

חנוכה–Hanukkah

In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great with his Greek armies conquered the Near East including Israel. After his death, his empire split apart. The land of Israel, after a period of struggle, came under the control of the Seleucid dynasty, which ruled the region of Syria. In the year 167 BCE, the king Antiochus Epiphanes decided to force all the peoples under his rule to hellenize. The practice of Jewish rituals such as the Sabbath and circumcision was outlawed. The worship of Greek gods and the sacrifice of pigs replaced the traditional worship in the temple. Some Jews eagerly flocked to the gymnasium, symbolic of the Greek emphasis on the beauty and strength of the body. Others resisted Hellenism and died as martyrs.

One day the Greeks came to the village of Modi'in and set up an altar. They commanded the Jews to bring a pig as a sacrifice to show obedience to Antiochus's decree. Mattathias, an old priest, was so enraged when he saw a Jew about to do so that he killed him. He and his five sons then fought the Greek detachment, retreated to the mountains, and began a guerrilla war against the Greeks and their Jewish allies. Before he died of old age, Mattathias passed on the leadership to his son Judah the Maccabee (Maccabee means "hammer"). Judah led his forces against a series of armies sent by Antiochus, and through superior strategy and bravery he defeated them all. Finally, he and his followers liberated Jerusalem and reclaimed the temple after it was defiled by the Greeks.

Legend has it that they could find only one small cruse of oil, enough to last one day, but when they lit the Temple menorah with it, a miracle occurred and the menorah burned for eight days. Since then we celebrate Hanukkah to remember the Maccabees and their successful fight for independence against the Greeks, a miracle which God performed by giving the victory over the many to the few. The miracle of the oil was given, not as a miracle in and of itself, but as a testimony to remember the miracle that God accomplished as He gave the few Jewish fighters the victory over the massive armies of Antiochus.

The Books of First and Second Maccabees recount this story in detail, but without the miracle of the oil. For this reason, some feel that part of the story was added later. The Maccabean recounting, along with that of Josephus, however, do mention the lighting of the menorah and the purging of the Temple. In contrast, the Talmud emphasizes the miracle of the oil, almost to the exclusion of mentioning the military victory! The discrepancy is explained this way by the Rabbis: the real miracle was the victory which God gave to the Jewish people who were greatly outnumbered by their enemies. But in order to emphasize beyond any doubt that the victory was a miracle, God gave the sign of the oil. The latter miracle was given to validate the former one, which might have been missed by later generations.

The Ritual

Hanukkah centers its ritual around the lighting of the eight-branched menorah, called a hanukkiah (there are places for nine candles, the middle candle used to light the others). One light is lit each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, as follows. The first night the blessings for lighting the candles, the *sheasah nisim*, ("He who did miracles") and the *shehecheyanu* ("He who has sustained us") are said. For the remaining nights, the blessing for the candles and *sheasah nisim* are said, but not the *shehecheyanu*. After lighting the candles each night, a blessing is recited reminding that the Hanukkah candles are not to be used for any other thing than simply reminding of the miracle God performed for our fathers in days of old.

Each night the hanukkah is loaded with new candles. Thus, the first night two candles are used, the middle candle (the Shammash or helper candle) and the first candle on the right. The second night, three candles (Shamesh, and the two on the right), and so on. Candles should be allowed to burn all the way down, and should be long enough to last at least 1 hour. By this procedure, one will need 44 candles for the entire 8 days of Hanukkah.

Traditions

Traditional foods for Hanukkah are suphganiot, light donuts; latkes, potato cakes (some use sweet potatoes or even zucchini) and generally any foods cooked in oil (since the story of the sacred oil lasting a full eight days has become a dominant theme).

Dreidals (four-sided tops) are used for playing the dreidal game at Hanukkah as well. Each of the four sides of the dreidal are inscribed with the beginning letter of each of the four words making up the sentence “a great miracle happened there” (נֶסְ גְּדוֹל הָיָה שָׁם). In Israel the phrase is “a great miracle happened here” (נֶסְ גְּדוֹל הָיָה פֹּה). Using chocolate coins (“gelt”) as play markers (each person should have the same number of candy coins to begin with), the participants spin the dreidal. If it lands with the ש up, the player puts two candies into the “pot.” If the נ lands up, the player does nothing. If the ג lands up, the player takes the whole “pot,” while spinning a ה gives the player half of the “pot.” When the pot gets down to only two pieces of candy, everyone puts one in, just as they did when the game began. When a player no longer has any candy pieces, he leaves the game. The game ends when one player has captured all the candy.

Meaning

Hanukkah means “dedication.” Thus, Hanukkah is the Festival of Dedication, and so it should be for us as we celebrate it. Yeshua made His way to the Temple during the Festival of Dedication (Jn 10:22f) and most likely participated in the celebration. It is yet another Festival commemorating the victory which God gave to the Jews over their enemies. But it is not merely a celebration of the victory over enemies, but a call to God’s people everywhere to remain faithful to the call of God and not to be tempted to worship as the pagan nations who do not know God. The victory over the Syro-Grecian forces was only the final battle of many — battles of compromise by the Jewish nation as she attempted to be more and more accepted by the world through her hellenizing. Hanukkah calls not only for a rededication of the Temple, the place of worship to God, but (and especially from a Messianic viewpoint), a call to rededicate one’s soul as the Temple of God—to walk in His ways no matter the cost. As the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah reminds us that we are to be the light to the nations, shining forth the glory of Messiah in our words and deeds.

Hanukkah is also a reminder that God intends the Jewish people to remain Jewish. Within Torah communities where Jew and non-Jew are united in their faith, there still must be the concerted effort on the part of all to maintain a Jewish presence in the world. God had made eternal promises to the nation of Israel, and all, whether Jewish by blood, or grafted in through faith in Yeshua, are part of the commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:12ff). The existence of Israel must remain if God is to show Himself faithful to His promises. Hanukkah reminds us all that we must do all in our power to see that those who want the annihilation of Israel do not succeed.