

## Chanukah

A perspective on Chanukah as traditionally celebrated and a festival worthy of celebrating.

### Introduction

The term “Chanukah” derives from the Hebrew verb “to dedicate”. The root of the verb is formed with the consonants Chet, Nun and Kaf with a dot.

The short version of the story behind Chanukah, of course, is the re-dedication of the second Temple in Jerusalem after it had been desecrated by Antiochus the Fourth, the eighth king of the Seleucid (Greek) kingdom based in Syria.

### PART 1 Chanukah in Scripture.

The only mention of the Feast of Dedication in the New Testament is found in *John 10 v.23*. But this is really only mentioned in passing to confirm the timing (winter) of certain events in our Lord’s ministry. It does at least confirm that the Feast was celebrated at the time of His earthly ministry.

Of course, Chanukah is not included in the Feasts of the Lord (*Leviticus 23*) as the Pentateuch was formulated centuries before the events that led to Chanukah.

However, *Daniel chapters 7, 8 and 11* give an amazing foretelling of the sequence of gentile empires which would dominate Israel including the Greeks under Alexander the Great and the four generals who would inherit his empire.

Israel first came under the control of the Ptolemaic Greek kingdom which was based in Egypt and later the Seleucid Greek kingdom based in Syria.

*Chapter 8 of Daniel* refers to Alexander as the “great goat”, his successors are referred to as the “four notable ones” and Antiochus the Fourth as the “little horn” who cast down “some of the stars to the ground” (i.e. Israel) and took action to prevent the worship of the true God.

*Daniel 8 v.14* foretells that there will be a period of 2,300 days from the desecrating of the Temple by Antiochus until it’s cleansing.

*Daniel 14* foretells in amazing detail the course of the conflict between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms in amazing detail. This conflict is very significant

for Israel as it is located in the only viable land border between the two warring kingdoms.

## PART 2 Chanukah outside of the Canon of Scripture.

1 and 2 Maccabees provide details of the desecrating of the second Temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent Jewish revolt. The main heroes of the revolt were Mattiyahu, the High Priest, and his five sons. The youngest of his sons was Judas, who became known as Yehudi Makabi (“the hammer”). This family formed the Hasmonean dynasty.

The revolt started with Antiochus forbidding the daily sacrifices, forbidding circumcision, erecting a statue of Zeus in the Temple and sacrificing a pig on the altar. In 167BC Mattiyahu killed a Jew who wanted to comply with the edicts of Antiochus and a Greek official who came to enforce the orders of Antiochus (*1 Maccabees 2 vs.24-25*). Shortly after the revolt started Mattiyahu died and Judas took over the lead role.

By 164BC the revolt against the Seleucid monarchy had been successful. The Temple was liberated. A new altar was built to replace the one which had been polluted and new holy vessels were made.

In *2 Maccabees Chapter 7* we have the story of Hannah and her seven sons. They refused to defile themselves in accordance with the instructions of Antiochus and were in turn tortured to death in front of their mother.

## PART 3 Chanukah and Jewish Folklore.

The miracle of the one day’s supply of holy oil which lasted for eight days is not found in *1 and 2 Maccabees*. The 8 day rededication of the Temple is described in *1 Maccabees* but the miracle of the oil is not mentioned. *2 Maccabees* describes a similar-sounding story that refers to the rekindling of the altar fire at the time of Nehemiah. Some commentators suggest that the initial 8 day feast was a delayed celebration of Sukkot which became an annual feast subsequently on 25<sup>th</sup> Day of Kislev. The historian, Josephus, seems to support this.

The “miracle” of the oil is described in the Talmud but this was committed to paper centuries after the Maccabean revolt.

The story of Judith which is associated with this period is widely accepted as fictitious and appeared in Jewish folklore in the Middle Ages. She was supposed

to have charmed a Syrian general to facilitate his assassination and thus save the nation.

#### PART 4 The Historic Setting for Chanukah.

With Daniel's help we have already touched on the international scene at the time. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and the first two-thirds of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Israel was controlled by the warring kingdoms of two Greek rulers (the Ptolemaic and the Seleucid kings). Israel's location was unfortunately on the border between these two kingdoms. Israel had rebelled against Egyptian rule but that left the Syrians in control. To add to the turbulence of the area, Rome was becoming an influential power in the region.

But there was also internal strife in Israel between those dedicated to the true worship of the true God and others willing to compromise with their Greek rulers. This conflict was reflected in the struggle to have a High Priest from either faction.

Then Antiochus succeeded his brother to become the eighth Seleucid king. Some years before the Maccabean revolt, Antiochus had brought a large army into Jerusalem. His forces massacred 80,000, took 40,000 prisoners and sold another 40,000 into slavery in order to prevent the removal of his designated High Priest, Menelaus.

But it was in 167BC that Antiochus returned to Jerusalem with his army at the request of a group of Hellenizing Jews called the Tobians. They were frustrated that they had lost control of the office of High Priest.

Thus we see that the period leading up to Maccabean revolt was a very dark, dangerous and turbulent one for Israel. It was controlled by foreign powers and riddled with internal strife. The prospect of the kingdom being restored to Israel must have seemed very distant.

#### PART 5 The Beauty of Chanukah.

Chanukah reflects the joy of God's people, having experienced the most awful and dangerous period, when they realise that despite all the horror that God was still with them. The ability to re-dedicate the Temple allowed them to reconnect with God and keep alive the hope of the restoration of the kingdom. God is at the heart of the traditional Chanukah celebrations.

These include the reading of *Psalm 30* in which David praises God when he has been healed from a near-fatal illness.

Further praise for God's mercy is found in the *Al HaNissin* prayer which is recited:

In the days of Mattiyanu ben Yochanan, High Priest, the Hasmonean, when the evil Greek kingdom stood up against Your people, Israel, to cause them to forget your Torah and abandon the ways You desire, You in Your Great Mercy stood up for them in their time of trouble. You fought their fight. You judged their judgement. You took their revenge. You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the sinners into the hands of those engaged in Your Torah. You made Yourself a great and holy name in Your world and for Your people, Israel, You made great redemption and salvation on this very day. And then Your sons came to the inner chamber of Your house, and cleansed Your Temple and purified Your sanctuary and lit candles in Your holy courtyard and established 8 days of Chanukah for thanksgiving and praise to Your holy name.

## PART 6 Traditional Prayers and Blessings.

Traditionally, there is an additional blessing for the first night of Chanukah:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the universe who has granted us life and sustained us, and allowed us to be alive at this time.”

The daily blessing over the candles:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah candles.”

There is another blessing for the miracles of Chanukah:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the universe who performed miracles for our ancestors in these days at this time”

And finally after the candles are kindled the hymn “Hanerot Halalu” is recited:

“We kindle these lights for the miracles and wonders, for the redemption and the battles that You made for our forefathers, in these days at this season, through Your High Priest. During all eight days of Chanukah, these lights are sacred and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them

except to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your Great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvation.”

## Conclusion.

Although not a Feast of the Lord, Chanukah is a festival well worth celebrating. At the heart of the traditional Chanukah is the recognition that even in the direst circumstances, God’s people can know that He has not abandoned them. We only need to cry out to God and this will inspire others.

Scripture is full of such assurances e.g.

*Psalm 40*: By grace God lifted David out of a seemingly hopeless mess which led Davis to sing God’s praises and this in turn inspired others.

*Psalm 10* begins in despair. Injustice is rampant and God seems to be disinterested. But the Psalmist turns his thinking towards God. Hope begins to dawn. Yes, he is living in a hostile world but it is also a world of hope. In *verse 14* he realizes that God is our hope and advocate; the defender of the defenceless. The “hand” of God is more than sufficiently strong to shatter the power of ungodly people. He finally realizes that God is king and in charge of everything.

In the New Testament (*John 14 vs.16-19*) we have the beautiful words of reassurance which our Lord gave to his disciples prior to the crucifixion knowing that losing Him would be a terrible shock. He promises the Holy Spirit.

And in *Matthew 28 v.20* Yeshua’s last recorded words offer comfort and reassurance. He will be with all the saints until He returns bodily to judge the world and establish His earthly kingdom.

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