

HANUKAH – THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

THE MEANING OF HANUKAH

In Israel and for the Jewish community world wide, the festival of Hanukah is never so more important as it is today. The little light ceremony is symbolic of the eternal Israel - God's covenant with Israel that will never cease. As one reads the history of the times, one realizes that the heroes who fought for independence and right to worship the One True God, against the Hellenists or 'assimilationists' of the time who cared little for what was happening to them, are still fighting that battle today. As then, so too around the world, there are Jews who do not care about the customs and the festivals of Israel's history, do not care about the Bible, Jewish history, Hebrew language, the community of Israel and even whether the Land of Israel exists or not. Hanukah reminds people of the battle between the Hasidim (pious ones) and the Hellenists.

We know how Jews are still paying a price for being Jews. Bombings, killings, and general anti-Semitism still visit on a daily basis. That is why Hanukah is so important, not just a little candle-lighting ceremony but a celebration of courageous fight for independence against impossible odds at the time of the Maccabees under Mattathias and later his son Judah, residents of the town of Modiin who defeated the armies of Antiochus IV at Emmaus in 165BC. For Christians too, the battle is on for truth against assimilation in the increasing 'multi-faith' or pluralistic world of the 20th

century. We can and should learn the lessons.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Hanukah means 'dedication.' Coming from the word relating to the cleansing and re-dedication of the Temple after it was desecrated by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus 'Theos Epihanes' IV meaning 'the visible God' in 168BC. His detractors called him 'Epimanes' or 'madman.' Briefly, Darius III came to the throne of the Medo-Persian empire in 336BC. By 332BC he had been defeated by the 20-year-old Greek, Alexander (the great) at Issus. By age 30 Alexander had mastery over the whole known world. Greek culture and religion, known as Hellenism, was the new civilization. At 33 Alexander was dead and the empire was swiftly divided into four regions. Israel was in the middle; governed first by the Ptolemy's based in Alexandria then by the Seleucids in Antioch.

In Israel the conflict grew between those who embraced Hellenism and those who upheld Jewish Law and custom who were horrified by creeping assimilation. Bribes were offered to Antiochus first by Jason, brother of the high priest Yohanan (Onias III) then by Menelaus a rabid Hellenist in order to gain power. Civil war was breaking out. In 168BC, to quell the unrest and to re-assert his authority, Antiochus eventually ordered his generals to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple mount. Furthermore he built a temple to Zeus, the supreme deity of the Greek pantheon and on the birthday of Zeus (Kislev 25) offered a pig on the altar, sprinkled its blood in the Holy of Holies and poured its broth over the Torah scrolls before cutting up and burning them.

(1 Macc. Chs. 1-3)

Dark days followed where thousands died and many atrocities were committed, like those mentioned in Hebrews 11. People like Eleazar the 90 year old priest, Hannah and her seven sons were cruelly killed, all steadfastly refused deliverance in hope of the resurrection.

MATTATHIAS AND JUDAS THE MACCABEE (HEB. MAKKEVET – 'HAMMER')

At Modiin (17 Miles NW of Jerusalem) a pagan altar was built to Zeus. All were assembled to worship. Mattathias was singled out to offer a pig. He was father to John, Simon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan. He steadfastly refused, reacting by grabbing the sword of his Syrian oppressor and killing him. It was the start of the uprising that would end in defeat of Antiochus at Emmaus in 165BC. Jerusalem was liberated and the work of cleansing began. All was desolate. The sanctuary was cleaned, the altar was rebuilt and on Kislev 25, three years after the defilement, they re-dedicated the altar to the Lord.

THE MIRACLE

It is in the Talmud where the tradition is recorded, that the Maccabees found only one cruse of unpolluted oil in the Temple. One days supply for the golden lamp-stand but miraculously it burned for eight until a new supply of oil could be consecrated. Hence Hanukah is held for eight days. Most likely the popular tradition helped move focus away from the Maccabees dynasty, which later became very corrupt.

Certainly by the first century of Jesus time whilst under Roman rule it would have been impossible to celebrate the victorious

Maccabean rebellion. Josephus knew the holiday as the Festival of Lights.



MODERN OBSERVANCE

The principal ceremony is the lighting of the nine-branched menorah (candelabra) one lamp each day of the eight-day festival. The Centre candle called the 'shammash' or 'servant candle' is lifted up higher and is used to light all the others. They are lit from left to right and a blessing is pronounced as it is conducted. The Menorah is placed in the front window of the house to remind all who pass by of the meaning of Hanukkah. In Israel, marathon runners are sent to Modiin to bring a flaming torch to Jerusalem to light the Menorah at the Western wall. Hanukkah became an opportunity to give gifts, to play games like the 'dreidel' Four sides have

letters NGHS 'Nes Gadol Hayah Sham,' – 'A great miracle happened there.' Special dishes are made like 'latkes' (potato pancakes) or 'sufganyot' (deep fried doughnuts).

SPIRITUAL MEANING AND APPLICATION

(a) **The Talmud records** that it took eight days to rebuild the altar hence Hanukah is celebrated over eight days. In scripture, an eight-day period is always a period of dedication; that is, the object to be dedicated was set-aside for eight days and on the eighth day it was holy. Examples: Firstborn animals consecrated to God (Ex 22:30; Lev 22:27) Hebrew males circumcised on the eighth day. (Lev 12:3) Altar in Tabernacle was sanctified for seven days and on eighth was holy. (Ex 29:37) Rededication after Babylonian captivity took place during Passover (Ezra 6:16-22), which in conjunction with the feast of unleavened bread took eight days. Future altar of the Millennial Temple will be consecrated on the eighth day (Ezek 43:26-27) After Ahaz, King Hezekiah comes to the throne, cleansing the Temple and re-dedicated it to the Lord after eight days. (2 Chr 29:16-17)

(b) **Hanukah was patterned** on Tabernacles which was a seven day feast followed by a day of rest. So Hanukah was almost a second observance of Tabernacles, which hadn't been celebrated in that year 165BC. In much the same way, Hezekiah instituted a second opportunity to observe Passover for those not able to attend the first (2 Chr 30; Num 9:10-11) Hence the same Hallel Psalms are sung at Hanukah as at Tabernacles.

(c) **Why lights?** When Solomon dedicated the first Temple to the Lord at the feast of

Tabernacles (2 Ch 5:3) it was accompanied by the appearing of the Shekinah glory of God and divine lighting of the fire on the altar (2 Chr 7:1) From this later developed the impressive light celebration each night in the Temple. Since Hanukah was about rededication, then it is easy to see the borrowing of images.

(d) Daniel's prophesy. Many liberals seeing the detail of this work conclude that Daniel must have been written after the events recorded. *"It is not possible that he would have known such detail;"* surely not indeed if it was merely the work of man and not God who knows the end from the beginning - then no prophecy can be a foretelling. The Hebrew Scriptures do not record the events of 165BC except that Daniel's vision of the Ram with two horns (Medo-Persian empire) being smitten by the Goat (Greece) with a single horn (Alexander) is a clear reference to unfolding events. Then amazingly the large horn is broken allowing four smaller horns to arise from which one horn (Antiochus) grows exceeding powerful. This horn exalts himself and causes God's people great pain until he himself is removed. The stirring charge of Daniel is this *"The people who do know their God will be strong and do great exploits."* (Dan 11:33-34) Probably remembered by the Maccabees.

(e) Future fulfillment. The nations have been obsessed with the idea of desecrating the Temple. Antiochus and Zeus, Hadrian and Jupiter. Today the Temple is desecrated with the Mosques, to the Moon-God Allah. There is yet a future desecration spoken of by Daniel (Dan 9:27) when they enter into a 'covenant with death' (Isa 28:15) peace deal with a gentile ruler who is the Antichrist. In

the middle of the week (Daniels 70th) Jerusalem will be captured and oppressed by the Gentiles (Luke 21:20; Rev 11:2) He will reveal himself for who he is and will demand worship (2 Thess 2:4; Rev 13:12-15) He will desecrate the Temple as before (Matt 24:15-16) causing many to fall away, apostasize (2 Thess 2:3) but the faithful will as before flee to the mountains and wilderness. This is the great tribulation. But God is faithful, will remember Israel and raise up a new Temple to which the Shekinah glory of God will return (Isa 4:5; Ezek 43:1-6) After great mourning Israel will put their trust in God (Isa 10:20; Zech 14)

(f) Jesus – the Light of the World. In John 10 Jesus is walking in the re-dedicated temple yet this temple contained neither the articles in the Holy of Holies nor the Shekinah Light of God. In Jn 8:12; 9:5 during the Feast of Tabernacles, He had declared that He was the Light of the world. Now at the Feast of Dedication people were clamouring to know would He be the one who would be the Messiah. *"If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly . . ."* (10:24)

CONCLUSION

Hanukah reminds us of the enduring faith of heroes and the faithfulness of God who will not fail His people.

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