



THE HISTORY AND MEANING OF HANUKKAH



by

Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy

We are familiar with the definition of Hanukkah/Chanukah meaning (dedication). Halakot on Hanukkah gives several definitions. (1) “חנוכה” Hanukkah meaning that the Jews rested on the 25th day of Kislev from their enemies. (2) The Mishkan (Tabernacle) was completed on the 25th day of Kislev. (3) To commemorate the rededication of the בית המקדש (Temple) from the defilement of the enemy.

The rabbis are concerned that Hanukkah should be applicable to every Jew. It should be a time of rejoicing for miracles of the past and the present. This holiday reminds us that Hashem has given us power to prevail over our enemies. An enemy is defined as anything that is destructive to our physical or spiritual well being. One should be aware of the fact that enemies come in different forms and the most dangerous are those that come from within. Consider these examples: Lack of self control may be considered a personal enemy. Allowing ourselves to be influenced by people who do not observe Torah is another. And, of course, the immorality of modern society that promotes drugs, promiscuity, and destruction of family values while ridiculing those who work hard, excel academically, and remain true to their beliefs. The former are the mortal enemies of Israel today.

To safely guard ourselves against the darkness that surrounds us requires constant prayer and enwrapping our lives in the study of Torah. Torah observance is a tree of life to Israel. It gives life to those that grasp it! (עצ חיים היא . למדנא חזקיקים בה). The philosopher Martin Buber wrote in his book, *I and Thou*, of the spiritual difference between the “I” and the “It”. The “I”, according to Buber, is internal and the “It” is external. Some things are serious problems arise when, for example, people who are wrongly treated as a thing, as a relationship is important and understood in every area of our lives. To connect “I” and “It” one must find a harmony order to live a balanced life. We must never treat people like things, nor must we in this consumer-driven society allow the acquisition of material things define the value of our lives. Let us consider how Torah applies Buber’s I-It philosophy. The Torah is “It” (היא). “It” is a tree of life. Only in it, the Torah, can we organize our lives. All the paths of Torah are peace. Overcoming the problems of this modern world requires the faith and strength of the Maccabees. Israel in every generation is confronted with the struggle against the enemies of God and his people.

“We must never treat people like things, nor must we in this consumer-driven society allow the acquisition of material things define the value of our lives.”

I and Thou; of the spiritual difference between the “I” and the “It”. The “I”, according to Buber, is internal and the “It” is external. Some things are serious problems arise when, for example, people who are wrongly treated as a thing, as a relationship is important and understood in every area of our lives. To connect “I” and “It” one must find a harmony order to live a balanced life. We must never treat people like things, nor must we in this consumer-driven society allow the acquisition of material things define the value of our lives.

The origin of Hanukkah

Hanukkah began with the priestly Jewish family called Hasmoneans under Greek domination. At the end of the fourth century, B.C.E., Alexander “the Great” conquered the Persians. The Greeks then became the rulers of that part of the world, which included the land of Israel. The period after Alexander’s conquests is called the Hellenistic period in world history. All of the Near East, western Asia and northern Africa was Hellenized, and fell under the influence of the Greek religion and Hellenistic culture. In the towns of western Asia and Egypt people began to speak Greek and to take on the outward appearance of Greeks. Moreover, the worship of Greek Gods became common.

Through the courageous leadership of Judah Maccabee and his many Jews were able to resist. They refused to abandon Torah or be indoctrinated into the Greek religion. These priestly men fought so valiantly that they became known as Maccabees, which means “hammer”. The Maccabees brave resistance to corrupting pressures is an example of what every Jew must do today. The victories of the Maccabee against superior armies re-establish Israel’s religious autonomy. When the war was over, the leaders of Israel consulted on what they should do with the altar of burnt offerings, which had been profaned by the Greeks. They decided to pull it down and build a new altar according to the plans of the original sanctuary. They also replaced the holy temple articles that had been defiled. They made new holy vessels to replace those that had been desecrated. Legend has it that when all this was done, there was only one cruse of oil for the נר תמיד (perpetual light). However that oil, which was only enough for a one day miraculously lasted for eight days. Thus Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days with special candles being lit each night.

On the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is called the month כסלו Kislev, in 148 BCE, the people rose up early in the morning and offered sacrifice according to the law upon the new altar of burnt offerings which they had made. This fixed the current date of Hanukkah. Ironically, the heathens had profaned the temple on that same day a year before. When the temple was rededicated, the people celebrated with songs, drums, harps, and cymbals. Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshipping and praising the God of heaven who had given them success. And so they kept the dedication of the altar eight days and offered burnt offerings with gladness and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise.

Hanukkah today stands for two ideals: First, for the achievement of religious liberty. Second, in the minds of most thinking Jewish people, for the revival of the nation of Israel as it was in the days of old and as the prophets predict it shall be again.

Hanukkah Traditions

Rabbinic laws provide the basis for many of practices connected with the historical event of Hanukkah. The Zadikim (the righteous men and women who apply Torah in every aspect of their daily life) taught that it is the duty of Israel to perform mitzvot and to acknowledge the goodness of Hashem. The great miracle of Hanukkah

most certainly presents compelling circumstances. Yet, there was no special day set aside for the celebration of Hanukkah. It is not written in the Torah. Hanukkah is observed as a *tradition*. It is a *holiday* and not a *High Holyday*. We celebrate it as a reminder of the tremendous faith our people have in Hashem. We believe that God will deliver his people in every generation and under any condition.

The rabbinic laws requires that we light one Hanukkah light each night at sun down and make the appropriate brakot. A special prayer was incorporated in our siddur. מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ , לְךָ , שְׂאֵתָהּ הוּא יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ , וְאֵלֵהֵי דְנֵאָאֲבוֹתֵינוּ , לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד . *We give thanks unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God and the God of our fathers for ever and ever; הַהֵם בְּזִמְנֵי הַיָּהּ . הַפְּרָקוֹן וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַנִּפְלְאוֹת וְעַל הַנְּחֻמוֹת , וְעַל הַמְּלָחֵמוֹת , שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ , בְּיָמֵים וְעַל הַנְּסִים וְעַל הַמְּוֹדִים .* *We thank Thee also for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and saving acts, wrought by Thee, as for the wars which thou didst wage for our fathers in days of old, at this season.* They following prayer is said “In the days of the Hasmonean, Nattathias son of Johanan, the High Priest, and his sons, when the iniquitous power of Greece rose against Thy people Israel to make them forgetful of Thy Law and to force them to transgress the statutes of Thy will. Then didst Thou in thine abundant mercy rise up for them in the time of their trouble; Thou didst plead their cause, Thou didst judge their suit, Thou didst avenge their wrong; Thou didst deliver the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the arrogant into the bands of them that occupied themselves with Thy law; for Thyself Thou didst make a great and holy name in Thy world, and for Thy people Israel Thou didst work a great deliverance and redemption as at this day. And thereupon Thy children came into the oracle of Thy house, cleansed Thy temple, purified Thy sanctuary, kindled lights in Thy holy courts, and appointed these eight days of Hanukkah in order to give thanks and praise unto Thy great name.”

Next



THE MEANING OF HANUKKAH

By
Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy

Hanukkah is eight days of meditation, concentration, contemplation and thinking of an incident that took place in our past history that has affected our lives today. We recall the struggle, the despair and the hopeless condition, which gave courage to a people who stood up and fought for life. If you fight for life, salvation is won. It is in the victory of life that we find joy. This was the realization of the Maccabees in their message to you and me at the season of Hanukkah. In the eight days of rededication, evaluation and introspection of our being, we recall the past in a way that transforms who we are in the present, which in turn, affects what we may do in the future.

We don't just count, we evolve each day by brings the following things to mind:

On the 1st day

Calls our attention to the knowledge of our G-d "THE LORD IS ONE".

שמע ישראל, יהוה אחד, יהוה אחד.

On the 2nd day

Our duty to study the written and Oral law. [2]

א) ש בכתב (ב) ש בעל פה.

On the 3rd day

We acknowledge that we are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and that our spiritual being is dependent on Nefesh (life force, physical soul) Ruach (spirit) and Neshmah (living soul).

On the 4th day

Reminds us of the four sections of the law where it declares God's absolute unity. We Must love God with all of our Heart, Soul, Might and Strength.

On the 5th day

Represents the 5 books of Moses. In studying them we find 613 commandments. There are 365 positive commands that equal the 365 days in the calendar year. There are 248 negative commands that equal the 248 bodily organs. The divine harmony of the positive and negative commandments is expressed in the Torah through the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Thus proving that inner peace can not be achieved without making peace with ones fellows.

On the 6th day

Symbolizes the six days in which G-d made the heavens and earth. Its was on this day man was created and was given the responsibility to maintain God's creation. To choose good or evil. Ultimately, we must either be our brother's keeper or we will be his murderer; killing him and ourselves in numerous ways.

On the 7th day

Seven represents completeness, perfection. It represents the seven gates in man: (2) eyes, (2) ears, (2) nasal cavities in our nose. (1) mouth. There are seven days in the week. Rosh Hashanah occurs in the seventh month of the year. These examples teach us to be more aware of the patterns that exist in the universe because these patterns can instruct us.

On the 8th day

Gives us eight complete days of retrospection, rejuvenation, refortification and thereby, giving us a rededicated mind.



* For further reading consult the *Shulkan Aruk* and *Guide to Jewish Holy Days: History and Observance* by Hayyim Schauss.

Laws of Hanukkah

The proper time for lighting.

Approximately 25-40 minutes after sunset.

How long must the Hanukkah lights burn?

Menorah should burn for a minimum half hour.

Where should the menorah be placed in the home?

Near the window facing the street.

Recite brakot before beginning to light.

A. The shamash, however should be lit before reciting the brakot.

B. The brakot should be recited before beginning the lighting. The reason is that all brakot for mitzvot must be recited immediately before performing the mitzvah.

(Some communities do not say Hashem has “commanded us” because Hanukkah lighting is not a divine degree.)

Setting up the candles.

On the first night of Hanukkah, the candle to be lit is placed at the end of the menorah facing your right. ♦

On the second night, he adds a candle to the left.

The Shulchan Aruch view lighting the leftmost candle first, (that is, the candle which was added that evening, and then the rest of the candles are lit proceeding from left to right.

Lighting on Erev Shabbath and Motza’ai Shabbath.

Since it is prohibited to light fire on Shabbath, Hanukkah candles should be lit on Friday afternoon before sunset. *The Hanukkah lights are kindled before the Shabbath candles.*

Motza’ai Shabbath.

Havdallah is recited first, before the kindling of Hanukkah lights. Many Poskim disagree with this view and hold the Hanukkah lights are kindled first.

Complete Hallel is said.

On all eight days of Hanukkah, complete Hallel is said. The reason is that a miracle occurred each day.

One must light again at home.

A person cannot fulfill his obligation of kindling the Hanukkah lights through those kindled in Shul. He is required to light again at home and recite the brakot.

Dreidel

A great ׀ Miracle ׀ Happen ׀ Their ׀