

מאי חנוכה? What is Hanukah?  
By Lisa Schlaff<sup>1</sup>

"מאי חנוכה? What is Hanukah?" This strange question, posed in Shabbat 21b, is not asked of any other holiday. Why is there a special need to explain why Hanukah is celebrated? Hanukah, along with Purim, possesses a unique status as a post-biblical holiday. While Purim is not ordained in the Five Books of Moses, the book of Esther serves as a grounding narrative reviewing the events that transpired and explaining how and why a holiday was declared. No such canonized narrative exists for Hanukah, prompting the rabbis of the Talmud to expound not only upon the *halakhot* associated with the holiday, but also to explain its very essence. The rabbis find their answer to the mystery of Hanukah in a *tanaitic* source:

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

What is Hanukah? The rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, there are eight days of Hanukah on which there is no eulogizing or mourning. For when the Greeks entered the sanctuary they defiled all of the oils therein. When the Hasmonean dynasty rose in victory against them they searched and found only one flask of oil stamped with the seal of the high priest. There was enough oil in it to last for only one day. A miracle occurred and they were able to light from it for eight days. The next year they established them as holidays with rejoicing and thanksgiving.

The answer to the question clearly lies in the miracle of the oil. While mention is made of the military victory of the Jews over the Greeks, the rabbis focus on the miraculous event surrounding the rededication of the temple as impetus for the holiday. This explanation not only clarifies why we celebrate Hanukah, but why the celebration need last for eight days.

The sole focus of the rabbis on the miracle of the oil is particularly intriguing when compared to earlier sources detailing the events of Hanukah. While there are no canonical biblical sources describing the events of Hanukah, its events are recounted in the apocrypha. Written in Greek in the first century BCE, the First Book of the Maccabees is an account of the history of the Hasmonean court. After providing a detailed account of the military victory of the Jews over the Greeks, it recounts the rededication of the temple:

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Schlaff is co-coordinator of Judaic Studies curriculum at SAR High School in Riverdale, NY. She has an EdM in Curriculum Development from Teacher's College, Columbia University and is completing a PhD in Talmud at New York University. She has both studied and taught at the Drisha Institute in New York and is an alumnus of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship program.

...They made new holy vessels, and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. Then they offered incense on the altar and lit the lamps on the lampstand and these gave light in the temple. They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken.

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the gentiles has profaned it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshipped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering.

...Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev.<sup>2</sup>

According to I Maccabees, Hanukah is celebrated in commemoration of the rededication of the altar which lasted for eight days. While there is mention of the lighting of lamps, it is placed in the context of rededication of all the vessels in the temple, and there is no mention of the miracle of the oil. The focus of the holiday is on repossession of the temple, an event made possible by the military victory of the Jews – and in particular the Hasmoneans. In the view of I Maccabees, in celebrating Hanukah, we celebrate the triumph that enabled us to once again worship in our temple.

A similar account of the events leading to declaration of the holiday can be found in Josephus. Written in Greek in the first century CE, Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews is a thorough review of Jewish history from biblical times through the second temple period. A Jewish general during the war against the Romans, Josephus' historical accounts often focus on military events. After detailing the victory of the Jews over the Greeks, he explains the establishment of the holiday:

When therefore he had carefully purged it, and had brought in new vessels, the candlestick, the table, and the altar, which were made of gold, he hung up the veils at the gates, and added doors to them. He also took down the altar and built a new one of stones that he gathered together, and not of such as were hewn with iron tools. So on the five and twentieth day of the month Casleu, which the Macedonians call Apeliens, they lighted the lamps that were on the candlestick, and offered incense upon the altar, and laid the loaves upon the table, and offered burnt-offerings upon the new altar.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Maccabees 4, 52-59. Translation from The Holy Bible New Revised Standard Version Oxford University Press 1989.

...Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight 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 so 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.<sup>3</sup>

As did I Maccabess, Josephus claims that Hanukah is celebrated in commemoration of the rededication of the temple after the victory of the Jews. The holiday is modeled after the rededication which lasted for eight days. Again there is mention of the lighting of lamps, but no mention of the miracle of the oil. Josephus' discussion of the name of the festival is particularly intriguing – he is at a loss as to why the holiday is named “Lights” and provides an allegorical explanation. Josephus clearly had a tradition linking Hanukah to “Lights” but makes no connection between the lights and the miracle of the oil.

In light of Josephus and I Maccabees, the Talmudic explanation of the holiday of Hanukah as solely focused on the miracle of the oil stands out. As religious thinkers, we would expect the rabbis to highlight a miracle that occurred in the temple. However, the lack of focus on the military victory of the Hasmoneans – especially as it could easily be described as a victory aided by God - appears to be more than an oversight.<sup>4</sup> Purim provides the perfect model of a holiday based upon a military victory. In the case of Hanukah, the rabbis' shift in emphasis from the military victory to the miracle of the oil should be read as an attempt to redefine the meaning of the holiday. The motive for this shift can be understood by reviewing the history of the Hasmonean house.

It is clear from both Josephus and rabbinic sources that there was great tension between the later Hasmonean rulers and their Jewish subjects. Generations after the Hasmonean victory over the Greeks, the Jews questioned the fitness of the Hasmonean house to rule. Evidence the following two accounts relayed by Josephus:

As to Alexander, his own people were seditious against him; for at a festival which was then celebrated, when he stood upon the altar, and was going to sacrifice, the nation rose upon him, and pelted him with citrons [which they then had in their hands, because] the law of the Jews required that at the feast of tabernacles every one should have branches of the palm tree and citron tree; which thing we have elsewhere related. They also reviled him, as derived from a captive, and so unworthy of his dignity and of sacrificing. At this he was in a rage, and slew of them about six thousand. He also built a partition-wall of wood round the altar and the temple, as far as that partition within which it was only lawful for the

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus Antiquities Book 12, Chapter 7. Text and Translation taken from [www.earlyjewishwritings.com](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com)

<sup>4</sup> Evidence the medieval prayer על הנסים which focuses on God's hand in the military victory.

priests to enter; and by this means he obstructed the multitude from coming at him.<sup>5</sup>

... and there it was that he (the Roman governor) heard the causes of the Jews, and of their governors Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, who were at difference one with another, as also of the nation against them both, which did not desire to be under kingly' government, because the form of government they received from their forefathers was that of subjection to the priests of that God whom they worshipped; and [they complained], that though these two were the posterity of priests, yet did they seek to change the government of their nation to another form, in order to enslave them.<sup>6</sup>

In the first case Josephus describes the Jews as questioning the lineage of their Hasmonean leader. The tension ultimately leads to a massacre. In the second case, the Jews go beyond questioning the fitness of a particular leader and critique the form of government of the Hasmonean house as moving from the traditional temple-centered priestly model to a secular monarchical model. Josephus' accounts of tension are corroborated with similar accounts in the Talmud. In Sotah 49b the Talmud describes how an argument between the warring Hasmonean brothers Hyrcanus and Aristobulus led to the appearance of a pig in the temple. While we cannot assume that the details of these accounts are historically accurate, the accounts clearly indicate that the later Hasmonean rulers have strayed far from the original Hasmonean brothers who oversaw the purification of the temple.

In attempting to explain the holiday of Hanukah centuries after its historical events, the rabbis were faced with the dilemma of reconciling the victory of the Hasmoneans with the more recent memory of Hasmonean misdeeds. The move to focus solely on the miracle of the oil rather than on the military victory can be read as a shift away from human triumph, which is ultimately fallible, to focus on the power of God. Examining the history of the holiday allows us to appreciate how deftly the rabbis were able to cling to tradition while keeping it relevant to new realities. We can thus appreciate Hanukah in a new "light" and celebrate not only the miracle of the oil, but the rabbinic flexibility and creativity that has shaped the meaning of the holiday for centuries. Let the model of Hanukah remind our current leaders that change can preserve tradition rather than uprooting it. Let it motivate us all to be deeply devout, but never complacent in our religious lives.

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<sup>5</sup> Josephus Antiquities Book 13, Chapter 14. Text and Translation taken from [www.earlyjewishwritings.com](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com)

<sup>6</sup> Josephus Antiquities Book 14, Chapter 3. Text and Translation taken from [www.earlyjewishwritings.com](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com)