy serves as the *haftara* for Chanuka), to the point where all the concepts of Chanuka became entangled in a knot of riddles. Only Rabbi Yaakov Emden and the *Sefat Emet* were able, with their sharp intellects, to discern the direction in which to seek the solution. Had these prophecies not been preserved throughout the generations, we would not even be able to imagine this complicated development behind the festival of Chanuka.

May its lights continue to illuminate our way with the dual light of Am Yisrael who are saved by the miraculous light shining from within nature, in Eretz Yisrael with its grain, wine and oil.

(The unabridged version of this article, “The Day of Laying the Foundation of God’s Sanctuary According to the Prophecies of Chaggai and Zekharia” can be found here: <http://www.ybn.co.il/mamrim/PDF/Hannukah1.pdf>.

Additional articles by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun can be found on his website, ybn.co.il.)

[1] This dispute may be related to the controversy concerning the dates involved and the identity of Artaxerxes; the scope of the present article does not allow for detailed discussion of the respective views on this issue.

[2] For a full treatment and development of this notion, see the original version of this article in *Megadim* 12.

[3] The term “*menora*” refers specifically to the central pillar; see *Shemot* 25:31-35.

[4] It has its origins in the introduction to the section of rebuke in *Sefer Devarim* (28:1): “And it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God...,” see also *Devarim* 7:12; 8:19; 11:13; 28:15.

[5] The *menora* in the Sanctuary, and the “*keruvim*” (cherubs) in the Holy of Holies, were the only vessels of the Mishkan and the Temple that were made of a single piece of gold. The *keruvim* expressed God’s Kingship and His Presence in His House, in the midst of Israel, as a supernal fire that appears from the heavens. Correspondingly, upon the destruction of the First Temple, the chariot of the Divine Presence returned to the heavens, as described by Yechezkel (chapters 8-11). The *menora*, in contrast, has lights that are kindled by the kohen who performs the Divine service “before God”; this is epitomized in the Second Temple and its special illumination. The return of the Divine Presence to the Second Temple is therefore expressed in the *menora* rather than in the *keruvim* – all subject to Israel’s behavior. This explains why the *menora* became the most important Jewish symbol for all generations, up until its eventual adoption as the symbol of the modern State of Israel – which, of course, was designed on the basis of the lights in Zekharia. May we be worthy of it.

[6] By Sukkot it would usually be possible to bring an offering of the first of the oil, but so long as the olive season continues, one can certainly bring more. This would appear to be the source of the controversy concerning the recital. The question here is whether it is desirable (*le-khatchila*) that a person bring an offering from the olives harvested later in the season, in which case he should certainly recite the special speech over the *bikkurim*, or whether oil from later on in the season (after Sukkot) is acceptable but not preferable (*bedi’avad*), in which case he should not recite.

[7] See Sefat Emet on Chanuka – 541, 544, 536.

[8] The eight skewers from which they fashioned a *menora* (*Megillat Ta’anit*, cited in *Pesikta Rabbati* chapter 2, and *Rosh Ha-shana* 24a; *Menachot* 28b; *Avoda Zara* 43a); the eight days that the pure oil lasted (*Megillat Ta’anit*, cited in *Shabbat* 21b); as well as most of the explanations for the well-known question of why the festival lasts eight days, while the miracle of the oil was only really seven days (since there was sufficient oil for the first day) (*Beit Yosef*, OC 670).