

Chanukah Light & Miracles

Evolution of a Holiday

1) Judah Maccabee with his men, led by the Lord, recovered the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. He demolished the altars erected by the heathen in the public square and their sacred precincts as well. When they had purified the sanctuary, they constructed another altar; then, striking fire from flints, they offered a sacrifice for the first time for two whole years and restored the incense, the lights and the show bread... The sanctuary was purified on the 25th day of Kislev, the same day of the same month as that on which foreigners had profaned it. The joyful celebration lasted for eight days. It was like the Feast of Sukkot, for they recalled how, only a short time before, they had kept that feast while they were living like wild animals in the mountains and caves; and so they carried garlanded rods and branches with their fruits, as well as palm fronds, and they chanted hymns to the One who had so triumphantly achieved the purification of God's own Temple. A measure was passed by the public assembly, which stated that the entire Jewish nation should celebrate these days every year. (*II Maccabees 10:1-8, 2nd-1st c. BCE*)

2) Now Judas [Maccabeus] celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the Temple for 8 days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival. (Josephus, *Antiquities*, c. 94 C.E.)

3) What is Chanukah? Our rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev begin the eight days of Chanukah, on which we refrain from eulogizing the dead and from fasting. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils in it, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed over them and defeated them, they searched and found only one bottle of oil that had been sealed by the High Priest. It contained only enough for one day's lighting, but a miracle was brought about with it, and they lit from it for eight days. The following year they were established as a festival, with Hallel and thanksgiving. (*Talmud, Shabbat 21a, c. 500-700 C.E.*)

The Miracle of Light

4) Our rabbis taught: when the first human (Adam) saw the daylight hours were becoming shorter and shorter, he said, "Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and is returning to chaos (*tohu va-vohu*). This is the death sentence declared upon me by Heaven!" He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. After the winter solstice when he saw the days becoming longer and longer, he said, "This is simply the way of the world!" He went and made an eight-day festival . . . He established them for the sake of Heaven, and they [the pagans/Rome] established them for idolatry. (Talmud, *Avodah Zarah 8a*)

5) The matter of the miracle is like the owner of the castle who declares, “Look, here I am!”¹ For in truth, a miracle also indicates something about nature—that it is all hidden miracles. And this is why we light on Chanukah for 8 days, even though there was enough oil for one day [and so, technically, only 7 days should be counted as ‘miracles’]. But because of the matter of the miracles, it became known that nature is also a “miracle.’ Thus we do this memorial for 8 days, to show that nature is like an ax in the hand of the quarryman—the One who speaks to vinegar, and it lights, He speaks to oil, and it lights. (*R. Yehudah Leib Chasman, early 20th c.*)

6) **And we are not permitted to make use of them, but rather only to see them...** (*Hanerot hallelu*): And it says that the *mitzvah* is to see the Chanukah lamp. This means that the Chanukah lamps give light for each soul so that it will be able to see itself in the manner of self-seeing needed by every human being...The miracle of the lamps was to give illumination to everyone whose eyes had grown too dark for seeing. The Talmud states: "Lamp light is good for making an inspection" – i.e., lamps are used for searching out things, for it is written, [*A person's soul is God's lamp*] which searches out all the innermost parts... (Proverbs 20:27). “*The innermost parts*” refers to the point of vitality in each soul that comes from the blessed Holy One, as it is written, *and God breathed into his nostrils the soul of life* (Genesis 2) – it searches the holes and cracks in a person's soul, trying to find a proper place to spread out and give light. Thus is exactly like the lamp-light searching for oil in the wick...Even if a person is enslaved to the evil inclination and is unaware of the truth, s/he shall be able to see with the help of God's lamp, which is the *mitzvot*, which are called “lamps.” (*Sefat Emet, R. Yehudah Leib of Ger, 1871*)

7) Thirty-six candles of Chanukah—these correspond to the primordial, hidden light that was used during the first 36 hours of Creation.² The light of the Chanukah candles is an illumination from that hidden light. Chanukah educates/trains us for the future redemption, when the hidden light will be revealed to us, the messianic light in its fullness. “Light” is mentioned in the Torah 36 times, for the primordial light of Creation is hidden within Torah. And this is what the sages of the Talmud said: “The one who makes a regular practice of lighting the candle”—that is, who accustoms himself to the future light—“will have scholarly children.” (*Bnei Issachar, R. Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov, 1783-1841*)

8) A favorite rabbinic question concerning Chanukah is, What is the miracle of the first day, since there was enough oil in the cruse to burn for that day? One popular response is that the miracle on the first day was the victory or the dedication of the Temple. Another is that, miraculously, no oil was consumed even by the first morning. To my mind, the answer that comes closest to the meaning of Chanukah is that the miracle the first day was the deep faith that it took to light the menorah, know there was not enough oil for eight days. That same faith led the Maccabees to revolt against impossible odds, to strike like hammers and scatter sparks of revolt in the hills of Judea. They believed they would prevail “not by strength, nor by power, but through My spirit—says Adonai.” This faith allowed them to light the menorah, and it is this

¹ This is a reference to a midrash about Abraham realizing God's existence through the parable of a man looking at a lit-up building and realizing it must have an owner.

² This references a midrash, that explains how it was that “light” was created on the first day of Creation, but the sun and moon on the 4th day—the first light was a powerful, spiritual light that was hidden away until messianic times, when we will merit it.

The Miracle of Light, cont'd

faith that made it burn for 8 days. It is the miracle of faith despite darkness, and of belief in the growth of light in the depths of winter. (*Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, The Jewish Holidays*)

9) As the days grow short and the night darkness long, we are invited to enter into the darkness of our own hearts. There, buried beneath the rubble of our disappointments, we find the miraculous spark of our Divinity, the awesome knowledge that we are each created in the image of God. This is the spark that kindles our Festival of Lights. Each night of Chanukah, we light another candle. Each night the light grows brighter, shining its radiance into our own hidden places.

The "Great Miracle" of healing is happening right here within us when we call light into our own places of Darkness, when we bring the healing light of compassion into hidden crevices of shame or fear. As we light the flames of Chanukah, may we kindle the flame within that will shine the light of awareness across the true expanse of Soul.

(*R. Shefa Gold, shefagold.com/InnerChanukah/html*)