

## The “real” story of Hanukkah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

### Where are there parallels with Tanakh?

*(Translation from Anchor Bible and Revised Standard Version)*

1.10 ...There came out a wicked root, Antiochus Epiphanes, who reigned in the 137<sup>th</sup> year of the Greek kingdom.

11. In those days wicked men went out of Israel, who persuaded many, saying, Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen around us: for when we are separate from them we have much sorrow.

12. This proposal pleased them,

13. And some of the people eagerly went to the king. He authorized them to observe the ordinances of the heathen.

14. They built a place of exercise according to the customs of the heathen.

15. They made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy **covenant**. They joined the heathen and sold themselves to do evil.

20. While returning from his conquest of Egypt in the year 143, Antiochus marched against (Israel and) Jerusalem with a strong army...

21. Arrogantly entering the temple, he took the golden altar and the candelabrum with all its furnishings

22. And the table for the showbread and the libation jars and the bowls and the golden ladles and the curtain....

24. With all this loot he returned to his own country, having polluted himself with massacres and uttered words of great arrogance [saying]:

25. “Great sorrow came upon Israel, wherever they lived...”

29. Two years later, the king sent a Mysarch against the towns of Judah, and he came against Jerusalem with a strong army.

31. He plundered the city, set fire to it, destroyed its buildings and the walls around it.

41. The king wrote to all his kingdom, for all to become one people

42. And for each to abandon his own customs. All the Heathens agreed to the terms of the king’s proclamation.

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

43. Many Israelites, too, accepted his religion and sacrificed to idols and violated the Sabbath.

44. The king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah containing orders to follow customs foreign to the land,

45. To put a stop to burnt offerings and meal offering and libation in the temple, to violate Sabbaths and festivals,

46. To defile temple and holy things,

50. Whoever disobeyed the word of the king was to be put to death

60. The women who had their sons circumcised they put to death according to the decree,

61. Hanging the babes from their mother’s necks and executing also their husbands and the men who had performed the circumcision.

64. Indeed, very great Wrath had struck Israel.

2.1 In those days Mattathias the son of John, son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, moved from Jerusalem and settled in Mode'in.

2. He had five sons, John surnamed Gaddi,

3. Simon called Thassi,

4. Judas called Maccabeus,

5. Eleazar called Avaran, and Jonathan called Apphus.

6. He saw the blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem, and said,

7. "Alas! Why was I born to see this, the ruin of my people, the ruin of the holy city, and to dwell there when it was given over to the enemy, the sanctuary given over to aliens?"

**8. Her temple has become like a man without honor;**

**12. And behold, our holy place, our beauty, and our glory have been laid waste; the Heathens have profaned it.**

**13. Why should we live any longer?"**

**14. Mattathias and his sons rent their clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned greatly.**

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

15. Then the king's officers who were enforcing the apostasy came to the city of Mode'in to make them offer sacrifice.

16. Many from Israel came to them; and Mattathias and his sons were assembled.

17. Then the king's officers spoke to Mattathias as follows: "You are a leader, honored and great in this city, and supported by sons and brothers.

18. Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the Heathens and the men of Judah and those that are left in Jerusalem have done... "

19. But Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice: "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers,

20. yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the **covenant** of our fathers.

22. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the **right hand or to the left.**"

23. When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice upon the altar in Mode'in, according to the king's command.

24. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him upon the altar.

25. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar.

26. Thus he burned with zeal for the law, as **Phinehas did against Zimri the son of Salu.**

27. Then Mattathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying: "Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!"

28. And he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the city.

29. Then many who were seeking righteousness and justice went down to the wilderness to dwell there,

30. they, their sons, their wives, and their cattle, because evils pressed heavily upon them.

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

### **RABBINIC—Talmud, Shabbat 21b, redacted ~6<sup>th</sup> century CE Babylonia**

מאי חנוכה, דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון [=שמונה הם], דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון [=שאיין להספיד ולהתענות בהם]? שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל, טימאו כל השמנים שבהיכל. וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד. נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאו ימים טובים בהלל והודאה". (שבת כא ע"ב)

What is this “Chanukka” about which the Sages learnt in [in a baraita, a citation from Megillat Taanit] that “Starting on the 25th of Kislev are the 8 days of Chanukka, during which one should not deliver a eulogy nor fast?”

When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

...

Rab Judah said in R. Assi's name: One must not count money by the Hanukkah light. When I state this before Samuel, he observed to me, Has then the lamp sanctity? R. Joseph demurred: Does blood possess sanctity? For it was taught: he shall pour out [the blood thereof], and cover it [with dust]: wherewith he pours out, he must cover, i.e., he must not cover it with his foot, so that precepts may not appear contemptible to him. So here too it is that precepts may not appear contemptible to him.

R. Joshua b. Levi was asked: Is it permitted to make use of the booth decorations during the whole of the seven days? He answered him [the questioner], Behold! it was said, One must not count money by the Hanukkah light. God of Abraham! exclaimed R. Joseph, he makes that which was taught dependent upon what was not taught: [of] booths it was taught,

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

whereas of Hanukkah it was not. For it was taught: if one roofs it [the booth] in accordance with its requirements, beautifies it with hangings and sheets, and suspends therein nuts, peaches, almonds, pomegranates, grape clusters, garlands of ears of corn, wines, oils and flours; he may not use them until the conclusion of the last day of the Feast; yet if he stipulates concerning them, it is all according to his stipulation.— Rather, said R. Joseph: The basis of all is [the law relating to] blood.

It was stated: Rab said: One must not light from lamp to lamp; but Samuel maintained, You may light from lamp to lamp. Rab said: Fringes may not be detached from one garment for [insertion in] another, but Samuel ruled, Fringes may be detached from garment to garment. Rab said, The halachah is not as R. Simeon in respect to dragging; but Samuel maintained, The halachah is as R. Simeon in respect to dragging. Abaye said: In all matters the Master [Rabbah] acted in accordance with Rab, except in these three, where he did as Samuel: [viz.,] one may light from lamp to lamp; one can detach [the fringes] from one garment for [insertion in] another; and the halachah is as R. Simeon in respect to dragging. For it was taught: R. Simeon said: One may drag a bed, seat, or bench, provided that he does not intend to make a rut.

One of the Rabbis sat before R. Adda b. Ahabah and sat and said: Rab's reason is on account of the cheapening of the precept. Said he to them, Do not heed him: Rab's reason is because he impairs the precept. Wherein do they differ?-They differ where he lights from lamp to lamp: on the view that it is because of the cheapening of the precept, one may light from lamp to lamp; but on the view that it is because he impairs the precept, even from lamp to lamp is forbidden.

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

### **MEDIEVAL—from Maoz Tzur, composed ~12<sup>th</sup> century Germany**

מְעוֹז צוֹר יְשׁוּעָתִי לְךָ נִאֶה לְשַׁבַּח, תִּכְוֶן בֵּית תְּפִלָּתִי וְשֵׁם תּוֹדָה נִזְבַּח,  
לַעֲת תִּכְוֶן מִטְבַּח מִצָּר הַמְּנַבַּח, אֲזִ אֶגְמַר בְּשִׁיר מִזְמוֹר חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ.

רְעוֹת שְׁבַעַה נְפְשֵׁי בְּגוֹן כַּחֵי כְּלָה, חֲנִי מְרַרוּ בְּקִשֵׁי בְּשַׁעְבוֹד מַלְכוּת עֲגָלָה,  
וּבְיָדוֹ הַגְּדוֹלָה הוֹצִיא אֶת הַסָּגְלָה, חֵיל פְּרָעָה וְכָל זָרְעוֹ יָרְדוּ כְּאֶבֶן מִצוֹלָה.

...

יִנְגִּים נִקְבְּצוּ עֲלֵי־אֲזִי בִימֵי חֲשָׁמְנִים, וּפְרָצוּ חוֹמוֹת מְגִדְלֵי וְטַמְאוּ כָּל הַשְּׁמַנִּים,  
וּמְנוֹתָר קִנְקְנִים נִנְעָשָׂה נֶס לְשׁוֹשָׁנִים, בְּנִי בִינָה יְמֵי שְׁמוֹנָה קָבְעוּ שִׁיר וּרְנָנִים.

חֲשׁוֹף זָרוּעַ קְדָשְׁךָ וְקָרֵב קֶחַ הַיְשׁוּעָה, נִקֵּם נִקְמַת דָּם עֲבֹדֵיךָ מֵאֵמָה הַרְשָׁעָה,  
כִּי אֶרְכָּה לָנוּ הַיְשׁוּעָה, וְאִין קֶחַ לִימֵי הַרְעָה, דַּחַה אֲדַמּוֹן בְּצֵל צִלְמוֹן הָקֵם לָנוּ רוּעִים שְׁבַעַה

O mighty stronghold of my salvation, to praise You is a delight.

Restore my house of prayer, and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.

When You will have prepared the slaughter, for the blaspheming foe,

Then I shall complete with a song of hymn, the rededication (Hanukah) of the altar.

My soul had been sated with troubles, my strength has been consumed with grief.

They had embittered my life with hardship, with the calf-like kingdom's bondage.

But with His great power, He brought forth the treasured ones,

Pharaoh's army and all his offspring, Went down like a stone into the deep.

...

Greeks gathered against me then in Hasmonean days.

They breached the walls of my towers and they defiled all the oils;

And from the one remnant of the flasks a miracle was wrought for the roses.

Men of insight - eight days established for song and jubilation

Bare Your holy arm and hasten the End for salvation -

Avenge the vengeance of Your servants' blood from the wicked nation.

For the triumph is too long delayed for us, and there is no end to days of evil,

Repel the Red One in the nethermost shadow and establish for us the seven shepherds.

## The “real” story of Hanukah? A Civilizational Approach

*After you read each excerpt, consider: If you only read this text, and no others, what would you say that Hanukkah is all about?*

### **MODERN—Mi Yemalel, written early 20<sup>th</sup> century Israel by Menashe Ravina**

Who would tell the mighty deeds of Israel?

Who would count them?

Here, in each generation, a warrior stands up who redeems the people.

Listen!

In these days, in this season, a Maccabee saved and rescued,

And in our days all the nation of Israel will unite, arise, and redeem themselves.

למי ימל גבורות ישראל  
אותן מי ימנה  
הן בכל דור יקום הגיבור  
גואל העם

שמע  
בימים ההם בזמן הזה  
מכבי מושיע ופודה  
ובימינו כל עם ישראל  
ליתאחד, יקום ויגא

### **CONTEMPORARY—From the San Francisco Jewish paper, 2002, by Jane Ulman**

Don't tell me that Chanukah is a minor holiday. Not when, according to the Greeting Card Association, Americans will purchase 8 million Chanukah cards...And not when, according to the U.S. Postal Service, Americans will use 35 million "Hanukkah" stamps to mail their cards, letters and even bills.

The rabbis tell us that...lavish gift-giving at Chanukah is a post-World War II capitulation to Christmas and to our materialistic culture.

From an evolutionary perspective, Jewish holidays take on greater or lesser significance. More than 2,000 years ago, Jews made pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem to sacrifice animals on Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot. Now Yom Kippur, Chanukah and Passover are pre-eminent for most American Jews.

To American Jews, and to society at large, Chanukah sends a major message: the right to live freely as Jews despite the pressures to assimilate. Instead of bemoaning the fact that more than 50 percent of American Jews intermarry and even fewer are affiliated with a synagogue, let's look at the fact that 60 percent of American Jews light Chanukah candles. "What matters to the Jews we interviewed, rather," write [Brown and Eisen], "are powerful memories and experiences."

So let's create those powerful memories and experiences. And Chanukah, celebrated by more American Jews than any holiday except Passover, is a good place to start. Because at the end of the eight days, Chanukah, whatever its status religiously, is about building memories -- festive, familial and authentically Jewish.