



B'NAI CHAYIM

CHILDREN OF LIFE

12 Kislev, 5781 **CHANUKAH: A WARRIOR'S BANQUET**

J. M. Terrett

Origin of the Feast:

When the Jews returned from Babylon, they established a very strong religious community under Persian control. When Alexander the Great conquered the East, the Jews were granted the same privileges they enjoyed with the Persians and benefited greatly from their initial contacts with Hellenistic (Greek) culture. For example, the Sanhedrin [the Great Council] was transformed from a body that interpreted the Law, into a legislative body that made laws. Koine Greek quickly became the language of commerce throughout the Middle East and many Middle Eastern people converted to both the Greek culture and the Greek religion.

Under Alexander's successors, Palestine became a battle ground between the Egyptian Ptomleys and the Syrian Seleucids, with the Jews divided in their loyalties between these two powers. After King Antiochus IV, king of Syria, added Epiphanes (G-d made manifest, the Jews called him epimanies "crazy man") to his name, he attacked Egypt, but was forced back by the Romans. He did retain control over the Holy Land. He turned his anger on Jerusalem, which was only partially loyal to him, and massacred the population, which refused to fight on the Sabbath.

He leveled the city walls and set up a statue of Zeus in the temple court and even demanded that other Greek gods (Athena and Dionysus in particular), also be worshiped. Pigs were offered to these gods on the high altar. He was aided in his program of forced Hellenization by **Menelaus**, the Hellenized High Priest that he appointed, and who let him go into the Holy of Holies and who gave him most of the temple treasure. Scores of Jews converted to Greek paganism and even in the time of the Messiah, there were still ten cities of Hellenized Jews which the Maccabees were not able to crush.

This high priest also outlawed Sabbath observance, did not allow circumcisions and forbade the study of the Torah. He commanded that pagan altars be built in every Jewish hamlet, and ordered the Jews to bow down before these altars, and to sacrifice swine on them at least once a year. Those who refused were killed. Serious Bible students pretended to be gambling with dreidels, and studied the Torah whenever the coast was clear. Since only Torah study was forbidden, they found prophetic portions which reflected each Torah portion and we still study them today to honour their bravery and ingenuity.

In the village of Moqein, an old priest, **Mattathias**, of the house of **Hasmon**, struck down and killed, both the royal commissioner sent to enforce these laws, and a Jew who was about to bow down to the altar. He escaped to the hills with his five sons. Soon a core of practicing Jews joined in the formation of a guerrilla band. Their leaders were called the Hasmoneans, after the house Mattathias belonged to. The old man soon died, and his son, **Judah**, replaced him as the leader. He was such a good warrior, that he became known as "the hammerer", or "Maccabee".

Another tradition says his followers fashioned a flag with the four letters of the verse: "Me Kamoche Ba-elim Adonai" (Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty - Ex. 15:11) **M K B A** (these letters spell **Maccabee**).

What followed was a lengthy civil war mainly between Hellenized Jews and those who refused to abandon Judaism. There is no real evidence that any Syrian armies were involved until a much later date after the Holy Land was freed.

To prevent their enemies from killing them on the Sabbath, the **Maccabees** ruled that Jews could fight to defend themselves on this day, but could not launch an attack. This flexible approach to Sabbath observance in times of great need, should allow us to also be flexible in our Sabbath observance where principle is upheld, but where we have to bend sometimes. With superb guerrilla tactics, **Judah the Maccabees** eventually defeated his enemies and forced them to come to terms with him. An initial settlement was reached whereby all the laws against Judaism in Judea were rescinded.

This did not satisfy Judah the Maccabee, because Greek worship was still occurring in the temple. On the 25th of Kislev, his forces stormed Jerusalem, still without walls, and tore down the desecrated altar, smashing all the pagan idols. To celebrate the consecration of the temple and the dedication of the new altar, the people celebrated a feast for eight days. It was first called: "The Sukkoth [tabernacles] of the month of Kislev", to allow the Jews, who had not been able to celebrate Sukkoth while the temple was in enemy hands, to do so. As Sukkoth is celebrated for eight days, so was this new festival, as a kind of **Second Sukkoth** (especially since both the **first** and the **second** temples had been dedicated on the Feast of Booths (Sukkoth) - I K. 8:1, 2, 65, 66 and Neh. 8:13-18).

The name "Chanukah" is linked to the consecration of the Tent of Meeting in the desert:

zot Chanukat ha-Mitzbeah (This was the dedication of the altar - Num. 7:60).

It was also called the **Festival of Lights**, or the **Feast of Fire**, for the kindling of lights by Jews worldwide. The celebration was formalized and an ordinance was issued and accepted by the people, both in Israel, and in the Diaspora (the Dispersion):

" Then Judah and his brothers and the whole congregation of Israel established that the days of the consecration of the altar be celebrated for eight days at this period, namely beginning with the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev, in joy and happy renewal. "(I Macc. 4:36-61)

Chanukah was well received by the common people, but when the Mishnah (collection of Oral Laws that with later commentaries, formed the core of the Talmud, also called the Gemara) was being put together, several centuries later, no mention of the feast was included. Not only was the feast not mentioned in the Scriptures, but the Hasmoneans, who originated the celebration, were priests, and even though they were not descendants of David, they eventually crowned themselves kings of Israel (Herod the Great being the most famous and the worst of the bunch).

The rabbis were uncertain about sanctioning a feast initiated by these unscrupulous people. Also, after the second temple was destroyed (70 C. E.), and the rebellion of **Bar Kokhba** had failed (132 C. E.), the Jews were still recognized by the Roman authorities as a religious community, and may not have wished to dwell on nationalistic liberation movements. Much of the **Mishnah** was compiled from centers like Tiberius, when the Holy Land was still under Roman control, and Jews were still vulnerable to periodic persecution.

Further, it was a Greek custom, not a Jewish one, to inaugurate a perennial festival in commemoration of a great Military event. The nine branched menorah was also of heathen, Greek origin. It was both a symbol of victory and of divine enabling, as of the nine fruit of the Spirit and the nine gifts of the Spirit. None of the major symbols of Chanukah or of biblical origin

The two schools of rabbinic thought, **Hillel** (very liberal) and **Shammai** (very rigid and strict), whose positions and teachings (and disagreements) gave the Mishnah much of its material, argued about **Chanukah's** importance as a religious festival. Since no ruling was established, the Mishnah remained silent about Chanukah and it was the later authors of the Talmud who finally settled this aspect of the feast, **many hundreds of years** after the event occurred.

Here is a small sample:

"What really is Chanukah? The Rabbis taught: on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of the Chanukah feast commence. There are eight of them, during which eulogies for the dead and fasting are prohibited. When the Syrians entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil stored in it. After the Hasmoneans had established their rule, and prevailed, they searched and found but one single cruse of oil, still sealed with the seal of the High Priest. But there was only enough oil in it to last for one day. A miracle occurred, and the supply lasted for eight days. In the following year they appointed these days as Yamim Tovim, festivals with Hallel and thanksgiving [**Shabbat 21a**]".

This is not historical accurate because the Rabbis fought against celebrating Chanukah for several centuries and there were two main legends about why lights are kindled over an eight day period. Hillel taught about the legend of the oil. It never required eight days to prepare, it just made a nice story. Shammai taught that Judah and his soldiers had 8 iron spears that they threw into the ground before the ruined menorah and suddenly, they miraculously burst into flame. The festival was first called the Festival of Sukkoth of the month of Kislev and that is why there the eight days of Chanukah come from. The Chanukah menorah was a Greek symbol of victory which the Maccabees adapted to the festival – kind of like a Jewish equivalent of a Christmas tree. Legends may be interesting, but they should never be accepted as actually happening.

Rituals of Chanukah:

Every day for the eight days of the feast, the entire *Hallel* (Ps. 113-118) is read in the morning, along with the Torah portion dealing with the Dedication of the Tent of Meeting (Num. 7:1-89), divided into 8 lessons, one for each day.

The main portion of the celebration centers around the evening lighting of the candles of the Chanukah menorah or Chanukiah, which must be placed near a window, so that the world can see that Judaism is a religion of light. On the Sabbath, they must be lit **before** the regular Sabbath candles, and **after** the Havdalah candles are extinguished. After the candles are lit, songs are sung (including *Maoz Tzur* [literally fortress rock: Rock of Ages, let our song praise Thy saving power]) Many special prayers are recited, along with Scripture readings, which are either traditional selections (Ps. 30, 44:2-9), or those selected from traditional verses relating to light. The only place where this festival appears by name in the Bible is John 10:22, where it is called the festival of dedication.

Chanukah Blessings: Lighting the Nine Candles

While there is no absolute consensus about exactly how the candles should be lit (all in a row from the same side, or the first on the right side of the menorah, the second on the left, the third, next to the first, etc.), or where the lit menorah should be placed, most Jewish traditions stress that one candle (plus the **Shamash**) should be lit for each evening of the festival. There is one strand of tradition that lights all eight candles (plus the Shamash) on each day of the festival, but this is not the common or the ordinary practice. However many are lit each day, the following order is usual. Two are lit on the first evening, and another candle is added for each evening of the festival. On the last evening of the festival, all nine are lit.

The first candle we light must be at our **right**, when we face the Chanukah menorah; subsequent candles are lit from the **left to the right**. That is, on the first evening **one**, the **Shamash** (or servant) is lit first, then candle number one. On the second evening **two**, the **Shamash** is lit first, and then candles number **two**, and number **one**. On the third evening, **three**, the **Shamash** is lit first, then candle number **three**, followed by candles number **two**, and number **one**. On the last day, you light the **Shamash** and starting from the left, you light all eight candles on the Chanukah menorah (Chanukiah).

The same procedure is followed for each evening lighting, so that the candles are always lit from the left to the right, when you are facing the menorah, beginning with the **Shamash**. By the end of the festival, you will have used a total of 44 candles. When we light the **Shamash**, we take it in our hand, and speak the *Berachot* (Blessings).

1. The first blessing (recited every night):

Barookh atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam Asher kidishaynu b'mitzvatov vetcivanu lehadlik ner shel Hanukkah (Blessed are You, O L-rd, our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and who has commanded us to kindle the light of Hanukkah) ***Barookh atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam she-asah nissim la-avotenu bayamim hahem ba-z'man hazeh*** (Blessed are You, O L-rd, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has performed miracles for our fathers in ancient days, at this season.)

2. Shehecheyanu: (recited on the first night only)

Barookh atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam, she-he-che-yanu ve-kee-ye-manu ve-hee-gee-anu laz'man hazeh (Blessed are You, O L-rd, our G-d, King of the universe, You are He Who has kept us in life, has sustained us, and has permitted us to reach this moment.)

Once the candles are lit, we say the following prayer each night of the festival:

3. Hanayrot hallalu (these lights):

We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, the rescuing deeds, the wars You carried out for our fathers through the hands of Your holy priests. And throughout all of these eight Hanukkah days these lights are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them, only to look at them, in order to give praise to Your Name for Your miracles, for Your rescuing deeds, and for Your marvelous acts.

Then the games and the food begin: Dreidels, cards, chocolate coins [gelt], latkes and dairy products (sweet food as well).

The Dreidel Game

The Dreidel (from the German: ***drehen***, to spin) is a spinning top containing four Hebrew letters, one on each of its four sides: **Nun-Gimmel-Hay-Shin**. In order to play, the children receive ***Chanukah geld*** (chocolate Chanukah coins), which used to be the only present they received. You can have as many players as you want. At the beginning of each round, all the players put one piece of chocolate into the middle of the table, and everybody takes a turn spinning their dreidel.

If the top falls on **N (nothing)**, the player gets nothing out of the kitty; if it falls on **G (gets)**, he or she gets everything out of the kitty; if it falls on **H (half)**, half of the kitty is theirs; if it falls on **S (set)**, he or she has to put money into the kitty. The letters represent the phrase: (N) nes (G) gadol (H) hayah (S) sham (a great miracle happened there). Card games are also permitted. This is the only time of the year when the rabbis permitted gambling.

Special foods include ***latkes*** (potato pancakes cooked in oil) and dairy products, to commemorate the role of women during the Chanukah season. The two most common are **Judith** who fed her enemy dairy products to make him sleepy, and then killed him. There is also **Jael**, the wife of **Heber**, who lulled the fleeing military leader to sleep. Sisera smf nailed a tent peg through his brain.

When the rabbis could not suppress Chanukah, they took it over. Originally the people believed that just as Judah entered the temple in victory, one day on Chanukah the Messiah would appear in the temple and declare Himself. He did (John 10:22 and following). The Rabbis took every reference to the Messiah out of Chanukah and turned it into a feast of Jewish courage which resisted all attempts at assimilation. Let's put the Messiah back in Chanukah and also put Him back into Christmas. What follows is a brief comparison between the two festivals.

Chanukah and Christmas:

Chanukah has been compared to Christmas in two ways. Both are festivals that involve celebrating rebirth of **light** in the depths of winter, and they occur around the same time. Many Jewish people dislike Christmas because it is a Christian festival to celebrate the birth of Messiah, Jesus, the light of the world. However, since up to 40% of retail sales occur during this season, their hostility is toned down.

Messianic Jews and many Christians are unhappy with Christmas because of its materialism and the invasion of so many pagan practices into its rituals. Because of this, some believers choose to ignore the festival all together, and treat the 25th of December as an ordinary day (Rom. 14:5). Some Jews try and compete with Christmas by giving lavish gifts on Chanukah (usually one each night), and some even bring Christmas trees into their homes and call them Chanukah bushes.

The festival was never intended to compete with Christmas, and any attempts to increase its significance take away from both its original purpose and that of Christmas. **It is a festival of divine deliverance and the rebirth of light in a time of great spiritual darkness when Judaism was nearly extinguished.** Christmas is the festival that celebrates the birth of God's light among men. The two are distinct festivals. Neither one is of Biblical origin, but both were established in commemoration of significant events.

Even though Christmas does have a Messianic origin, there is no biblical requirement to celebrate this day. At best, we should set some time aside – around the tenth of Tevet to rejoice that Messiah was born into our midst. We need to openly declare to people that the babe that was born in the manger, grew up to die on the cross for the sins of mankind.

Chanukah is really a folk festival to celebrate the victory of G-d's light over enforced pagan darkness. Its symbols are also mainly, of pagan origin. Over each annual holiday season, it is one time in the year you can talk about the Messiah fully and freely and let people know that He is the only true meaning of Christmas which anyone will ever find.

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Vayeshev **And He Settled** **Enter Joseph the Unlikely Hero**

Torah: **Genesis 37:1-39:23**

Haftarah: **Amos 2:6-3:8**

Brit Chadashah: **Matthew 1:1-6; 16-25**

The portion begins with a time lapse, saying Jacob settled in the land and then immediately switches to discussing the trials and tribulations of Jacob's second youngest son. We learn very early on that is a dreamer of prophetic dreams.

Before we get into the first two of these dreams, lets do a comparative chronology. Joseph was 17 when he was sold into slavery and thirty when he became governor of Egypt. His brothers made two trips to Egypt and so he was 32 when he saw his father again. Jacob was 130 when he was presented to Pharaoh, which would have made him 98 years old when Joseph was born.

Jacob died at the age of 137, seven years after his arrival in Egypt. Joseph would have been 49 when his father died and he lived for another 61 years after the death of his father. Sometime after Joseph's death, there was a regime change in Egypt and the Jews lost the special privileges they had under the previous regime.

Now back to the story of Joseph. He was his father's favourite and was not afraid to tell him when his brothers acted or spoke poorly. He was not so much a snitch as someone with a high regard for the truth. His father gave him a coat of many colours, which despite the cost of the dyes, was nearly his undoing. Benjamin was not the favourite, likely because his birth caused his mother's death.

In his first prophetic dream, he is a sheaf of wheat that grows larger than his brothers' sheaves and they bow down to him. His brothers are unhappy with the dream and begin to hate him. In the next dream, the sun, the moon and eleven stars all bow before him. Jacob understands that it is referring to his family and reprimands his son for his apparent arrogance. This dream appears in Revelation chapter twelve and refers Israel as the glorious woman who is going to give birth to the Messiah.

Joseph's brothers move their sheep towards Schechem, the site where the murders occurred. Jacob sends the son he can trust to get news of his other sons. They see him a long way off and decide to kill him and throw his body into a dry well. Reuben convinces them not to kill their brother, hoping to make up for his assault on Rachel's maid by returning Jacob's favouritism son to him.

They turn a deaf ear to Joseph's pleas and Judah notices some nomadic traders, called both Ishmaelites and Midianites. Instead having the guilt of Joseph's murder on their hands, Judah suggests selling Joseph into slavery for the grand price of 20 silver shekels. When Reuben returns, Joseph is gone and the brothers, who had kept his coat of many colours, devise a plan to tell their father that

Joseph has been killed and devoured by a wild beast. There were both lions and bears living in the land at that time. When they tell the cover story to their father, he goes into deep mourning and refuses to be comforted by all or any of his children. He is sold into the home of the chief of Pharaoh's guards.

Now here comes an equally disturbing story in the portion. Judah married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons. The first one died and the second one refused to perform the leverate responsibility, where the brother of a sonless man was required to sleep with his widowed sister-in-law until she produced an heir for the dead brother.

He refused and also died. By this time, Judah was convinced that there must be something horribly wrong with widow of his first son and sent her home to her family until his youngest son grew up. When the boy grew up, he was given another wife and Tamar was forgotten. Around this time, Judah's wife died and when he had finished mourning, he went to visit his friend who was shearing sheep.

Tamar knew that Judah had not allowed his youngest son to perform his leverate responsibility and took matter into her own hands. She dressed like a veiled prostitute and sat by the road when she saw Judah passing. It was likely at dusk and Judah wanted to use her services. She required a guarantee that Judah was going to pay her and he left his signet ring and his staff. She disappeared before Judah could pay for her services.

She conceived and when it was told to Judah, he wanted her burned at the stake. This story is full of double standards – may our lives never follow suit. She shows Judah the ring and the staff and he declares that she is less guilty than him and has made him fulfill the leverate responsibility which should have been performed by the youngest son.

He never touched her again, but she remained a part of his household. She has conceived twins and during the childbirth one twin's hand appears and a servant attaches a scarlet thread to it. His brother comes out first, but the twin with the scarlet thread is considered first born.

Meanwhile in Egypt, the mighty blessing of YHVH follows Joseph and his owner makes him the overseer of all of his property. The wife of Potiphar tries to get Joseph to commit adultery with her because he is handsome and well built. He refuses and fled from her, leaving his cloak behind him. He did not have much like with cloaks, did he?

He is thrown into jail on her false accusation. It is not a regular chair, but a place where high ranking people were put under house arrest. The blessing of YHVH follows him and he is placed in charge of all the prisoners, but his troubles are not over yet. The Jewish people have been robbed, beaten and chased across the globe, but the blessing of YHVH has never left us and never will. While he was in prison, two high ranking officials angered Pharaoh and he put them under house arrest. They were Pharaoh's baker and his cupbearer (the one who would taste his drinks to make sure they were not poisoned>

They each had a dream and Joseph interpreted them. In return for his help, he asked that they would speak to Pharaoh because he was wrongly imprisoned. The cupbearer was returned to favour and the baker was executed. Once he was restored to favour, the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph.

Three things. When we have a prophetic dream, we have to share it and have it verified. Joseph's dreams may have sounded arrogant, but they did come from the L-rd. Secondly, the favour of the L-rd does not always mean we will have the favour of men, something which we Jews know quite well. Joseph being sold, saved his life and being wrongly incarcerated put him in a position to have access to Pharaoh's court.

Thirdly, as long as we walk with the L-rd, His blessing will follow us and in His appointed time, we will be released from whatever prisons are trying to hold us and we will see how His hand has made that all possible. The Jews are still being a blessing to all nations, because we are not only those who gave Messiah to the world, we also gave the Torah to the world. We are a great nation that is still doing great things.

Jacob is going to have a blessed end to his story because he trusted in G-d. Trust in G-d, no matter what else is going on in your life and things will eventually turn out for the best, either in this Short life or in the one which is to come.