

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

The following essay is dedicated in loving memory of my dear grandmother *Rahel bat Esther A"H*.

The holiday of Hanuka has been treasured by the Jewish people for over two thousand years now. It has inspired and motivated us to maintain our Jewish identity in the face of adversity. It has spread the light and holiness of our Torah to each Jewish home. There is no doubt that our nation has gained greatly from the establishment of this holiday.

However, in order to fully appreciate the holiday we must explore the original intention of Hazal upon establishing Hanuka. Hashem saved Am Yisrael and performed miracles numerous times throughout our history, yet Hazal did not establish a holiday for every such instance.

### Why did Hazal decide to establish a holiday after the events of Hanuka happened?

In order to answer this question, we must look at the account of the Hanuka story as expressed through Hazal in the Gemara:

*“What is Hanukah? When the Greeks entered the Bet Hamikdash, they defiled all of the oil in the Bet Hamikdash. When the Hashmonaim overpowered them and won, they searched and only found one jug of pure oil which was sufficient to light for one day. There was a miracle and it lasted for eight days. The following year they established these days as a holiday with praise and thanks to God” (Shabbat 21B)*

The above Gemara seems to **imply that the miracle of the oil is the sole reason** that Hazal established the eight-day holiday of Hanukah. This is difficult to understand for two reasons.

1) Although the military victory over the Greeks did not involve a revealed miracle (a break in the laws of nature), it is abundantly clear that it was a hidden miracle. Only through the hand of God could a small group of Jewish rebels manage to throw off the rule of the powerful Greek Empire. **Why does the Gemara neglect to speak of this miracle?** Why does it only focus on the miracle of the oil?

2) If we look at our history, we find that it is replete with miracles- none of which have a holiday established for them. We will cite three examples to prove this point.

A. **During the times of Yehoshua many miracles were performed for Am Yisrael** as they fought the goyim in Eretz Yisrael. A prime example is the miracle which Hashem executed during the battle against the five Amorite kings. Am Yisrael was winning the war, but the day was coming to an end. The nation needed more time to successfully conquer their enemies. Yehoshua turned to the

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

sun and told it to stand still (so the day wouldn't end) and it did! **The miracle of the sun standing still was definitely a greater miracle than the oil**, yet no holiday was established.

B. **Miracles were actually quite common in the Bet Hamikdash.** The mishna in Pirke Abot tells us, "*Ten Miracles took place daily in the Bet Hamikdash* (Pirkei Abot 5:4)."

C. The Gemara in Masechet Taanit (25A) records a miracle which happened to the daughter of Ribbi Hanina Ben Dosa. In the haste of *Ereb Shabbat*, she accidentally put vinegar instead of oil for *Nerot Shabbat*. She came to her father to explain her mistake. Ribbi Hanina dismissed her worries and said "*whoever said that oil should be lit, will say that the vinegar should be lit.*" The Gemara records that **the vinegar caught fire and stayed lit** throughout the entire Shabbat! This miracle is even greater than the miracle of the oil, and still there is no holiday which recalls this event.

**It is abundantly clear from these examples that holidays are simply not established to commemorate miracles.** Hence, we must return to our original question, why did the Hachamim decide to establish a holiday just for the miracle of the oil? What exactly are we meant to celebrate during the holiday of Hanuka?

In order to answer this question, we must first look at our other holidays and determine the reasoning behind their celebration.

### Pesah

The ultimate goal of the Exodus was to ready Bene Yisrael to become God's nation. On Pesah we celebrate our freedom, and the forming of our fledgling nation. This concept is expressed in the four *leshonot of genulah*, as it says: "*I am the Lord. **I will free you** from the labors of the Egyptians and **deliver you** from their bondage. I will **redeem you** with an outstretched arm... And **I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God***" (Shemot 6)

Hashem communicated this to Am Yisrael from the very onset of the redemption process. The first time Hashem speaks to Moshe he tells him "*And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain*" (Shemot 3:12). *Yesiat Misrayim* was a vital stepping stone towards Matan Torah.

**Pesah celebrates the beginnings of the *berit* (covenant), the special relationship we forged with Hashem.**

### Shabuot

On Shabuot this *berit* came to full expression with the giving of the Torah. The message which Hashem sends to Am Yisrael beforehand crystalizes this concept: "*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. **Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples.. and you will be for me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation***" (Shemot 19)

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

Any covenant is two sided; each party is obligated to do something for the other. Hashem had already performed great miracles to redeem Bene Yisrael from Egypt. Now it was Am Yisrael's turn to do their part- to follow the Torah they were about to receive. Only then would Hashem make them his treasured and holy nation.

**Shabuot celebrates the *berit* we forged with Hashem through our acceptance of the Torah.**

### Succot

Succot is known to be a celebration of the seven clouds of glory which Hashem granted to Bene Yisrael shortly after leaving Egypt. The clouds of glory provided shade and protection for Bene Yisrael throughout their sojourn in the desert. These clouds were a product of the unique relationship Am Yisrael had with Hashem after forging the *berit* at Sinai; a special show of the love Hashem had for Bene Yisrael.

According to the Midrash, however, the clouds were taken away from Bene Yisrael after they committed the grave Sin of the Golden Calf<sup>1</sup>. Idol worship is a flagrant violation of the *berit*. Hence, Hashem had to remove the clouds as a result of the sin of Bene Yisrael. They no longer deserved a display of love from Hashem. Only after Moshe Rabbeinu managed to attain forgiveness for Bene Yisrael, did the clouds return. The date of the clouds return was the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishre- Hag HaSuccot.

**Succot celebrates the reforming of the *berit* between Hashem and Am Yisrael.**

### Common Core:

If we look at each of the holidays, we find that they all share something in common. **Each holiday celebrates the *berit* between Hashem and Am Yisrael.** Hence, if Hazal decided to establish a new holiday, we would assume that it also would be a celebration of the *berit*. In order to explore whether or not Hanukah fits into this category, we must first deal with another aspect of the establishment of this holiday.

### Odd Man Out:

**Each of the major Jewish holidays barring Hanuka are mentioned in the Bible.** Even the rabbinical holiday of Purim is found in the Ketubim. The Hachamim in the times of Purim conceded to the wish of Esther to include the *Megila* in the biblical canon. Yet, after the Hasmonean victory, Hazal did not allow any of the books which described the events of Hanuka (i.e. Sefer Maccabim) to be added to the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Gaon Mivilna on Shir Sashirim 1:4.

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

### Why wasn't the story of Hanuka included in Tanach?

The Ben Ish Hai answers that **there is a prerequisite for any sefer to be included in the biblical canon**. It must be written down either through *nebuah*-prophecy, or *ruah hakodesh*-divine inspiration. When the first Bet Hamikdash was destroyed prophecy stopped. There were no new prophets after the destruction. Hence, as great as the story of Hanuka was, it **could not** be included in the Bible<sup>2</sup>.

During the time of Esther, *ruah hakodesh* (which is secondary to prophecy) remained. The *megilah* was written in *ruah hakodesh*. Hence, the *megilah* became like all the other books of Tanach, which Hachamim make *derashot* upon and learn halachot from.

During the time of Hanukah however, they no longer had *ruah hakodesh*. **Therefore, Hazal couldn't write down the story with divine inspiration**. They would have to formulate the story in their **own** language. That is why they chose not to have a book written about the Hanuka story to be included in Tanach.

### No Mention:

**If Hanuka could not be included in tanach, at the very least it should have been included in the mishna.** Every major Jewish holiday has a portion in the mishna that deals with its laws. Many holidays have their very own masechet (i.e Masechet Succa, Pesachim, Megilah... etc.). Not only does Hanukah not have its own masechet, **it does not even have a mishna that officially teaches about Hanukah**. The only place that Hanukah is mentioned in the mishna is in a roundabout way.<sup>3</sup>

### Why is there no official mention of Hanuka in the Mishna?

In order to answer this question, we must explore the origins of the Greek exile:

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Gemara in Masechet Yoma (29A) states: "*Rab Asei said: why is Esther compared to dawn (ayelet hashahar)? Just like dawn is the end of the night, so too, Esther is the end of all of the miracles.*" The Gemara asks, "*What about Hanukah?*" Shouldn't we consider Hanukah as the end of the miracles? The Gemara answers, "*We are referring to the last of the miracles that could be written* (in Tanach)."

<sup>3</sup> The mishna in Baba Kama (Chapter 6) records this law: '*If the flax on the back of a camel catches on fire from the flame of nerot hanukah, the owner of the store does not have to pay for the damage which was caused*'. He is exempt from paying because the nerot hanuka have a right to be there in order to perform *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle. This is the one place in the mishna that mentions Hanuka! See our Debar Torah on Parasht Vayesheb entitle "One Spark" for the full implication of this teaching.

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

*“During the times of Talmi (Ptolemy) five elders translated the Torah into Greek. **The day the Torah was translated into Greek was as difficult to Yisrael as the day they created the golden calf**” (Masechet Sofrim 1).*

### Why is the translation considered to be such a tragedy?

On a basic level anytime a book is translated, things could get lost in the translation. Therefore, if the Torah was translated, it wouldn't be represented properly in the translated language.

In light of our above discussion on *berit*, however, we can offer a deeper explanation. **The translation of the Torah into Greek is considered to be the beginnings of a breach of our covenant with God.** It is therefore compared to the creation of the Golden Calf- the beginnings of the sin which was the ultimate breach of the *berit*. It signifies the Greeks attempts to absorb elements of Judaism into their culture. It was the first step of their ultimate goal in assimilating Am Yisrael. If the Greeks could successfully incorporate and adapt the tenets of Judaism into their culture, it would be easier to persuade the Jews to drop their ‘old-fashioned’ Torah, and adopt the Greeks ‘new & improved’ Torah and philosophy.

### The Septuagint:

This approach is corroborated in the continuation of the beraita. The beraita relates another episode of when the Torah was translated into Greek:

*“Talmi gathered 72 hachamim and put them in 72 separate homes. He did not tell them why he gathered each one. He came to each one individually and commanded them to translate the Torah into Greek.”*

With a little help from God, all of the hachamim ended up writing the exact same translation to the entire Torah. In fact, **they all changed the exact same thirteen pesukim in the Torah** which the Greeks might have misunderstood<sup>4</sup>. This translation became known as the Septuagint.

Although the episode seems to end with a positive result, it was viewed as a major tragedy. The Shulchan Aruch writes: *“On the eighth of the month of Tebet, the Torah was translated into Greek in the times of Talmi, and **there was darkness upon the world for three days** (Orach Haim 580)”* The day is included in a list of days on which we fast for tragedies which befell the Jews. **The Hachamim felt that this translation was the direct cause for the Greeks entry into the Holy Temple.**

<sup>4</sup> Ex. instead of “*bereshit bara elokim*” It was changed to “*elokim bara bereshit*.” They didn't want people to think that there is a being (*bar minan*) that created Hashem. As well, they wrote “*Vayomer elokim e'eseb adam*” instead of “*na'ese adam*”, as it sounds like more than one being created the world h”v.

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

### Thirteen Breaches:

The mishna in Massechet Middot (Chapter 2) tells us that the Greeks made **thirteen breaches** in the **fence leading into the Bet Hamikdash**. The thirteen breaches were parallel to the thirteen pesukim which the hachamim changed in their Greek translation. It is viewed as a real consequence of their actions.

### Why is a little more explanation from the hachamaim considered a breach in the covenant?

The answer can be found in a pasuk in Hoshea. *“The many teachings I wrote for him Have been treated as something alien (Hoshea 8:12).”*

Although having the Torah translated into Greek was a tragedy, there was an even greater tragedy looming over Am Yisrael. The written Torah is not what makes the Torah exclusive to Am Yisrael. Rather, it is the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*- Oral Torah, which divulges the true meaning of the Written Torah. Hence, Ribbi Yohanan said that the covenant was forged with God **only through the Oral Torah**, not the Written Torah (Gittin 60b).

If the Greeks would only have a translation of the *Torah Shebichtab*- Written Torah, the damage wouldn't be so great. If the Greeks managed to get their hands on our Oral Torah, the results would be devastating. Nothing would remain inherently 'Jewish'. The Greeks would adapt and transform our wholesome and holy Torah and incorporate it into their vain and mundane culture.

### It's mine not yours!

If Am Yisrael was to remain God's nation, it was imperative for the Oral Torah to remain oral. **The moment it would be written down, it would lose its exclusivity**. Non-Jews would be able to read and understand it. Hence, the thirteen explanations of the hachamim which were **in the spirit of the Oral Torah** led to a “breach”; a breach in the covenant, **which lead to a breach in the wall** leading to the temple. This represents the Greeks infiltrating our authentic Judaism and our holy Torah.

The prophet Hoshea explains that if the mishna was in the hands of the Goyim, they could have claimed that the Torah was truly theirs, **and it's teachings would become foreign to**



## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

us<sup>5</sup>. According to the midrash on the pasuk in Hoshea, Hashem expressed this very concern to Moshe Rabenu:

*“Ribbi Yohanan said: the majority of the Torah is told orally and a minority of the Torah is written down. Ribbi Yehuda said: ‘Moshe requested that the Mishna be written down. (Moshe was concerned that it might be lost when it was passed down.) Hashem saw **that the goyim are going to translate the Torah and going to read it in Greek and claim that they are Jews also.**”*

The Greeks had their own wisdom; they developed new ideas in philosophy, math and science, but they wanted to incorporate the Torah into their culture as well. They wanted to claim the Torah as their own. The Greeks wanted their culture to contain everything—including the wisdom of the Torah.

*“Hashem foresaw that this would happen. He says to the nations: You claim that you are my children? **The ones who have the hidden treasure are considered to be my children.** What is the hidden treasure? The Mishna. If the Mishna was in the hands of the Goyim, they could have rightfully claimed they were like the Jews and Am Yisrael would be like strangers (Yalkut Shimoni 525).”*

### Grave Danger:

This Midrash enables us to understand the grave danger Am Yisrael was in during the Greek exile. The very uniqueness of Am Yisrael was at stake. Had the Greeks succeeded with their plans, our nation would have been absorbed into the Greek empire. Our special status as God’s treasured nation, and the special berit we forged with God would all be lost. The Hashmonaim rose to the occasion and risked their lives to battle the Greeks.

### Staying Alive:

Now that we are cognizant of the great danger the Greeks brought to Am Yisrael, we can better understand what we are celebrating. We celebrate the fact that although the berit began to unravel and was breached somewhat, it remained intact after the victory. Am Yisrael was still alive and connected to Hashem. **The holiday of Hanuka like all other holidays, it is a celebration of the berit.** It was only proper that the story of Hanuka and its’ halachot remain *be’al peh*-oral. **The very reason we were able to maintain our relationship with God was on account of the Oral Torah.** The fact that there is no official mention of Hanuka in the mishna enforces this point.

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<sup>5</sup> There came a time when Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi felt it necessary to record the Oral Torah. Due to the trials and tribulations of exile, the Oral Torah was in danger of being forgotten and lost. Yet, even as he compiled the Mishna he left much to be elaborated upon in order to maintain an oral component of the Torah.

## Hanuka: The Festival of the Oral Torah

### Everlasting Light:

We can now answer why the hachamim felt it necessary to make an eight day holiday, and why the miracle of the oil was so important. Hashem brought about the miracle to show that he was pleased with the actions of Am Yisrael. It was an affirmation of the berit. He was pleased that Bene Yisrael stood up to fight in order to preserve their uniqueness. **Just as the oil lasted longer against all odds, so too the berit we have with Hashem lasted and will last against all odds!**

The *menorah* represents hochma-wisdom, and the *ner* represents the Torah. The Greeks were on the verge of bringing darkness to the world permanently. They were on route to suppressing the identity of Am Yisrael- the nation that was meant to be “***A Light unto the nations***” (*Yeshayahu 49*). Hashem brought about the miracle through the lights of the menorah to illustrate to the Jews that he will never forsake the berit.

Hashem wished to indicate to the goyim that the light of the Jews is eternal, and will continue to shine brightly until the coming of Mashiah speedily in our days. Amen!