



Hanuka - Getting the Point

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Why Do We Celebrate Hanuka?

Why do we Jews celebrate Hanuka? Many of us tend to concentrate on questions such as whether to light candles or oil, by the door or window.... and somehow we miss the point. Some believe that we are celebrating the fact that an amount of oil burned longer than expected. This is a grave misreading of the Tora in general and of Hanuka in particular.

To better understand the holiday, we need to review the historical events that we celebrate 2170 years later.

The Historical Background

After the death of Alexander the Great in the year 323 BCE, the empire he had carved out was divided among his generals. The Land of Israel fell first into the hands of the Ptolemaic Empire, centred in Egypt, and later (198 BCE) became part of the Greco-Syrian Empire. The inevitable result was that Greek thinking and culture took root in the Jewish homeland.

By the time Antiokhus Epiphanes ('God personified' in Greek!) rose to the throne (175 BCE), Hellenism had successfully infiltrated Jewish society. Many Jews turned their backs on their God and their people; they saw Greek culture as the most advanced and enlightened of the day. This type of betrayal always has its rewards; such Jews were often appointed to positions of power within the Greek colonial administration. The position of 'tax collector' was particularly coveted as it afforded one the opportunity to rob and extort with official sanction. They spared no effort to win other Jews over to their point of view, and not without success. Ever increasing numbers of Jews were becoming Hellenized (Book of Macabees I, 1:11).

For the hard-core Hellenists, however, this was not enough. They envisioned a New Middle East. Antiokhus was approached by Jewish subjects who proposed that they be empowered to enforce a policy designed to undermine, and eventually eradicate, Jewish life and culture. If their Jewish brethren did not recognize the 'glory' of Greek 'progress', and insisted on remaining true to their God and His Tora even at the price of being out of step with the rest of the empire – they would simply have to help them to see the light.

Antiochus was only too ready to comply, and the new government policy was proclaimed throughout the land. Circumcision, Shabath observance and Tora study were outlawed. The Temple did not escape either; an idol of the Greek god Zeus was erected on the Holy Altar. Tora scrolls were burned, and women whose babies were discovered to be circumcised were put to death together with their sons. Many Jews chose to die a martyr's death rather than transgress the Word of God (Macabees I, 1:44-64).

This was the state of affairs when a force of Greek soldiers arrived in the town of Modhi'in to enforce the law requiring every Jewish settlement to offer a sacrifice on a Greek altar. The townspeople were forcibly gathered, and Matithyahu – the head of the priestly clan who resided in the town – was approached by a Greek official to perform the sacrifice. *“Heaven forbid! I and my sons shall follow the example of our forefathers. We shall never forsake the Tora”* he replied (Macabees I, 2:20-21). Another Jew, however, willing to do the 'dirty work' (for a price), was found.

As this Jew was about to desecrate HaShem's Name in public, Matithyahu decided that enough was enough; it was now clear beyond doubt that the only choice left was to live as an idol-worshipping Greek or die as a Jew. Matithyahu chose God and honour over sin and shame:

“And Matithyahu was zealous [for HaShem] and ran and slaughtered the man on the altar. He then killed the official in charge, and destroyed the altar. He acted zealously for the Tora like Pinhas did to Zimri Ben Salu, and he cried: ‘All those who are zealous for the Tora, who are faithful to the Covenant [with HaShem] - follow me!’ And he and his sons fled to the mountains, leaving all their belongings behind” (Macabees I, 2:15-28).

Thus began the Hashmonean revolt.

The rest, as they say, is history. In a campaign that lasted three years, an irregular army of peasant-soldiers, entirely untrained, poorly armed and forced to live off the land, led by Matithyahu's son Yehudhah, succeeded in driving the Greco-Syrian forces out of Jerusalem and much of the country.

The victorious Jewish forces marched to Jerusalem – which had been off limits to Jews for some years – and entered the Temple. The sight that met their eyes was not a pretty one: the site was desolate, the altar desecrated, the gates burned. Weeds grew in the cracks of the stone floors.

It took eight days to restore some semblance of order, renovate and produce the necessary vessels for the Temple Service (Meghilath Ta'anith Mishnah 23). On the 25th day of the ninth month (Kislev) they rose early in the morning and offered the first morning sacrifice in three years:

*“And the people fell on their faces, and prayed, and **praised HaShem for having granted them victory**. And they celebrated the rededication of the Altar for eight days – they offered sacrifices...the rejoicing of the people was very great; **the ignominy of foreign domination was removed**. And Yehudhah, his brethren, and all of the Assembly of Israel instituted that*

these Days of Rededication of the Altar be observed annually for eight days, beginning on 25th of the month of Kislew...” (Macabees I, 4:55-58).

Subsequently, a letter was sent by Yehudhah and the Sanhedrin to the Jews of Egypt, informing them of the new festival:

“May HaShem be praised for bringing the evil-doers low. We are preparing to celebrate, on the 25th day of Kislew, the Festival of the Purification of the Miqdash – we wish to inform you...” (Macabees 2, 1:17-18).

Knowing a Miracle When You See One

This is the essence of Hanuka: the successful revolt of the Jewish people faithful to HaShem and His Tora against a pagan empire and its Jewish supporters determined to eradicate Judaism. For a time it seemed that the anti-Torah forces would prevail. The Eternal One of Yisrael, however, *“will not lie nor change His Mind; for He is not a man...”* (Shemuel I, 15:29). The revolt succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Not only did they restore the primacy of Tora culture and practice in the State of Yehudhah; the Jewish people were actually sovereign and free, able to determine their own spiritual and material destiny for the first time in centuries.

This is the miracle to which the Talmud refers when it asks: *“Why do we say Hallel for eight days on Hannukah?”* The Talmud replies: *“Because of the miracle”*. The text continues: *“If so, why not say Hallel on Purim because of the miracle? [Answer]: Because we do not say Hallel for a miracle that took place in the Exile [seeing that we remain in Exile, it is only a partial salvation]”* (TB ‘Arakhin 10b).

This Talmudic discussion raises the obvious question: What miracle of Purim? The Book of Ester is the only book of the T’nakh in which the name of HaShem does not appear. No supernatural event is recorded therein; all the happenings of the Book of Ester occur in a natural and seemingly mundane fashion. So again we ask: what miracle?

The Hebrew word for miracle, *nes*, does not necessarily refer to a supernatural event. The very same word also means ‘flag’ or ‘banner’. Thus we read in the Tora: *“And Hashem said to Moshe: ‘Make a serpent and set it upon a banner [nes]; and it shall be that anyone who was bitten shall look at it, and shall live’”* (B’midhbar-Numbers 21:8). And in T’hilim-Psalms we find: *“You have given a banner [nes] to them that fear You”* (60:6).

Nothing in L’shon haQodhesh, the Holy Tongue, is the result of chance. It is the language of HaShem the Creator, perfect and divine, bequeathed to His People. There must be a profound reason why *nes* means both miracle and banner – and there is. Something which stands out from its surroundings, an object or event of which people take particular notice is a *nes* – be it a banner or flag designed to attract one’s attention, or a supernatural event.

The matter now becomes clearer: the salvation of the Jews from their enemies at the time of Ester and Mord'khai is the miracle of Purim **even though nothing supernatural took place**. When mundane events occur with a mysterious synchronicity, inexorably leading to an astonishing and incredibly positive outcome, the Tora Jew sees the Hand of Hashem. So too, the victory of the Jewish nation against a great empire, against all odds and logic, is the outstanding and singular event to which the Talmud refers in connection with Hanuka – not the miracle of a certain quantity of oil burning longer than expected.¹ The successful revolt changed the direction and flow of history; without it Judaism would have perished, and I would not be writing and you would not be reading this article.

We recall the miracle of our salvation and victory by reciting *Hallel* and '*Al HaNisim* (where the oil is unmentioned). The miracle of the oil is commemorated by the lighting of candles (see T.B. Shabbath 21b and Maharsha ad loc). The miracle of the oil alone would not have warranted decreeing a new festival. Coming, however, on the heels of such history-shaping events, this supernatural occurrence served to remind us that **all the events surrounding *Hanuka* stem from the same Divine source** (see *Ner Misswa*, Maharal of Prague, p.22).

When perceived on a deeper level, *HaShem's* workings within the apparently normal events of this world are truly the greatest miracle of all.

¹ The burning of vinegar as if it were oil in the home of the holy and pious R. Hanina ben Dosa is related in the T.B. Ta'anith 25a. Such miracles are but very small in the eyes of HaShem, Master of All Things. Nobody of course has ever suggested that we declare a holiday because of the miracle of the vinegar.