

Hanukkah

Some Basic Information

by Tim Hegg

The History – An Outline

1. Alexander the Great conquers the Ancient Near East and defeats Persia, 334–332 BCE
2. Alexander the Great dies (323 BCE) and his kingdom is divided among his four generals
3. Egypt and surrounding regions are given to Ptolemy I
Syria and regions north given to Seleucus I
Israel remains as a kind of “buffer” between the two kingdoms
4. Ptolemys and Seleucids begin their warring, and Israel finally came under the control of the Ptolemys
5. The High Priest was appointed by the Ptolemy government as responsible for seeing that taxes were collected and paid. This gave way (at times) to much in-fighting among the Jewish community, as the High Priest functioned as the tax-collector for the foreign government. One High Priest, Chananyah III, refused to pay the taxes (because he pocketed the money) and was replaced by Joseph ben Toviyah, who became a real tyrant against his own people.
6. Finally the Seleucids defeated the Ptolemys (199 BCE) and Antiochus III the Great became ruler over the entire region.
7. Antiochus III was followed by Antiochus the IV, who called himself Epiphanies (“god manifested”). The Jewish tax collector at the time was Jason, who had been appointed High Priest by Antiochus through bribes. Jason turned on his own people (169 BCE) and began killing them because they were unable to pay the high taxes he was demanding. Antiochus thought Jason was trying to take the city of Jerusalem for his own rule, and came to subdue Jason. In the battle that followed, Antiochus killed over 40,000 Jewish people (men, women, and children).
8. Antiochus decided that it was time to Hellenize the Jews, that is, to make them into good Greek citizens. He did this by building a beautiful gymnasium next to the Temple, and encouraging the Jews to participate in the Greek games and education. Some did, but many did not. Antiochus finally desecrated the Temple, set it up as a Greek Temple (with cult prostitutes) and erected a statue of a Greek god on the altar, to which sacrifices of pigs were made daily. Jews who refused to worship the idol were killed. Two famous stories are those of R. Elazar (90 years old) and Chanah, mother of 7 sons, both of whom chose death rather than submit to idol worship.
9. In the attempt to Hellenize the Jews, the armies of Antiochus went to surrounding towns to force the people to eat non-kosher meat (pork), worship idols, and denounce their Jewish faith. One famous incident occurred in the town of Mo’din, where Mattitayhu the Hasmonean killed his fellow priest who was in the process of sacrificing a pig upon a pagan altar. He called for those who were willing to fight, and formed an army of no more than 4,000 men.
10. Antiochus, upon hearing of the revolt, sent 47,000 troops to take care of the problem. The fighting went on for three years, during which time Mattityahu the Hasmonean died, and the leadership was passed to his sons, primarily Yehudah the Maccabee. Miraculously, the Jewish fighters won, and Jerusalem, including the Temple mount, was regained.
11. According to late, rabbinic tradition, upon entering the desecrated Temple, the priests sought a way to dedicate it anew to God. They found one cruse of oil that had not been opened by pagans, and though they knew it would never last for the eight days required for purification, they proceeded to light the menorah. Miraculously, the light burned for eight days, and the Temple was rededicated to God. But this story is not found in any early source, appearing only in the later Babylonian Talmud (Bavli), and is therefore without

historical veracity. It is more likely that the eight days assigned to the celebration for the rededication of the Temple relate to a celebration of Sukkot. Since the people were not able to celebrate Sukkot during the years of fighting, and since the dedication of the first Temple built by Solomon occurred at the time of Sukkot (1Kings 8:65-66), the Hasmonians celebrated Sukkot late, i.e., several months after the month of Tishri (according to their calendar). However, since they had not been able to maintain the calendar by way of intercalation (since the Sanhedrin who decided the years for intercalation was not active during the years of the war), it seems possible that according to the readjusted calendar, they would have been celebrating Sukkot in its proper month. Thus, the eight days of Hanukkah related to the festival of Sukkot, just as was the case in the dedication of Solomon's Temple.

13. The Hebrew term "hanukkah" means "dedication." Thus, the festival of "Dedication" was instituted in memory of the miracles that God did on behalf of His people during this season.
14. Hanukkah is called the Festival of Dedication in many early sources, as well as in the Apostolic Scriptures (John 10:22), where we find Yeshua at the Temple for this festival.

As noted above, 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 Rabbis seek to explain this clear discrepancy in this way: 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. But as noted above, the "miracle of the oil" has no early attestation in primary documents, and it seems quite likely that it is the invention of the later Babylonian Talmud.

Should we, then, celebrate Hanukkah with the traditional eight days? Absolutely! And here is why: the victory given to our people, and the rededication of the Temple, clearly came about by the miraculous hand of God Who gave the few victory over the many. Moreover, since the rededication of the Temple surely included the lighting of the Menorah, the festival of rededication (which Yeshua Himself attended) at the time of Sukkot parallels the dedication of Solomon's Temple which is no coincidence. Even as the Menorah was rekindled in the rededication of the Temple, and done so at the time of Sukkot, so we know that the Light of the world (John 8:12) came to "tabernacle among us" (John 1:14). As we light a candle each of the eight nights, we anticipate the coming of Yeshua, Who is the Light, and Who has given us light so that we no longer walk in darkness.

Lighting the Hanukkiah (Nine branch menorah)

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 candle is lit each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, as follows. The first night the blessings for lighting the candles, the *she-asah nisim*, ("He who did miracles") and the *she-he-cheyanu* ("He who has sustained us") are said. For the remaining nights, the blessing for the candles and *she-asah nisim*, but not the *she-he-cheyanu*. 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 *hanukkiah* 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 (Shamash, 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.

Other Traditions

Traditional foods for Hanukkah are *sufganiot*, light donuts; *latkes*, potato cakes (some use sweet potatoes or even zucchini) and generally any foods cooked in oil (to remind us of the lighting of the Menorah in the rededication of the Temple). The modern custom of giving gifts at Hanukkah was probably influenced by the fact that Hanukkah often occurs near the Christmas holiday. There's nothing wrong with giving each other gifts any time of the year, but we should realize that this was not part of the more ancient Hanukkah traditions. As in every festival season, giving gifts to the poor has always been a tradition.

Playing Dreidel

The dreidel is a four sided top made so that after it is spun it falls to reveal one of the four sides. Each side of the dreidel is marked with a Hebrew letter, the first letter of the four word phrase **נֶגַם גְּדוֹל הָיָה שָׁם**, “A Great Miracle Happened There.” Thus one side is marked with the **ג**, one side is marked with the **ה**, one side is marked with the **י**, and one side with the **ש**, the first letter of each of the words in the phrase. As we play the game we are reminded of *nes gadol hayah sham*, A Great Miracle Happened There. In Israel, of course, the dreidels reflect the phrase A Great Miracle Happened Here, so the **ש** is replaced with a **פ** (for **פֹּה**, “here”).

Here's how to play:

1. Give everyone the same number of markers (candy, beans, gelt [chocolate money wrapped in foil], etc.)
2. Everyone begins by contributing 1 marker to the “pot”, the pile in the middle of the table.
3. Determine who should start first (usually the youngest), having that person spin the dreidel. When the dreidel falls, calculate the turn as follows, depending upon which letter is up:
 - = none (the player neither contributes to nor takes from the pot)
 - ג = all (the player takes all the markers in the pot. Then everyone needs to contribute one marker to replenish the pot, including the player who just took all)
 - ה = half (the player takes half of the pot. It is customary to round up, but this can be negotiated. If the pot is left with only 1 marker, everyone contributes one to replenish the pot, including the player who just took half.)
 - ש = two (the player contributes two to the pot.)
4. Continuing playing until only one person remains. (Those who run out of markers are out of the game unless they can negotiate a loan from a fellow player!)

Since it is a holiday of joy, make sure everyone gets plenty of candy or whatever when the game is over.

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 acceptable to the Hellenistic world in

which she lived. 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.

We always feel the tug of assimilation away from God's guidelines. Even our well-meaning friends may chide us for celebrating God's appointed times (Sabbath; Torah festivals), for adopting His definition of what is "food" and what is not, for walking in the ways of Torah as we live out our faith in Yeshua, our Messiah. While our situation may not be as grave as was that of God's people in the time of the Hasmoneans, the issue is the same: will we give into assimilation, or remain resolute in our obedience to God as laid out for us in His word? The Festival of Lights, Hanukkah reminds us once again 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 that Israel (comprised of Jews and those who have joined Israel through faith), will remain. 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 has 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.