The Laws of Chanukah

What is Chanukah? The Rabbis taught that on the 25th of Kislev, the eight days of Chanukah [begin], during which one may not eulogize or fast. For when the Greeks entered the sanctuary, they defiled all the oils in the Temple. When the kingdom of the Hasmoneans became strong and overcame them, they searched, and could only find one bottle of oil lying there with the seal of the High Priest, and it only contained enough oil to light one day. A miracle occurred, and they lit with it for eight days. The next year, they fixed them and made them festival days, for praise and thanksgiving.

Shabbath 21b.

Chanukah is the newest of all Jewish holidays. It is the only festival that came into existence after the closing of the Bible cannon. As well known, it celebrates the victory of the Hasmoneans over the Seleucid Greeks and the subsequent rededication of the Holy Temple. Particularly important was the miracle of the lamps; there was enough oil for only one night, but it burned for eight.

An obvious question immediately comes to mind. Why make a permanent holiday at all? There are many miracles recorded in the Bible, as well as many great victories. There were many times that the Jews were in great danger, both physical and spiritual, and were saved. Why was the miracle of Chanukah so special that it required a special holiday?

Besides, making a holiday is not that simple. As a general rule, just as nothing may be subtracted from the Torah, so nothing may be added. One does not lightly add a holiday to the Jewish calendar, no matter what it commemorates. Although prophets could be consulted before a festival like Purim was ordained, there was considerable agonizing before a new ritual was actually introduced. This being true, there must have been some overriding reason for introducing Chanukah as a regular festival.

To understand the reason for the festival of Chanukah, we must first view the structure of Jewish history after the destruction of the first commonwealth. There was an ancient tradition that Israel would be subjugated to four kingdoms: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. Babylon destroyed the First Temple (in 423 b.c.e.), bringing to an end the era of prophecy in Israel. Persia allowed the Temple to be rebuilt, and it was during the period of Persian dominance (373–339 b.c.e.) that the canon of the Bible was closed and the daily services introduced. It was also the time of the miracle of Purim. Under Greek dominance (339–140 b.c.e.), the miracle of Chanukah occurred. Finally came the period of Roman dominance, during which the Second Temple was destroyed, and the exile in which we still remain began. This exile will not end completely until the coming of the Messiah.

The Greek persecution of the Jews was nothing less than a kulturkampf—a war between cultures. Greece dominated the world of culture and philosophy; the contributions of such giants as Plato and Aristotle had already changed the entire mode of western thought. In their desire to assert cultural dominance, the Seleucid Greeks tried to make the Jews “forget the Torah,” and admit the superiority of Greek thought and worship.

Although the Jews may have admired the depth of Greek thought, they were also aware of its limitations. While Greek philosophy had access only to the worldly, the Jews had a Torah which gave them access to the Divine. While Greek thought sought to explain nature, the Torah could provide insight into that which was above nature. If the Greek philosophers claimed that they could perfect the world, the Jew knew that he could also perfect spiritual worlds.

Not only were the Jews unwilling to give in to the Greeks, but they were even ready to risk their lives to defend their principles. Under the leadership of the High Priest Mattathias and his five sons they rebelled against the mighty Greek empire, and miracle of miracles, they emerged victorious.

In this entire drama, a very special role was reserved for the Holy Temple (Beth HaMikdash). The Temple was the focus of the extramundane, the link of the Jew with the spiritual. It was like a miniature
Garden of Eden, where the rules of spirit rather than of nature were dominant. In its Holy of Holies, the Temple had the rock upon which had stood the Ark containing Moses' original Torah and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. It was the "gate of heaven," the portal through which all spiritual energy flowed to the Jewish people.

The Greeks saw it important to defile the Temple for this very reason. If the focus of Jewish spirituality could be rendered impotent, then their spirituality itself could be conquered. Conversely, when the Jews were victorious, they made it their first duty to purify the Temple and rededicate it. The altar that had been defiled by the Greeks was torn down, and when it was rebuilt the entire Temple was cleansed of idolatrous pollution.

An important part of the rededication was the relighting of the Great Menorah, the huge golden candelabrum that stood in the inner sanctuary. Only pure, undefiled olive oil could be used for these lamps. Along with everything else, however, whatever oil that had been left in the Temple had been defiled by the Greek hoards.

Then, a miracle in itself, an untouched flask of oil was found, still bearing the unbroken seal of the High Priest. The rededication of the Temple would be complete, and they would even be able to light the Great Menorah.

It would, however, take at least eight days before they could get new oil. Their source was a four day journey away, and to get there and back would take eight days. Since they had been defiled by contact with the dead in battle, the Hasmoneans themselves also had to wait until their seven day purification period was over, and therefore, they could not press new oil until the eighth day.

Although the flask only contained enough oil for a single day, a great miracle occurred. The small amount of oil burned for a full eight days. The Menorah shone without interruption until new oil was obtained. The eight day celebration of dedication was complete.

The next year, the Jewish sages realized that a great change had occurred. Their victory had so weakened the Greek empire that its period of world dominance had come to an end. But that meant that a new threat was on the horizon—Rome. Although Roman influence may not have yet reached the Holy Land, they realized that it would now be inevitable.

Rome was the fourth kingdom about which many dread prophecies had been uttered. The influence of Rome would not be shaken off as easily as that of Greece. The Romans would destroy the Second Temple and drive the Jews into exile; the situation would not be rectified until the coming of the Messiah.

It was realized that a period was dawning when the spiritual benefits of the Temple would no longer sustain the Jews. Urgent measures were required if the survival of the Jews during this last long exile was to be insured, and it would have to be done immediately.

The sages of the time realized the commemorating the miracle of the lamps could fulfill such a function. The great faith that had brought about their victory had opened a spiritual door. It was the spiritual force that had flowed through this door that had resulted in the miracle of Chanukah. If this door could be opened even when the Temple had been defiled, it could be kept open even after the Temple would be destroyed. By a proper celebration of the miracle of Chanukah, this door could be held open, allowing a spiritual influx to flow and sustain the Jews during the long exile to come.

A key element in the miracle had been faith. Mattathias' son Judah had led his people under the banner of the word Makkabee (מַכַּבֶּה), an abbreviation of the verse, Mi Khamokka BeElim YHVH (~; "Who is like You among the powers, O God") (Exodus 15:11). This was a phrase from the song sung after the splitting of the Red Sea, indicating that God was dominant over all powers, both temporal and spiritual. The Makkabees took it as their battle cry, demonstrating that even in war they considered faith their greatest weapon.

There are many miracles recorded in the Bible, but all of them occurred during the time of the prophets. As a general rule, a miracle does not occur unless there is a prophet available to initiate and interpret it. In the case of Chanukah, however, a miracle occurred without a prophet. It was the result of pure faith and dedication to the Torah. Just as the Jews were willing to go beyond the call of duty for the sake of God, so He went beyond the limits of nature for their sake. It was this faith that opened the spiritual door of Chanukah.

The sages were also aware of the significance of the flask of uncontaminated oil that had been found in the defiled Temple. It was a clear sign that no matter how much something is defiled, some holiness always remains. Like the oil, this holiness can be used to light the lamp of faith and make it shine forth. Even when the exiled Jew would find himself on the lowest spiritual level, the Chanukah lamp would find the hidden bottle of pure oil and bring it to produce radiance.
Chanukah was thus ordained as a festival of hope and faith. During the long exile, every time they would light the Chanukah lamp, the Jews would remember that even in the defiled Temple there was a flask of oil sealed by the High Priest. They would recall that there is likewise a holiness in every Jew that cannot be defiled by all the exile in the world. This holiness is aroused through the light of the Chanukah lamp. In this context, it is significant that even many otherwise unobservant Jews keep the observance of Chanukah.

The Menorah

To understand the significance of Chanukah on a somewhat deeper level, we must first delve into the significance of the Menorah itself. The Menorah was the huge golden candelabrum, over six feet high, described in detail in the Torah (Exodus 25:31–40). It had seven branches, all joined to a single stem.

It is important to understand the meaning of the Menorah's seven branches. Obviously, they paralleled the seven days of creation, but even this requires some explanation.

It is obvious that we live in a three-dimensional world. Our universe has three dimensions: length, breadth and height. Since each dimension has two directions (back and forth), there are a total of six directions in the physical world: up, down, right, left, forward and backward.

This was one reason that the world was created in six days. To complete a three-dimensional world, six days were required, one for each primary direction.

With this, the significance of the seventh day, the Sabbath can also be understood. The six primary directions can be thought of as six lines, all emanating from a single central point. This central point connecting the six directions is represented by the Sabbath. The Sabbath is thus the day that unifies all the forces in our three-dimensional world.

The number seven thus represents the perfection of the physical world. A complete world was finished in seven days. In resting on the seventh day, God completed and perfected His creation, binding it all together with a central purpose.

The seven branches of the Menorah parallel these seven days of creation. The fact that they are all joined together on a single base indicates that all the seven powers of creation have a root in a single Unity.
The oil of the Menorah must be pure. If it is corrupt (tameh), it cannot be used. Similarly, if one's concept of the Divine is corrupt, he cannot be truly enlightened.

The defilement of the oil by the Greeks is representative of their attempt to corrupt our ideal of the Divine. After all their effort, a flask of undefiled oil could still be found. No matter how much outside forces try to corrupt our ideal of the Divine, there is an element of faith in the Jew that remains strong and untouched.

The bottle of undefiled oil supplied the Menorah for eight days, no more and no less. There is great significance in the number eight here. If, as mentioned earlier, seven indicates the perfection of creation, then eight represents the next level. Eight thus represents the extramundane, the levels of power that are higher than the physical universe. The fact that a one-night supply of oil could continue to burn for many days was a miracle that transcended the mere laws of nature. Since it was a miracle that reached the eighth level, Chanukah was ordained as an eight-day festival.

This was also the reason that the High Priest wore eight vestments when he served in the Temple. As mentioned above, the Temple represented the Jew’s link with the extramundane, the eighth level. When the High Priest served in the Temple, he would wear the eight vestments to indicate that he was drawing spiritual sustenance for the Jews from a realm that was higher than the seven days of creation.

Another important eight is the eight days of circumcision. Circumcision is performed on the eighth day for essentially the same reason as above. Circumcision is God's covenant with Abraham, and through it, God established the principle that Abraham and his descendants would be able to live on a plane that could transcend the physical. It is through the covenant of circumcision that the Jew has a link to the spiritual realm.

Man’s highest link with the spiritual is prophecy. At the time of the miracle of Chanukah, however, prophecy had already ceased to exist. The eight days of the miracle therefore had a special significance. Although prophecy had ceased to exist, and there was no prophet to interpret it, they had been worthy of a miracle through sheer faith. The eight days thus indicated that although the Jew could not establish the link of prophecy, he still had a firm link with the Divine.

The Torah specifies that only the purest olive oil could be used for the Menorah (Exodus 27:20). There was an important reason for this, as explained in the Midrash. Israel is likened to an olive. An olive must be crushed to yield oil and produce light; similarly, when Israel is crushed, her light shines forth.

This olive oil was used to light the Menorah lamps, which, as we have seen, represent the level that is higher than the seven physical days. Israel is worthy of the transcendent because she does not abandon God when she is crushed. Instead, she comes even closer to God and gains a higher degree of enlightenment. The more the Jew is oppressed, the more he thus becomes one with the Divine Wisdom which is likened to the olive oil in the lamp.

This is precisely what happened when the Jews were faced with Greek persecution. The more the Greeks crushed them, the more their light of faith shone forth. This spiritual power brought about their victories and was then responsible for the miracle of Chanukah. It is renewed each year when the Chanukah lamp is lit.

There was merely enough oil for one night. How much persecution can a person endure? Often there is only enough faith for a single night. The Jew might only have enough faith to survive a short time under exile and persecution. But God miraculously made the oil burn for eight days. Even enough faith for a single night is enough to raise the Jew above the level of the mundane and thus enable him to survive the bitter years of exile.

It is also significant that the miracle occurred through the Cohen-priests. The revolt was initiated by Mattathias, who was high priest, and the battles were led by his sons. With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, the priests would lose their primary function, which was to serve in the Temple. No more would the High Priest don his eight vestments for the divine service, opening the Temple’s spiritual channels to all Israel.

The Cohen-priests therefore spearheaded the effort to initiate the festival of Chanukah. The spiritual channels would henceforth have to flow through another concept of eight—the eight days of Chanukah. This would be a primary source of spiritual sustenance for the Jews throughout their exile.

There is a final significance in the fact that the miracle occurred through oil. Besides being used for the Menorah, olive oil was also used for anointing and consecrating (Exodus 30:22). It was also used to anoint kings. The word Messiah, Mashiach (מָשִׁיָּךְ) in Hebrew, literally means “one who is anointed”—with oil.
As mentioned earlier, the festival of Chanukah was ordained especially through the exile initiated by Rome, an exile destined to last until the Messiah comes. The oil burning in the Chanukah lamp thus represents our faith that our exile will eventually end with the light of the Messiah. Amen.