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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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## CHANUKKAH, MIRACLES, AND ZIONISM

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Chanukkah commemorates events that took place during the period of the Second Temple. But which events? There are at least four possibilities. One, supported by the letter of some versions of the *Al Hanisim* prayer for Chanukkah, focuses on the military victory of the Hasmoneans. A second focuses on the restoration of Jewish sovereignty that resulted from that victory. A third, supported by the structure of that prayer and by the name of the holiday, focuses on the renewal of the Temple. A fourth focuses on the miracle of the long-lasting oil mentioned in the Talmud.

Each of these possibilities seems hopelessly outdated as the basis for a contemporary celebration. The Hasmonean victory has no ongoing political consequences; a century later, Judea became a Roman province, and eventually we were exiled from Judea. The Temple was destroyed and remains a ruin. The oil-miracle had no clear significance other than indicating that G-d was responsible for the victory and/or rededication. So why do we still celebrate Chanukkah?

This is not a new question. The irrelevance and historical insignificance of Chanukkah was discussed more than a thousand years ago in the Talmud (Rosh Hashannah 18a-b).

Sometime during the Second Temple period, a work ironically called Megillat Taanit (=The Scroll of Fasting) began serving as a record of all days on which Jews were forbidden to fast. The Talmud records a dispute among the first generations of Amoraim as to whether this prohibition remained in force: Rav and Rabbi Chanina said no, but Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said yes. Rav Kehana then challenges the position that it is no longer binding:

מעשה

וגזרו תענית בחנוכה בלוד,

יורד רבי אליעזר ורחץ, ורבי יהושע וסיפר,  
ואמרו להם: צאו והתענו על מה שהתעניתם.

*A factual narrative:*

*They once decreed a fast on Chanukkah in Lod.*

*Rabbi Eliezer went down to bathe, and Rabbi Yehoshua had his hair cut and (Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua said to them:*

*Go out and fast (to atone) for having fasted.*

The Talmud at this point sees Chanukkah as a perfectly ordinary Second Temple nonfast day, and takes the position of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua as dispositive (the end of the sugya acknowledges that both sides of the controversy had standing). So how could Rav and Rabbi Chanina deny that all the other nonfast days remained in force?

אמר רב יוסף:

שאני חנוכה, דאיכא מצוה.

אמר ליה אביי:

ותיבטיל איחי ותיבטל מצותה!?

*Said Rav Yosef:*

*Chanukkah is different, because it has an (associated) mitzvah.*

*Abayay said to him:*

*So let it and its mitzvah be nullified!?*

Rav Yosef initially distinguishes Chanukkah on the grounds that it had a ritual, presumably candle-lighting. Abbaya understands him to be arguing that rituals have greater legal inertia than a proscription against fasting. He finds the claim absurd; why should rituals survive their rationale?!

אלא אמר רב יוסף:

שאני חנוכה, דמיפרסם ניסא

*Rather, Rav Yosef said:*

*Chanukkah is different, because mfrsm miracle.*

So the Talmud reinterprets Rav Yosef, or else Rav Yosef changes his mind. It matters which. If Rav Yosef changed his mind, it turns out that ritual per se is not relevant; Chanukkah survives because of something intrinsic about the day. But if the Talmud is reinterpreting his earlier statement, then it is the combination of ritual and meaning that endures.

The grammar of *mfrsm* is also ambiguous. Does it mean that the miracle was already widely known, and therefore the day did not lapse, or that the day should not be allowed to lapse, because it serves the purpose of publicizing the miracle?

Rashi takes a radical third approach:

כבר הוא גלוי לכל ישראל  
על ידי שנהגו בו המצות,  
והחזיקו בו כשל תורה,  
ולא נכון לבטלו.

*Since the miracle is already “in the open” to all Israel  
via their performance of the mitzvot (plural!)  
and they grasped it as if it were Biblical,  
so it is not proper to nullify it.*

According to Rashi, the Rabbis did not find Chanukkah’s message more enduring than those of other Second Temple celebrations, nor did they grant rituals intrinsic halakhic inertia. Rather, the ritual served to spread the message, and the combination of medium and message embedded itself so deeply in popular culture that it would be improper – perhaps deeply unwise – to seek to nullify it.

Chanukkah thus becomes a parade example of bottom-up halakhic influence. The remaining question is whether the Rabbis were simply indifferent to the day, or whether Chanukkah’s popularity bothered them, because they were actively opposed to the continuation of its message in Exile. If the latter is the case, might they have sought to affect its meaning if they could not prevent its practice?

Rashi does not identify the miracle he is referring to, but he makes clear that for the Rabbis, Chanukkah survives not *in order* to publicize the miracle, but rather because it has already been publicized.

A different impression emerges from our edition of Rambam Laws of Chanukkah Chapter 3:

*During the Second Temple, when Greece had dominion,  
they imposed decrees on Israel, and nullified their religion, and did not permit  
them to engage in Torah and mitzvot,  
they laid hands on their money and their daughters  
they entered the Heikhal and breached it and defiled the things that must be  
tahor*

*Israel suffered much from them, and they tormented them greatly  
Until Hashem the G-d of our ancestors had mercy on them and saved us from  
them and rescued them  
so that the Hasmonean High Priests were victorious and killed them and  
saved Israel from them*

*They appointed kings from among the priests  
and Jewish monarchy/ sovereignty returned for more than 200 years until the  
Second Destruction*

*When Israel triumphed over their enemies and destroyed them – it was the  
25th of Kislev*

*They entered the Heikhal but found only once cruse of tahor oil,  
which only contained enough to light for one day  
but they lit the lights of the array from it for eight days, until they pressed olives  
and produced tahor oil.*

*Because of this*

*the Sages of that generation established that these eight days, beginning on  
Kislev 25,  
would be days of joy and praise  
and we light the nerot on each of those eight nights at the entrances of the  
houses*

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*in order to demonstrate and put “in the open” the miracle.*

Rambam does not use the word miracle anywhere in his retelling of the Chanukkah story, so we cannot tell for certain which miracle he thinks our lighting commemorates. However, his narrative clearly focuses on the return of sovereignty as the core of Chanukkah. Moreover, his concluding phrase seems clearly drawn from Rav Yosef, which indicates strongly that he sees Chanukkah as surviving *in order* to publicize the miracle.

However, Raphi Ozarowski pointed out to me that the phrase “In order to demonstrate and put in the open the miracle” is absent in the first edition of the Rambam and a key manuscript. That suggests that Rambam saw Chanukkah as surviving purely because of its underlying message, and perhaps tried to diminish the importance of the miraculous to that message – so much so that a later copyist felt impelled to insert a sentence reintroducing the miraculous.

Unlike Rashi, Rambam does not attribute Chanukkah’s survival to populist resistance. Rather, he presents it as a Rabbinic decree whose rationale never lost relevance. It is tempting to suggest that the hypothetical later copyist represents a different kind of successful resistance.

But the resistances to Rashi and Rambam might cut in opposite ways. For Rashi, it might be that the people refused to accommodate themselves to the condition of Exile, and kept the Chanukkah lights burning in order to keep their non-explicitly-miraculous (=non-Messianic?) Zionist dreams alive – whereas the resistance to Rambam rejected the possibility of non-explicitly-miraculous Zionism.

The Rabbis discuss whether in Messianic times there will still be a purpose in remembering the Exodus. By the same token, we could ask whether Chanukkah still has a purpose when a more recent victory is the cause of our having a State, even if we firmly hold that the State is at best potentially Messianic, and not inevitably so. Or perhaps Chanukkah has renewed meaning in our day precisely because it foreshadowed non-Messianic Zionism so powerfully for so long.

While the Hasmonean victory was not Messianic, it was certainly accompanied by the miracle of the oil. The oil in the Temple lasted just long enough for the Jews to prepare new *tahor* oil; it would have run out had the Jews delayed at all, and not been ready with new oil on the 8th day. One eternal message of Chanukkah is that miracles do not endure forever, and even those blessed by miracles must make every effort – spiritually and practically – to be ready for the transition back to normal life.

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