

TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, December 16, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Jews just finished celebrating Chanukah on Monday at sunset. As has been our practice for millennia, we lit candles every night; enjoyed the company of family, friends, and community; sang Chanukah songs; and ate (far too many!) *latkes* (fried potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (small jelly doughnuts, since they are also fried in oil). Chanukah is traditionally a relatively minor holiday on our calendar (with nowhere near the significance of the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot), yet it still has religious significance. We know this because we have the rabbinical commandment to light candles on each night of the holiday; and we pray additional liturgy and read extra Torah readings in honor of the holiday. Of course, it also has great cultural significance - it is the most observed holiday by American Jews - and has added nationalist importance, especially in Israel.

However, since Chanukah is *post-Biblical* (the uprising by Mattathias and his sons, known as the Maccabees, against the Seleucid Syrian Greeks started around 160 B.C.E., and we know that the Five Books of Moses was already completed and canonized by then), the question arose of how to commemorate this holiday and what it would ultimately mean. Clearly, the meaning of the holiday has morphed through history into a celebration of religious freedom, but that was not what it originally signified.

1. *Where in the Torah is the commandment to kindle lamps to celebrate Chanukah?* (When we say the blessings over the Chanukah lights, we say "...who sanctified us by His commandments, **and commanded us** to kindle Chanukah light.") In the Babylonian talmud, in Shabbat 23a, this very question arises. Why? Because **it isn't specifically commanded** (but neither is there a specific commandment to kindle Sabbath lights - Sabbath observance itself, however, is commanded in the Torah). Rav Aviya says there that the commandment to light Chanukah lights is derived from *Deuteronomy, Chapter 17, verse 11*: "*You shall act in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you; you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left,*" and the great sage Maimonides later agreed. However, this is only telling us to do what the rabbis will later decide (this makes Torah eternal and adaptable to every new circumstance) - there is nothing in that verse about Chanukah lights (of course). Yet another verse is often applied - this is the opinion of Rav Nehemiah: *Deuteronomy 32, verse 7, implies the commandment, saying "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you."* That is, we are commanded not only to do rituals but also to carry forward our history as links in a continuous chain of tradition; the victory of the Maccabees and "the miracle of the oil" are important parts of our story. The lighting of the candles in a Chanukah *menorah* that faces the street publicizes the miracle of the oil.

2. *What Torah portion could be read for a post-Biblical holiday?* Holidays are commemorated in Jewish prayer services through extra readings from the Torah, generally those sections pertinent to the holiday being celebrated. Chanukah needed to be celebrated in the same way, but since it is not in the Torah, the rabbis had to figure out what would constitute an appropriate set of readings (one for each day of the eight-day holiday). They chose Numbers, chapter 7 and the beginning of Chapter 8, broken down into readings for each day. Here is part of that reading:

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Numbers 7:10-23

י ויקריבו הנשאים את חנכת המזבח ביום המשח אותו ויקריבו הנשאים את קרבנם לפני המזבח: יא ולאמר יהוה אל-משה נשיא אחד ליום נשיא אחד ליום יקריבו את קרבנם לחנכת המזבח: יב ויהי המקריב ביום הראשון את קרבנו נחשון בן-עמינדב למטה יהודה: יג וקרבנו קערת-כסף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כסף שבעים שקל בשקל הקדש שניהם | מלאים סלת בלולה בשמן למנחה: יד כן אחת עשרה זהב מלאה קטרת: טו פר אחד בן-בקר איל אחד כבש-אחד בן-שנתו לעלה: טז שעיר-עזים אחד לחטאת: יז ולזבח השלמים בקר שנים אילים חמשה עתודים חמשה כבשים בני-שנה חמשה זה קרבן נחשון בן-עמינדב: יח ביום השני הקריב נתנאל בן-ציוגר נשיא יששכר: יט הקרב את-קרבנו קערת-כסף אחת שלשים ומאה משקלה מזרק אחד כסף שבעים שקל בשקל הקדש שניהם | מלאים סלת בלולה בשמן למנחה: כ כן אחת עשרה זהב מלאה קטרת: כא פר אחד בן-בקר איל אחד כבש-אחד בן-שנתו לעלה: כב שעיר-עזים אחד לחטאת: כג ולזבח השלמים בקר שנים אילים חמשה עתודים חמשה כבשים בני-שנה חמשה זה קרבן נתנאל בן-ציוגר: פ

10 The chieftains also brought the dedication-offering for the altar upon its being anointed. As the chieftains were presenting their offerings before the altar, **11** the LORD said to Moses: 'Let them present their offerings for the dedication of the altar, one chieftain each day.' {S} **12** The one who presented his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah. **13** His offering: one silver bowl, weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels, by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in for a grain-offering; **14** one gold ladle weighing 10 shekels, filled with incense; **15** one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt-offering; **16** one goat for a purification-offering; **17** and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Nahshon son of Amminadab. {P}

18 On the second day, Nethanel son of Zuar, chieftain of Issachar, made his offering. **19** He presented as his offering one silver bowl, weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels, by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in for a grain-offering; **20** one gold ladle weighing 10 shekels, filled with incense; **21** one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year, for a burnt-offering; **22** one goat for a purification-offering; **23** and for his sacrifice of well-being: two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, and five yearling lambs. That was the offering of Nethanel son of Zuar. {P}

The context for this reading is the dedication of the altar in the *mishkan*, the traveling tabernacle that the Levites would carry upon their shoulders and on carts and rebuild wherever the Israelites camped. The altar was first anointed and consecrated by Moses, but was then dedicated by the chieftains of the tribes through their offerings. Something unusual happened, however, when the chieftains made their offerings. I will spare you the readings of the offerings of the rest of the tribes - the only difference from paragraph to paragraph, as we can see, was the name of the chieftain who brought his offerings and his tribe.

Question for the group: Why do you think Netanel ben Tzuar brought the exact same offering as did Nachshon ben Amminadav? What lesson(s) can we learn from this?

One would imagine that the offerings of the chieftains of only the first eight tribes mentioned

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would be read to correspond to each of Chanukah's eight days, but the rabbis chose to have the entire chapter read, with the offerings of all 12 chieftains and the tally of all the offerings, finishing with Chapter 8, verses 1 through 4. Let's read those verses and see why they were added on.

Numbers 8, 1-4:

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְנוּחָה יְאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנְּרוֹת: ג וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן אַהֲרֹן אֶל־מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְנוּחָה הֵעֲלָה נְרֵיתֶיהָ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה: ד וְזֶה מַעֲשֵׂה הַמְּנֹרֶה מִקִּשָּׁה זָהָב עַד־יִרְכָּה עַד־פְּרֻחָהּ מִקִּשָּׁה הוּא כַּמְרָאָה אֲשֶׁר הָרָאָה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשָׂה אֶת־הַמְּנֹרֶה:

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand." 3 Aaron did so: he mounted the lamps at the front of the lampstand, as the Lord had commanded Moses. 4 Now, this is how the lampstand was made: it was hammered work of gold, hammered from base to petal. According to the pattern that the Lord had shown Moses, so was the lampstand made.

Immediately following the dedication of the altar in the mishkan was the commandment to mount (kindle/raise up) the lights of the *menorah*! Could this have been more than a fortuitous juxtaposition of Torah descriptions? Wherever you stand on Divine vs human origin of Scripture, this worked out beautifully for the rabbis who were developing the cycle of Torah readings, since the dedication of the altar (as the Maccabees had also done when they recaptured and cleansed the Temple) was followed by the lighting of the *menorah* (which the Maccabees also did).

According to the Talmud, when the Maccabees were cleansing the Temple, they found a small jar of pure, untampered oil (that is, its levitical seal was intact) with which to light the menorah, but only for one day. That meant that the menorah, which was supposed to be continually lit, would again go out before clean, new oil could be made. Miraculously, the one-day supply lasted eight days, which is why we celebrate Chanukah for eight days.

However, there is no mention of this miracle in any of the books of the Maccabees, nor is it found in Josephus. [First and Second Maccabees say the Maccabees celebrated Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret (Tabernacles and the Eighth Day of Assembly) belatedly in the newly rededicated Temple, since the Temple was still in the hands of the heathens when the holiday should have been celebrated, hence the eight-day festival of Chanukah.] Nevertheless, this miraculous story of the miracle of the oil made it possible for the rabbis to transform the holiday from one "only" celebrating a military victory of a small, brave force against a far larger foe to one of miraculous and Divine help. While the above passage from the Torah speaks of the traditional seven-branched *menorah* (lamp), the special Chanuka *menorot*, called *chanukiyot*, would have eight branches (plus one to hold the *shamash*, the light used to light the others), so as to recall the miracle.

Additional Questions?

- Possible suggestions: 1. Why aren't the books of the Maccabees in the Hebrew Bible (Tanach)?
2. Does Chanukah "need" the miracle of the oil to be holy/special/sacred?