

Which Hanuka Light is Right?

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Happy Hanuka! Tell me, what are we celebrating?

Are we celebrating the re-dedication of the Jerusalem Temple after it was trampled for three years by the Seleucid Greeks and their Israelite supporters? Are we celebrating the rekindling of the Temple Menorah?

Are we celebrating that the oil flask of the High Priest that held a single day's oil lasted for eight days? This is, after all, what the Talmud says happened.

Funny, this miracle, mentioned in the Talmud, is not recorded in any of the original historical sources. It is missing from the two Books of the Maccabees, and it is also not mentioned in historical accounts recorded by Josephus.

Strange, but even the earliest religious record of Hanuka, the Al HaNisim prayer that is recited in the daily Amidah prayer during Hanuka, also makes no mention of the miracle of the oil.

All the historical sources agree that the celebration was due to the re-dedication of the Temple, which was brought about through achieving victory in a bloody and ruthless guerrilla war against invading foreigners and their local sympathizers.

Hanuka celebrates a war that was won by the few against the many, by the weak against the strong. This indeed is reason to celebrate. But, in all due respect, this conflict between the Macabee forces and their traditional Israelite allies, verses the Seleucid Greeks and their Hellenistic Israelite supporters, is a type of conflict that we have always seen throughout human history.

Like every other similar conflict, it often happens that the few and small can, and do, defeat the many and strong. Look at what happened to the Americans in Vietnam. Look at what the Afghanis did to the Russians, and what they are presently doing to the Americans? The Vietnamese had their victory, so too did the Afghanis, as they will again. These are only two of many such similar examples. Conflicts of this type occur regularly, and it is rather often when the greater power is defeated.

Wars of attrition are not that hard to win because they are popular expressions of widespread resentment and collective struggle. In cases of invasion, such conflicts are only natural, and nature always wins out against that which is unnatural. The Macabees won because it was natural for their insurgency to win. But follow the Macabee dynasty in history after the war, and see what came after the war!

The Macabee kings themselves turned against those very principles which they fought for, and in their own way, became as bad as those that they had fought. This is all recorded in

history. One Macabee king even crucified thousands of Torah faithful Pharisees. Did the Israelite sympathizers with the Hellenists disappear? By no means! These Hellenists were prolific in their influence over everything in Second Temple period Judaism. They even formed their own political party, the Sadducees, and for the most part took control over the Temple and its rituals.

Granted, this is all ancient history, and today most people could care less for what is long gone. But is it long gone? Are the Hellenists only a footnote in history, or is their psychological spirit alive and well in modern day Israel and world Jewry. I will let my readers decide for themselves what they wish to believe.

Indeed, the miracle of the oil must have been a real miracle, especially because it is miraculously missing from the historical record. Granted, if, centuries after the fact, the Talmud recorded it, we can rest assured that there was very good reason to do so. After all, this tradition about the oil surfaced only after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and after when, decades later, Bar Kokhba's rebellion was ruthlessly put down.

With these two military disasters the martial tradition in Judaism came to a crashing end. How then could Hanuka continue to be observed, if it was a celebration of the guerrilla uprising against the Seleucids. Such a message was way too dangerous in those times. Suspicious Romans most likely did not approve of any Jewish celebrations associated with guerrilla uprisings and revolt. Therefore, if Hanuka was to survive, another more benign, spiritual meaning had to be applied to it. And so it was.

So today we light our lights, but I ask this, do our lights actually bring enlightenment as we celebrate a miracle, that may or may not have happened, or do they further a darkness of necessary historical revisionism?

We can choose between the truth of corroborating historical accounts, written to be an accurate record of the times, or we can chose an Agadah, a legend, which may or may not have ever been intended to be taken as literal, historical truth. We can chose either, we can chose both, or we can chose neither. I will again let my readers decide for themselves which truth, if any, they wish to accept.

Light is a funny thing and then again, so is darkness. What may be light for one may be darkness to another, and vice a versa, one man's darkness may be another man's light. Truth and falsehood is the same. One's man's truth is another's falsehood, and one man's falsehood is another's truth.

So, who is to say what is light and true, and what is darkness and falsehood? Of course, everyman stands up and says, "mine is the truth and light, and thine is the darkness and falsehood." And so it is with everyman!

The historical fact is that the Jerusalem Temple was rededicated after being trampled for a period of three years. However, let us ask, did the enemies who did the trampling really disappear into the recesses of history, or does their spirit still survive to this day? If the enemy is still alive and thriving, then what exactly are we celebrating when we light the Hanuka lights?

If we are celebrating a legend about a long-lasting flask of oil, that may have never happened, then we may very well indeed be propagating a story contrary to the original victory of guerrilla fighters over those who sought to destroy their freedoms.

What is the message of Hanuka? Is the message one about God's miracles or about human accomplishments? Does Hanuka celebrate miracles, wrought by God, or freedom, wrought by man, granted, with God's blessings, but with man's hands?

Freedom, that is such a fresh word. Freedom, it goes along with liberty. With or without the oil legend, Hanuka is a story with a message about freedom and liberty. In a world where today almost everyone is mentally enslaved, it seems that the real message of Hanuka is lost in legend.

It is easy to thank God for something that He did, as opposed to remember something that we humans did, and indeed, need to do again.

Is what I share darkness upon the lights of Hanuka? Or are revelations such as these real light that indeed shines into the darkness that has overtaken the real Hanuka, and darkened its original message about freedom and liberty?

For the third time, I will leave it up to my readers to decide, what for each individually, is light and what is darkness. After all, we each make our own decisions, and we each bare the consequences of those decisions.

The light we chose for ourselves will guide our paths, or not, if indeed the light that we chose is really the darkness. Who will decide, which is which? You will!

I pray that we all may indeed have a real and true, historically correct, happy Hanuka!

But how can we celebrate freedom and liberty when we no longer have them?

Maybe we need to rekindle the lights of Hanuka in actions and deeds, and not just in a pretty menorah? Then again, maybe I am asking too much.

Funny, but I wonder, long ago what did the Macabee family ask of their listeners? If only they had menorahs then, then maybe we would not be lighting ours now. Instead of fighting, in those long-gone desperate times, they could just have sat back and waited for a miracle. Maybe they were impatient.

It is always easier to sit back and wait for God, but something tells me, that God is sitting back and waiting for us.

Hanuka, who would ever have thought that it can make one actually think?