

Chanukah, Eight Days of Oil

Where can I find information about the menorah being lit for eight days, on one cruse of oil, following the Maccabees' rededication of the Temple?

The Maccabees drove the Seleucids out of the Land of Israel in the month of Kislev 165 B.C.E., which is in about the month of December. They had the task of cleaning up the mess that the Seleucids had left, notably in the city of Jerusalem and in the Temple complex. Antiochus' forces had completely ransacked the Temple and made it into a haven of idolatry. The Temple needed to be cleansed of its defilement and restored to its previous position so proper sacrifices could once again be performed. Of all of the items of Temple furniture that had to be cleansed and rededicated, one of the most important was the great lampstand or *menorah*. The *menorah* required special consecrated oil in order to be lit. Some historical traditions actually indicate that the Maccabees had to setup a "makeshift *menorah*" out of iron bars covered with zinc (Scholium to *Megillat Ta'anit*),¹ while a new gold *menorah* (מְנוֹרָה) was being crafted.

The Festival of Dedication or *Chanukah*, as attested in the historical record, was mandated as a national celebration so that the community could remember the sacrifice of the Maccabees, and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem:

"Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev" (1 Maccabees 4:59, RSV).

The historian Josephus wrote about the establishment of *Chanukah* as a new, national celebration for the Jewish people in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*:

"Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days; and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon: but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them, by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival" (12.323-325).²

The Greek name for this holiday as recorded by Josephus was *phōta* (φῶτα), meaning "Lights." The connection of *Chanukah* to the lighting of the *menorah* goes all the way back to the First Century B.C.E. Talmud tractates b.*Shabbat* 21b and 23a detail various *halachic* rulings from this period regarding the lighting of the *chanukia*, and debates between the Rabbinical Schools of Hillel and Shammai. These rulings date anywhere from 50-100 years before Messiah Yeshua.

The wonderful story that enlivens our *Chanukah* celebration concerns the fact that when the Maccabees were cleansing the Temple, only one cruse of consecrated oil was found to light the *menorah*. The Torah says that the oil used in the Tabernacle/Temple service was to be "clear oil of beaten olives for the light, to make a lamp burn continually" (Exodus 27:20, NASU; cf. Leviticus 24:2), and the prevailing *halachah* of the day required eight days for this oil to be produced. While there was plenty of olive oil present to use in the Land of Israel, only special consecrated oil could be used for burning in the *menorah*. The miracle of the eight days of oil is spoken of in the Talmud, in the midst of the arguments about how the *chanukia* was to be lit:

¹ Cf. Moshe David Herr, "Hanukkah," in *EJ*.

² *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 328.

“What’s the point of Hanukkah? It is in line with what our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev the days of Hanukkah, which are eight, begin. On these days it is forbidden to lament the dead and to fast.

“For when the Greeks entered the sanctuary, they made all of the oil that was in the sanctuary unclean. But when the rule of the Hasmonean house took hold and they conquered them, they searched but found only a single jar of oil, lying with the seal of the high priest. But that jar had enough oil only for a single day. But there was a miracle done with it, and they lit the lamp with it for eight days. The next year they assigned these days and made them festival days for the recitation of Hallel psalms [Psa. 113-118] and for thanksgiving” (b.Shabbat 21b).³

This story can be certainly deduced from the historical events recorded for us in 1-4 Maccabees, the writings of Josephus, and others. While some people today brand the miracle of the oil remaining lit for eight days as only a “legend,” the fact of the matter remains that Orthodox Jews, most Conservative Jews, and the vast majority of the Messianic Jewish community today, believe with great faith that it actually happened. The challenge for some in the more independent Hebrew Roots sectors today is the fact that many are unwilling to accept Jewish works like the Mishnah or Talmud as having any valid history (or for that same matter, the writings of the Church Fathers). Many are disrespectful to Jewish custom and tradition, and assert that it has no place in their interpretation and application of God’s Word.

The social situation in life of the Biblical text plays no part in the hermeneutics of some in the independent Messianic community, which is very sad because a critical part of returning to the faith of the First Century Disciples and Apostles of Yeshua is knowing the history of the times. In order to do this we have to piece together information from the Biblical texts, Jewish history, Greco-Roman history, early Christian writings, and archaeology. We also have to take much on faith, and make some value judgments. For some, custom and tradition are not important in determining how we should live our lives. But for many, especially in the Jewish community, custom and tradition are very important factors. As Messianic Believers who live in the Twenty-First Century, we have to ask ourselves what the Apostles would do regarding *Chanukah* if they lived in our time. **We believe that they would celebrate it.** Others believe that they would not. The debate is not going away until Yeshua returns.

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*