



*CHANUKAH-
PROBLEMATIC
AND
MYTH-BEGOTTEN,
AND WHY IT
REALLY
MATTERS*

Chanukah is probably the most myth-begotten festival of the Jewish year, starting with the invention of a cruse of oil and ending with the assertion that the war was an all-out contest against Hellenism.

The fact is, that Chanukah exists at all testifies to its popularity with the people, rather than any ritual or religious significance.

Chanukah, in its early incarnation, appears to have been very problematic, from a religious standpoint. That it is not mentioned anywhere in the Tanach (the Bible) is in itself telling. The full biblical canon was not yet fixed when the events of Chanukah unfolded; elements of the third section, Ketuvim, or Writings, were still being debated 200 years later. Both the First and Second

Maccabees, which deal with the events and personalities of the Chanukah story, were available for inclusion. That they were excluded, therefore, was obviously deliberate. There is not even a debate recorded over whether to include either or both, as there was, say, for the Song of Songs, or the Book of Esther.

Clearly, there was something about “Chanukah” that, to put it colloquially, just was not kosher.

In fact, there is virtually nothing about Chanukah in the Mishnah, which is primarily the product of the sages of the First and Second Centuries C.E. The four references that do appear are in passing, and only exist as parts of lists that also include other observances, such as Rosh Chodesh, Purim, and the ma’amadot (Temple-related prayer

services involving representative groups of Israelites). Considering that the Mishnah in its present version was not edited until around 200 C.E., by which time Chanukah was clearly acceptable as a minor religious festival, the paucity of these references only prove how devoid the essential code of Jewish law is of Chanukah-related matters.

The Babylonian Gemara, which essentially is a product of sages from 200 to 600 CE, has more to say about Chanukah, but little of what it says goes beyond describing its rituals.

Contrast this to Purim. Not only is it mentioned elsewhere in the Talmud, but it has its own tractate—Megillah. It also has its own book in the canon, Esther.

It could be argued, of course, that Chanukah is different because it was not divinely ordained, but decided upon by secular authorities and subsequently accepted by religious ones.

The same, however, is true about Purim, which was ordained by Mordechai, a person whose very name (derived from the name of the pagan god Marduk) suggests that he was an assimilated Jew. To get around this, the Talmud has Mordechai being one of the great religious leaders of his age and, indeed, was among its

greatest scholars, as well as being a member of the Sanhedrin. The Book of Esther, on the other hand, makes no such suggestion about its male hero.

This raises another telling point: The sages went out of their way to embellish Mordechai's stature; they did little, if anything, however, to add any luster to the Hasmonean stars.

There is a critical difference between Chanukah and Purim that accounts for the latter's treatment by the sages. While the Book of Esther never mentions God, the story has God's hand all over it. Critical events occur at precisely the right moments. Moreover, the final victory over Haman is brought about through fasting and prayer. There is nothing comparable in the Chanukah story. True, victory would not have been possible without God's blessing. Nevertheless, victory is achieved on the battlefield and without benefit of miracles or fortuitous turns of events.

That is another "unkosher" thing about Chanukah: The festival celebrates a military victory, which is a very "Hellinistic" way of doing things, but a decidedly un-Jewish one. A military victory means people on both sides died. Since all humans are God's children, that

our joy comes from the shedding of blood is not considered something to celebrate. (There is a midrash that has the Heavenly Host singing and dancing as Israel is delivered from the pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea. God tells them to stop. “My children are dying and you are celebrating,” He says.)

There is also the fact that the “victory” was short-lived; Jerusalem was soon re-occupied by the Seleucids and it would be another 25 years until Damascus finally conceded defeat. Even that, however, was short-lived, because the Hasmoneans soon made pacts with the Romans, and one of their number eventually conspired with Rome to yet again deny Judea its independence—this time with disastrous results that would take two millennia to rectify.

That the first Chanukah focused on the rededication of the Temple does not change the fact that it was a celebration of a military victory. The eight-day celebration was coincidental. Because the Seleucids had banned all religious observances, the Hasmoneans, who were priests after all, decided to include elements of the unobserved festival nearest in time, which was Sukkot.

That Sukkot lasts for eight days was fortuitous, because that was also the length of previous

dedications of sacred space. The first took place a year after the Exodus, when there was an eight-day dedication of the portable Tabernacle. Solomon used that as the model for dedicating the First Temple and Ezra did the same for the Second.

Aside from the military aspects of Chanukah, the sages probably also had problems with the Hasmoneans themselves. The Hasmoneans not only re-established the kingdom, they sat on its throne. That is the right of the House of David; being priests, the Hasmoneans descended from Aaron. They also made a family member high priest, which is solely the prerogative of a branch of Aaron’s family to which they did not belong. In other words, they usurped both throne and priesthood.

It is undoubtedly true, as The Book of First Maccabees asserts, that some form of people’s assembly at that time confirmed the Hasmoneans in both roles (tradition says it was the Sanhedrin that did so), but this was a political decision based on immediate and pragmatic considerations, and with nary a reference to divine will.

This is not the stuff of Jewish holidays.

That Chanukah is also a victory over Hellenization is yet another myth. Greek influence was everywhere, as the names parents

gave their children demonstrate (including the names the Hasmoneans gave to their children). Even the sages of the Talmud were not immune. In its listing of the chain of tradition from Moses to the sages, Mishnah Avot lists a Third Century B.C.E. scholar named Antigonus of Socho; one of Alexander's generals was named Antigonus. There is even a rabbi named Alexander in the Talmud (his sole contribution is to explain a place name).

There are others, as well, including Abtolmus bar Reuven. He plays a role in a talmudic discussion, found in BT Baba Kama 83a, about whether it is permissible to speak Greek. The answer is that apparently it is permissible. This follows:

“But was Greek Wisdom forbidden? Did not Rav Yehudah say that Shmuel stated in the name of Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel: ‘[A] thousand youths...were in my father’s house; 500 of them learned Torah, and the other 500 learned Greek Wisdom....’?” [An answer is proposed.] Say, rather, that Rabban Gamaliel’s family was an exception, because they had contacts with the [Roman] government, as it is taught: ‘He who cuts the front of his hair [in imitation of the Romans] is adopting the ways of the Amorites. Abtolmus bar Reuven, however, was allowed to cut the front of his hair [in the Roman manner] because he was in contact with the government.’ So,

too, Rabban Gamaliel’s family was permitted to discuss Greek Wisdom on account of its contacts with the government.”

Jewish ritual was influenced by the Greeks, as well. The Yizkor service apparently is another popular outgrowth of the Hasmonean victory. First Maccabees reports that a memorial service was held for the fallen soldiers. Apparently, the idea of memorial services generally soon caught on with the people (and, for a long time, was fought by the sages and their successors, the rabbis who followed them; to this day, Sefardim only allow Yizkor to be said on Yom Kippur). The Hasmoneans, in turn, seem to have borrowed the idea from the Greeks.

The Kabbalah, in its original incarnation during the Hasmonean period, is clearly rooted in Persian and Greek philosophy, especially the teachings of Pythagoras. These included a belief in the transmigration of souls (reincarnation) and the theory that numbers are at the heart of all existence. There also are elements of Plato and of neo-Platonism, with a little Aristotle thrown in. There even exists within Kabbalah a more than comfortable relationship with Gnosticism.

All of this probably represented something the sages were not prepared to accept in the wake

of the fall of the Temple, and the necessity to reformulate Judaism. Yet, they must have felt powerless to eliminate the festival, which had become popular by then (as the historian Josephus notes). To mitigate this, a popular legend was adopted regarding the small cruse of oil that burned for eight days. There is nothing in either book of Maccabees to support that story.

That the sages needed a miracle to legitimize Chanukah can be seen in this discussion in BT Rosh Hashanah 18b, which took place in Babylonia long after Chanukah had become a religious festival based on the cruse-of-oil legend. The argument was about whether a local community could observe a voluntary fast during Chanukah. The Babylonian scholar Rav Yosef argued that they could not “because there is a mitzvah” attached to it, meaning the kindling of the Chanukah lights. “Said Abaye

to him: ‘Let [Chanukah] be abolished and its mitzvah be abolished [rather than deny people the right to a voluntary fast].’ Rav Yosef then said, ‘Chanukah differs because it celebrates a miracle.’”

Today, of course, Chanukah stands for the triumph of faith in God over the forces of paganism, with God (not the Hasmoneans) as the ultimate author of the victory, as indeed He was. Unfortunately, it is becoming problematic once again, for now it has assumed an importance that was never intended, and is taking on the outward trappings of the proximate Christian observance.

Let us keep Chanukah a Jewish festival—and may its promise of ultimate redemption be fulfilled speedily and in our days.

A Happy Chanukah to all.

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