

Why is the miracle of oil so hidden?

שעייר-ענים אחד לחתאת:

“One seir goat for an expiation offering.” (Bamidbar 7:46).

Every day of Chanuka we publicly read the gift of a nasi at the inauguration of the Mishkan, which was the same exact gift as every other nasi. What lesson do these gifts have with Chanuka?

There are two major miracles of Chanuka. The victory of the war is a clear miracle. An outnumbered band of Jews versus a well-seasoned Seleucid army. While that may have been enough to celebrate Chanukah, Chazal teach us that there was a great miracle of oil, too—oil enough for one night lasted for eight days. Why, then, is the first mention of the miracle of the oil in the Talmud Bali and the Megillah of Antiochus (written about the same time)? Why does the Yerushalmi not mention it? Why does the Mishneh not codify the laws of lighting the chanukiah? Why does Josephus, Al Hanisim prayer—established by the Anshnei Kanesses Hagadolah at the time—and Book of Maccabees I (not that it is part of Tanakh but it is a reliable historical source) not mention it? Further, as Chanuka was kept from the time of the Chashmanoim how could it possibly be a machlokes between the Yeshova of Shamai and Hilel of how to light? Finally, as Rabbi Yosef Cairo famously queried, why is there an eight-day celebration if there was enough oil for one day? (The first day was not a miracle).

The answer to all of these questions lies in the history of the events that led up to creating the chag. The war took place over a three-year period. For three years the Beis HaMikdash was closed to service. This is seen to fulfill an earlier prophecy. (Daniel 9:26). Hashem made the Chashmanoim victorious in their struggles. They won many battles while outnumbered 4:1, including the great victory of Beis Tzur, where a few thousand Maccabees defeated more than 60,000 of the enemy infantries.

Gemara Shabbos (21b) and the historical documents give the same history: The war ended on the 24th of Kislev. They wanted to immediately commence the avoda again the next day. However, everything was destroyed and impure. They cleaned out the Beis HaMikdash and fixed it up to a situation where there were no more idols and they were able to bring in make-shift vessels for the vessels that were unusable. On the 25th of the ninth month (Kislev) they commenced service in the Beis HaMikdash. The first service of the day is cleaning out the wicks of the Menorah and preparing it for lighting. According to the Gemara, they could only find one jug of oil that had enough oil to last one day. They used it to light that evening. The next day, the 26th, they found that it was still burning. It lasted for eight days. Yet, the Gemara does not state why it had to last eight days. Ran is the first source (that I could find) that states the eight days were so that fresh pure oil can be fetched.

The historical accounts give a few reasons for the eight days. First, they fashioned it after the eight days of Succos, which is a Yom Tov celebrating the Beis HaMikdash—simchas Beis Hashoeva and waiving of arba minim daily. (Bamidbar 29:35). Also, Shlomo HaMelech made an eight-day celebration when he dedicated his Beis HaMikdash. (Melachim I 8:66). Josephus indicates that this was called a Holiday of Lights, but he does not state why. (Antiquities 12:7). In Al Hanisim, the first two thirds speak about the war and its great victory. Then it says, **וְאַחֲרֵכֶם בָּאוּ בְּנֵיכֶם וְפָנוּ אֶת-הַיּוֹכֵל וְטַהֲרוּ אֶת-מִקְדָּשׁ** “And after this Your children came to the inner sanctum of Your House, they turned over the sanctuary, purified your Mikdash, and they lit lights in the courtyards of Your holies.” Then it says, “And they established these eight days of Chanuka for thanks and praise Your great name.” The Gemara Shabbos 21b says that following year they established the celebration as thanksgiving and praise. It does not mention that they established lighting candles.

What happened was the Chashmanoim felt that the main miracle was rededicating the Beis HaMikdash after a three-year absence and they celebrated it for eight days. While they did find one jug of oil fit for lighting and a miracle occurred that it lasted eight days—thereby confirming that Hashem returned to the Beis HaMikdash—they felt that the main miracle was winning the war. Al Hanisim mentions the lighting of the lights in the Beis HaMikdash. It does not say “the menorah” nor does it say, “in the Kodesh” where the Menorah is. It says in the courtyards of Your holies. While the Beis HaMikdash stood and the avoda continued, another two centuries, the main celebration was the miracle of the war. However, the custom came to celebrate by lights. This is hinted at in Al Hanisim—they lit lights in all of their courtyards. Clearly, there was some sort of connection of lighting lights to this celebration. Josephus mentions this was named the Holiday of Lights. The Mishneh references lights were lit during this chag. (Bava Kama 6:6). The people celebrated with lights as a nod to oil miracle. There came a time, after galus set in, where celebrating with lights became more important than the rededication of the Beis HaMikdash. In galus, the fact that the Beis HaMikdash stood a bit longer was not as important as keeping Torah alive. The miracle of oil gives hope that Hashem will again return to His Mikdash. Therefore, a uniform method of lighting on Chanuka had to be established. That is why the Houses of Shama and Hilel argued—on how to establish it. That is why it is first brought up in Shabbos Bavli. The great Yeshivos realized it was time to codify the halachos for generations to come.

The reading of the gifts of the nesiim is important on Chanuka. The Mishkan had two eight-day periods of inauguration and twelve days of gifts. The gifts were eight sets of animals—bull, ram, lamb for ola (Bamidbar 7:45), goat for chatos (ibid 7:46), oxen, rams, he-goats, and lamb for shelamim (ibid 7:47). These sets hint at the eight days. Just as every tribe offered the same eight animal sets, so too, every tribe will be equally involved in a dedication ceremony of eight days to once again inaugurate a Beis HaMikdash. The full Klal Yisroel was not at the second Beis HaMikdash dedication nor its rededication. May we see all of Klal Yisroel at the dedication of the Final and eternal Beis HaMikdash, speedily in our days.