

# Chanukah: *Why Ancient Victories Still Matter*



## 1. What is Chanukah

What is Chanukah? It is as the Rabbis taught: ON THE 25TH OF KISLEV THE DAYS OF CHANUKAH commence THEY ARE EIGHT days in all, ON WHICH IT IS NOT permitted TO EULOGIZE OR TO FAST, FOR WHEN THE Syrian- GREEKS ENTERED THE SANCTUARY, THEY CONTAMINATED ALL THE flasks of OIL THAT WERE IN THE SANCTUARY, AND WHEN THE ROYAL HASMONEAN HOUSE GAINED THE UPPER HAND AND VANQUISHED THEM, [THE HASMONEANS] SEARCHED the Temple area AND FOUND ONLY ONE FLASK OF OIL THAT WAS LYING (hidden) WITH THE KOHEN GADOL'S SEAL still intact, AND IT CONTAINED ONLY enough oil TO KINDLE the Menorah FOR ONE DAY. However, A MIRACLE WAS PERFORMED WITH [THIS OIL], AND THEY KINDLED the lights of the Menorah WITH IT for EIGHT DAYS until other ritually pure oil could be obtained. IN THE FOLLOWING YEAR [THE HASMONEANS AND THE SANHEDRIN] ESTABLISHED AND RENDERED [THESE EIGHT DAYS] permanent FESTIVAL DAYS WITH RESPECT TO the recital of HALLEL AND "THANKSGIVING."

- *Talmud, Shabbos 21b*

- "The Following Year" — Why wait?
- "Praise and Thanksgiving" — What about feasting? We are Jews after all!

## 2. Darkness

(ב) וְהָאֲרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֵף עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:  
*The earth was desolate and empty and darkness was over the face of the depths and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the water (Genesis 1:2)*

Midrash:

וַחֲוָהּ זֶה גְלוּת יוֹן הַיָּם יִכָּחַשׁ יִכָּחַשׁ עֵינֵיהֶם לִי רֵאשִׁית  
"Darkness" this refers to the Greeks, who darkened the eyes of Israel

## 3. Salient Features of Hellenism

Hellenism:

- Fatalistic Paganism
- Human life was cheap, War, violence, pillage, and mercenary armies were a basic feature of Hellenistic life.
- Charity was unheard of.
- All forms of sexual vulgarity were acceptable in not encouraged.
- It was a culture that made their gods over in the image of man, rather than having man be

made over in the image of G-d.

- No such thing as Divine revelation of truth, or supernatural revelation
- Denial of supernatural of Revelation
- No meaning beyond its immediate and limited horizon.

#### 4. Immediate Events Leading Up to Chanuka:

The Syrian-Greeks tried to force the Jews to assimilate. The study of Torah became a capital crime. If a parent was found to have circumcised an infant son, both the parent and child were put to death. The Syrian-Greeks set up idols in town squares and called the Jews to the square and forced them to bow to the statue or sacrifice a pig before it. They even forced Jewish brides before their marriage to be with the local Syrian-Greek commander. Their campaign against Judaism began slowly, but by 168 B.C.E. they had desecrated the Holy Temple by setting a statue of Zeus in the main plaza, and offering pigs on the temple altar.

In the town of Modiin, west of Jerusalem, lived a man named Mattisyahu (Mattithias). He was from the Hasmonean family, which is one of the branches of the Kohanim (priests). In 167 B.C.E., Syrian-Greek soldiers came to the town and demanded that the Jews sacrifice a pig to one of their gods. Knowing that Mattisyahu was considered a righteous leader, they signaled him out. But Mattisyahu refused to sacrifice the animal, even under threat of death. Not all the Jews of Modiin were so brave and devoted. When one of his fellow townsmen stepped forward and volunteered to sacrifice the pig, Mattisyahu, outraged at the treacherous act, grabbed a sword and slew the heretic. Mattisyahu, utilizing the famous battle cry of Moshe (after the sin of the Golden Calf), called out Mi LaHahem Alay (Whoever is to Hashem – come with me!). Mattisyahu's sons joined him and they attacked the soldiers, decimating the force by the end of the day. He and his five sons: Shimon, Yochanon, Yehuda (Judah the Macabee), Elazar and Yonoson together with 6,000 men went into the Judian desert to fight a gorilla war against the Greek oppressors. Mattisyahu did not live to see the victory of his sons – led by Yehudah - over the Greeks.

[Note: Macabee – Greek for Hammer. Also stands for – Mi Camocha Ba'eilim Hashem – Who is like You, oh Hashem, among the powerful].

Upon rededicating the Bet HaMikdash – it was discovered that all of the olive oil flasks were tampered with and unfit for the lighting of the Menorah – all, that is, but one! They lit that one jug, which should have lasted for one day – and it remained lit for eight.

The Maharal sums up the essence of the Greek domination and empire as follows:

וַיְהִי כִּי הָיָה כָּל עַנְיֵן מַלְכוּת לִיָּת, לְבַטֵּל מִיִּרְאֵל מַעֲלַת הַתּוֹרָה הָאֱלֹקִית וְכָל דְּבַר אֱלֹקִים

#### 5. Looking Deeper

- Oil = Wisdom. Tainted oil – tainted wisdom.
- Pure oil – that lasts into the realm of eight = Torah
- A discussion of biblical holidays and rabbinic holidays and their seasons.
  - i. Purim – physical threat – So one major theme is that we eat
  - ii. Chanukah – spiritual threat – So the major theme is להודות ולהלל.

#### 6. It's the Same menorah!

That which we make the blessing: "...who has performed miracles for our ancestors..." over the candles of Chanukah is because the illumination of the miracles are in the candles. In truth these candles are holy (הנרות הללו קודש הם). For the lighting of the menorah during this time of year was done via a miracle – even though the Jews had no pure oil, so too now it is via a miracle even though

we have neither the menorah nor pure oil.

תרל"א ליל א' - *Sfas Emes*

## 7. At This Time

The explanation of “bazman hazeh” (at this time...) is that the miracle is renewed each and every year. That is the miracle that is implanted into Time, establishes the glow of that holiness into that time for perpetuity. This is true even though a miracle is above time, nevertheless the roots of time and nature have higher sources (and it is into those sources that the miracle imparts its everlasting glow).

A person needs to believe, that there is no change [to this influx of holiness]. That is what is meant by “Bayamim haHeim, bazman hazeh” (In those days at this time...), for all of time is one, only that now it is embedded under nature (i.e., within the fabric of this time) while back then (at the time of the miracle) it reached the lofty heights of the roots (of time).

תרל"ג ליל ב' - *Sfas Emes*