

Uncovering the True Story of Chanukkah

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Abstract: "So when we celebrate Chanukkah and get into its spirit of fun and games, of latkes and jelly donuts, of dreidels and gifts, we should also pause for a moment to remember the more somber aspects of this festival. Let us be sure to offer up words of praise for the heroism of our ancestors and their dedication to the Torah and to our Jewish way of life. For that is the greatest miracle of all!"

The theme of tonight's teaching is uncovering the true story of Chanukkah.

We all know the classic story. In 167 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek-Syrian ruler, forbade the practice of Judaism. Jews could no longer pray or study the Torah. Indeed, Antiochus ordered all Torah scrolls to be destroyed. Jews were not allowed to observe Shabbat, or keep kosher, or circumcise their sons, upon pain of death.

But the Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, refused to accept these awful decrees. They started a rebellion against the Greek-Syrian empire and they won. In 164 BCE, they recaptured and rededicated the Jerusalem Temple to the Jewish faith. They found a cruse of oil good enough to light the Temple lamps for only one day. But a miracle occurred and the oil lasted for eight days. And because of that miracle, the Maccabees established the eight day festival of Chanukkah.

It certainly makes a great story, doesn't it? Unfortunately, however, history is far more complicated. For starters, neither the Mishnah, nor Josephus, the great Jewish historian of antiquity, not even the two Books of Maccabees, composed around 120 BCE, say anything about the miracle of the oil!

Let's read from the First Book of Maccabees, chapter 4, verses 49-59. According to the First Book of Maccabees, Chanukkah surely commemorates the rededication of the Temple, but it doesn't explain why the festival lasts for eight days.

Now let's read from the Second Book of Maccabees, chapter 10, verses 1-8. The Second Book of Maccabees teaches that the Maccabees had to hide during the festival of Sukkot, the festival of booths, and were unable to celebrate it. So when the Maccabees rededicated the Temple, they celebrated Sukkot. Thus, as far as the Maccabees were concerned, Chanukkah was originally founded as a belated celebration of Sukkot, the eight-day festival of booths. The Maccabees knew nothing about the miracle of the oil.

So where does the legend of the oil come from?

The story of the miracle of the oil was introduced by the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud, composed around 500 CE. Let's read Tractate Shabbat 21b. Thus, Jews had been celebrating

Chanukkah for more than 600 years and no one had yet heard the legend of the miracle of the oil!

Why did the rabbis propagate the legend of the miracle of the oil and take great pains not to attribute the origin of Chanukkah to the Maccabees? For them, the Maccabees' involvement was incidental. It was not any human action, but God's miracle that established the festival. Furthermore, some scholars suggest that our rabbinic sages, having witnessed the two Jewish rebellions against the Roman empire in 66 CE and 132CE, and having experienced the terrible revenge exacted by the Romans, favored a non-violent, accommodationist approach to foreign domination. The rabbis intentionally downplayed the role of the Maccabees because they opposed their legacy of military opposition to the ruling powers.

History loves irony and all of this is quite ironic, isn't it? And you know what else is ironic? Neither of the Books of Maccabees are part of the Jewish bible. They were preserved by the early church and included in the Christian canon. Were it not for the early church fathers, we would know hardly anything about the Maccabees or the origins of Chanukkah!

One final note. The festival of Chanukkah affirms many wonderful humanitarian values: religious freedom and diversity, might does not make right, the few can overcome the many. What we do not often recognize is the human cost by which our people's freedom was won. Many, many Jews suffered and perished defending their faith from Antiochus' persecution and during the Jewish rebellion. Indeed, we know that Jewish concepts of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead first came into prominence within Judaism precisely at this time, due to the terrible persecution Jews experienced.

When our people of that era gazed at the lights of the Chanukkah menorah, it was not dreidels and children's fantasies that they saw. No, it was a far more somber miracle they perceived. They saw reflected in the Chanukkah lights their Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul and bodily resurrection.

So when we celebrate Chanukkah and get into its spirit of fun and games, of latkes and jelly donuts, of dreidels and gifts, we should also pause for a moment to remember the more somber aspects of this festival. Let us be sure to offer up words of praise for the heroism of our ancestors and their dedication to the Torah and to our Jewish way of life.

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