

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).

Under Alexander's successors, Palestine became a battle ground between the Egyptians 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 epimanes "crazy man") to his name, he attacked Egypt, but was forced back by the Romans. 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 High Priest that he appointed, and who let him go into the Holy of Holies and who gave him most of the temple reassure.

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. Those who refused were killed. Serious Bible students pretended to be gambling with dreidels, and studied the Torah whenever the coast was clear.

In the village of Modein, 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 Hasmonians, 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 Khamochah Ba-elim Adonai" (Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty - Ex. 15:11) **M K B A** (these letters spell Maccabee).

To prevent their enemies from killing them on the Sabbath, the Maccabees said that Jews could fight on this day, but could not launch an attack. With superb guerrilla tactics, Judah the Maccabee defeated his enemies and forced them to come to terms with him. An initial settlement was reached whereby all the laws against Judaism 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] Feast 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 - 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 Palestine, 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)

Hanukkah was well received by the 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 not descendants of David, and 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 A. D.), and the rebellion of Bar Kokhba had failed (132 A. D.), 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 eight branched menorah was also of heathen origin.

The two schools of rabbinic thought, **Hillel** and **Shammai**, whose positions and teachings (and disagreements) gave the **Mishnah** much of its material, argued about its importance as a religious festival, but no ruling was established, which also contributed to the silence in the **Mishnah** about Hanukkah. It was the authors of the **Talmud** who finally settled this aspect of the feast, many hundreds of years after the event occurred:

"What really is Hanukkah? The Rabbis taught: on the twenty-fifth of Kislev the days of the Hanukkah 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]".

Rituals of Hanukkah:

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 menorah, which must be placed near a window, so the world can see 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]), and 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.

Hanukkah Blessings: Lighting the 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 day 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.

The first candle we light, must be at our right, when we face the Hanukkah menorah; subsequent candles are lit from the left (that is, the Shamash, then number one [first day], then the Shamash, candle number two, then candle number one [day two], then the Shamash, candle number three, candle number two, then candle number one [third day], etc. - left [new candle first] to right, after the Shamash, but the first candle [day one] is always lit from our right when we face the menorah). The new light is always kindled first. We light the Shamash, take it in our hand, and speak the Berachot.

1. The Berachot (blessings):

Barookh atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam Asher kidishaynu b'mitzvatov vetzivanu 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:

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, latkes and dairy products (sweet food as well)

The Dreidel (from the German: ***drehen***, to spin) is a top containing four Hebrew letters, one on each of its four sides: N-G-H-S. 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: ***nes gadol hayah sham*** (a great miracle happened there). In order to play, the children receive ***Hanukkah geld*** (Hanukkah money), which used to be all the present they received. Card games are also permitted. This is the only time of the year gambling is permitted.

Special food includes **latkes** (potato pancakes) and dairy products, to commemorate the role of women during the Hanukkah season (like Judith who fed her enemy dairy products to make him sleepy, and killed him - she is compared to Jael, the wife of Heber).

Hanukkah and Christmas:

Hanukkah has been compared to Christmas in two ways. Both are festivals that involve celebrating light (the rebirth of light in the depths of winter), and they occur around the same time. Jewish people dislike Christmas because it is a Christian festival to celebrate the birth of Messiah, Jesus, the light of the world. Messianic Jews and many Christians are unhappy with Christmas because of its materialism and the invasion of so many pagan practices in 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 - we will be talking more about this in my Shabbat message during Hanukkah). Some Jews try and compete with Christmas by giving lavish gifts on Hanukkah (usually one each night), and some even bring Christmas trees into their homes (Hanukkah bushes).

The festival was never intended to compete with Christmas, and many 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. Christmas is the festival that celebrates the birth of God's light among men. Two distinct festivals. Neither one is of Biblical origin, but both were established in commemoration of significant events.

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