

Channukah: **Festival of Dedication or Pagan Fire Festival?**

The modern holiday of Channukah is celebrated for eight days beginning of the 25th of the Ninth Month (Kislev). The main ritual of Channukah is the lighting of an 8-branched candelabrum which in Hebrew is called a *Chanukkiyah* or *Channukah Menorah* (Channukah Candelabrum). One candle is lit for each day of the festival and one for each day that has elapsed. So on the first day a single candle is lit, on the second day two candles, etc. until eight candles are lit on the eighth day. Some Channukah Menorah's have a ninth candle which is used to light the other eight. Until recently the *Channukah Menorah* consisted of 8 oil lamps instead of eight candles and many Jews still follow the former practice.¹ The 8-branched *Channukah Menorah* differs from the 6-branched *Menorah* (candelabrum) used in the Tabernacle and Temple.² According to Rabbinic legend, the eight candles of the Channukah Menorah represent a miracle that occurred during the dedication of the altar in 165 BCE. In that year an army of Jews led by Judah the Maccabee liberated the Jerusalem Temple from the Seleucid Greeks who had filled it with idolatry. The Rabbinic legend relates that the Maccabees searched the Temple for pure oil with which to light the candelabrum but only found a single vial that remained undefiled by the pagans. By a great miracle this single vial of oil lasted for eight days, giving the Maccabees enough time to produce new vials of pure oil. The Rabbis explain that the 8-branched *Channukah Menorah* represents the eight days of miraculous light in the time of the Maccabees.

To commemorate the miracle of the magical oil, the *Channukah Menorah* is lit along with the blessing, "Blessed art thou Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to light Channukah candles". Of course, God never commanded us to light Channukah candles. The addition of this commandment by the Rabbis is in direct violation of the Torah which commands us, "You shall not add to the law which I command you, not shall you diminish from it"

¹ See *Kitsur Shulchan Aruch* 139:4 which says that it is best to use olive oil for the *Channukah Menorah*.

² Ex 25:37.

(Dt 4:2). Similarly, we read "All that I command you you shall diligently do; you shall not add to it nor diminish from it" (Dt 13:1). In Prov 30:6 we are taught "Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you and you be found a liar". To light the Channukah candles and bless God for commanding us to do so is adding to the Torah and lying in the name of God. But this is not the only lie. The historical Channukah celebrated 2200 years ago by the Maccabees themselves had nothing to do with the alleged miracle of the candelabrum. In order to sort out fact from fiction we must consider the historical events surrounding Channukah and the origin of the practice of lighting Channukah lamps.

Historical Background

The historical Channukah was a victory of the Jews over the Seleucid Greeks. But who are these Seleucid Greeks and what were the Greeks doing in the Land of Israel? The story begins with Alexander the Macedonian whom history has erroneously dubbed Alexander the Great. In the year 332 BCE Alexander swept through the Middle East with an army of Greek barbarians. By the time Alexander died in 323 BCE, he had conquered the entire region from India to Egypt. Upon Alexander's death, his empire was divided into a number of smaller empires by his greedy generals. In 312 BCE Seleucus I, one of Alexander's generals, established the Seleucid Empire in Syria. The main rival of the Seleucid Empire was the Ptolemaic Empire established in Egypt by another of Alexander's generals Ptolemy I. The Land of Israel, which lay between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires, switched hands numerous times as the two empires fought one another. In the year 200 BCE the Seleucids finally captured the Land of Israel and the Ptolemies were unsuccessful and taking it back.

The Maccabean Revolt

The historical events that culminated in Channukah are told in great detail in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. 1-2 Maccabees are reliable histories written within a few decades after the events and based on eyewitness accounts. 1-2 Maccabees are actually parallel accounts by two different authors who describe many of the same events. The story of Channukah itself begins in 168 BCE when the Land of Israel was ruled by the evil Seleucid Greek king Antiochus IV. The Seleucids empire

included a great variety of nations each with their own culture and religion. Antiochus IV believed that his empire would be more secure if all his subjects became more Greek. So in 168 BCE Antiochus IV issued a decree requiring all his subjects worship only the Greek gods and adopt the Greek culture. This policy was known as *Hellenization* (=to make Greek) and it was readily accepted by most of the citizens of the Seleucid Empire who had been convinced by decades of propaganda that the Greek way of life was more "advanced" and "cultured". However, the Jews naturally resisted the worship of false gods. To force Hellenization upon the Jews Antiochus IV enacted a series of laws designed to suppress Torah observance:

"(44) And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, (45) to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and feasts, (46) to defile the sanctuary and the priests, (47) to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, (48) and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, (49) so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances. (50) And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die." (1 Mac 1:44-50)

The king's laws were instituted in a number of ways. The first thing they did was to capture the Temple and sacrifice pigs to Zeus on the holy altar. At the same time they required every Jewish household to set up an altar to the sun-god at the main entrance of their home. Then the Seleucid authorities set up public altars in every town in Judaea and forced the community leaders to eat the pig-sacrifices to Zeus before their fellow Jews. Many Jews gladly accepted Hellenization and these became known as the "Hellenized Jews". But most Jews preferred martyrdom over eating the pagan sacrifices. When the Seleucids arrived in Modi'in, a small town in the hills of Samaria, they tried to force a local priest by the name of Matityahu the Hasmoneans (Matthias; Hebrew מַתִּיתָיָהוּ = "YHWH's gift") to eat of the pig-sacrifice. Matthias, the Hasmoneans and his sons ascended the podium in the public square but rather than eat of the pig-sacrifice they turned on the Seleucid authorities, killing them in front of all the local townsmen. Matthias and his sons immediately became outlaws and fled to the mountains where they joined the growing Jewish resistance against the Seleucid persecutions. Matthias' son Judah became a leader of the struggle against the Seleucids and he was such a fierce warrior that he was dubbed "Judah the Hammer",

in Hebrew "Maccet".³ Judah the Maccet is better known today by the Greek form of his name Judah the Maccabee (Ιουδας ο Μακκαβαίος).

After 3 years of fierce fighting, Judah the Maccabee and his army finally defeated the Seleucid Greeks and liberated Jerusalem. They cleansed the Temple of pagan artifacts and re-dedicated the altar which had been used to sacrifice pigs to Zeus. The liberation of Jerusalem and the re-dedication of the altar is described in great detail in the 4th chapter of 1 Maccabees. When the Maccabees first liberated Mt. Zion, they were horrified to find it desecrated:

"(37) ...all the army assembled and they went up to Mount Zion. (38) And they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins. (39) Then they rent their clothes, and mourned with great lamentation, and sprinkled themselves with ashes." (1 Mac 4:37-39)

After fasting and mourning over the defilement of the Temple, the Maccabees proceeded to tear down the altar which had been used to sacrifice pigs to Zeus:

(43) and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place. (44) They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. (45) And they thought it best to tear it down, lest it bring reproach upon them, for the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar, (46) and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them. (47) Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. (1 Mac 4:43-47)

The Maccabees were unsure as to what to do with the altar which was holy yet defiled. So to solve this dilemma the Maccabees tore down the desecrated altar but stored the stones in the Temple until a prophet could tell them what had to be done with the stones.

After building a new altar in accordance with Ex 20:24-26, the Maccabees cleansed the Temple and replaced the Temple vessels which had been stolen by the Greeks.⁴

³ "מקבת", Jastrow p.829.

(48) They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts. (49) They made new holy vessels, and brought the lamp stand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. (50) Then they burned incense on the altar and lighted the lamps on the lamp stand, and these gave light in the temple. (51) They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken. (1 Mac 4:48-51)

2 Maccabees similarly describes the restoration of the Temple:

(3) They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices, after a lapse of two years, and they burned incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence. (2 Maccabees 10:3)

After fixing up the Temple and replacing the vessels it was time to dedicate the new altar and re-establish the daily sacrifice which had not been offered during the three years which the Greeks controlled the Temple. The re-dedication was celebrated on the 25th of Kislev which marked the third anniversary of the original desecration of the Temple by the Greeks:

(52) Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, (53) they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built. (56) So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and offered burnt offerings with gladness; they offered a sacrifice of deliverance and praise... (59) Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev.

Similarly we read in 2 Maccabees:

(5) It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Chislev. (6) And they celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing... (8) They decreed by public

⁴ That the other Temple vessels were stolen is described in 1 Mac 1:20-24; 2 Mac 5:21.

ordinance and vote that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year." (2 Maccabees 10:5-8)

When we read the descriptions in 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees of the first Channukah the thing which is most noticeable by its absence is the miracle of the magical oil and the 8-days of free light. 1 Macs 4:50 and 2 Mac 10:3 do mention that the candelabrum in the Temple was lit, but they also mentions that the sacrifices were offered and the showbread placed on the table. Yet there is no mention of the miracle of the magical oil. This is all the more surprising when we consider that 1 Maccabees describe events in great detail. Yet 1-2 Maccabees do not contain a single reference to the main miracle of Channukah, the miracle of the single vial of oil that lasted for eight days. Why would 1-2 Maccabees, both written shortly after the historical events themselves, dedicate two entire books to the festival of Channukah, yet remain silent on the miracle which was supposedly the reason for the festival? This silence raises the question of whether this miracle ever took place.

The Original Meaning of Channukah

If the reason for Channukah is not the miracle of the magical oil, then what is it? 1 Maccabees explains that the reason for the celebration by Judah the Maccabee and his men was the "dedication of the altar". But what does the "dedication of the altar" have to do with Channukah? The word Channukah actually means "dedication" (deriving from the root חָנַךְ = "to dedicate"). The full name of the festival is *Chanukat Ha-Mizbeach* חַנּוּכַת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ meaning "dedication of the altar"! So the original Channukah had nothing to do with the alleged miracle of the candelabrum and the magical oil. Instead it was a celebration over the *Dedication of the Altar*, since the Maccabees built a new altar to replace the old one which had been desecrated by pagan sacrifice. This is exactly what 1 Maccabees says,

"(56) So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days... (59) Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days".

From 1 Maccabees it is clear that the historical festival of Channukah had nothing to do with the alleged miracle of the magical oil. The celebration was a *Channukat*

Hamizbeach, a "Dedication of the Altar". What is still unclear from 1 Maccabees is why the *dedication* celebration lasted for 8 days. The dedication of the original altar in the time of Moses is also called a *Channukat Hamizbeach* "dedication of the altar". The dedication of the altar of the Tabernacle lasted for 12 days, as we read in Nu 7:11 "And YHWH said to Moses, one prince each day shall offer their sacrifice as the dedication of the altar (לְחִנּוּךְ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ)". Since there were 12 princes, one for each tribe, the dedication lasted 12 days (Nu 7:84).

The dedication of the altar of the First Temple lasted 7 days, as we read in 2Chr 7:9-10, "And they observed an assembly on the eighth day, for they had performed a dedication of the altar for seven days and the pilgrimage-feast for seven days. (10) And on the twenty-third day of the Seventh Month he (Solomon) sent the people to their tents..." (see also 1Ki 8:65-66). So Solomon dedicated the altar from the 8th-14th of the Seventh Month. After the "dedication of the altar" they observed the pilgrimage-feast of Sukkot from the 15th-21st and the Eighth of Assembly on the 22nd.

When Zerubabel led the exiles back from Babylonia they rebuilt the altar as described in Ezra 3:2-4:

(2) And Yeshua the son of Yotzadak and his brethren the priests and Zerubabel the son of She'altiel and his brethren arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer upon it whole-burnt offerings as written in the Torah of Moses the man of God. (3) And they set up the altar on its foundations[, but did not rebuild the Temple], for the terror of the inhabitants of the land was upon them, and they offered whole burnt offerings to YHWH, whole-burnt offerings for the morning and evening. (4) And they performed the Feast of Sukkot as it is written..."

We see that Yeshua and Zerubavel only set up the altar but were afraid to complete the rebuilding of the Temple itself because of the threat of the surrounding nations. So in the time of Zerubavel, Mt. Zion had an altar upon it without a temple! Perhaps this is the reason that the altar is described as being "set up" rather than "dedicated". The actual dedication occurred in the 3rd year of Darius on the 3rd day of the 12th Month after the Second Temple itself was finally completed (Ezra 6:16-18). Because the altar had been set up years before, the dedication of the Second Temple is

described [in Aramaic] as חֲנֻכַּת בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים a "Dedication of the House of God" (Ezra 6:17; cf. Ps 30:1) and not a dedication of the altar. 2 Maccabees cites the dedications of Moses and Solomon as precedents for its own Channukah celebration (2 Mac 2:8-9) as well as the celebrations of Nehemiah when he dedicated the wall of Jerusalem (Neh 12:27).

From the four dedications described in the Tanach we can see that the dedication of altar/ Temple is not always according to a set number of days or at a set time. Moses dedicated his altar for 12 days, Solomon for 7 days, and in Second Temple times the altar or Temple were dedicated for an undetermined number of days. We also see that the exact season of dedication varies. Solomon and Zerubabel dedicated/set up their altars around Sukkot time, but the Temple in the time of Darius was dedicated on the 3rd day of the 12th month and in the time of Moses the date of dedication is not given. The Maccabees celebrated their dedication on the 25th of Kislev because this was the third anniversary of the original desecration of the Temple, as described in 1 Maccabees:

(52) Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, (53) they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built. (54) At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. (1 Maccabees 4:52-54)

Similarly we are informed in 2 Maccabees.

(5) It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Chislev. (2 Maccabees 10:5)

Hannukah as Sukkot Sheni (Second Booths)

It is clear why the Maccabees celebrated their dedication on the 25th of Kislev, but why did they celebrate it for 8 days? Was this somehow related to the alleged miracle of the magical oil? It was not! 2 Maccabees explains the reason for the eight days of celebration:

And they celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. (2 Mac 10:6)

So according to 2 Maccabees the eight days of Channukah were intended to make up for the Feast of Booths which the Maccabees had been unable to observe while they were rebels in the mountains. Channukah was essentially a *Sukkot Sheni* (*Second Booths*). The idea of a *Sukkot Sheni* comes from the biblical precedent regarding Passover. In Nu 9 we are taught that if a person is unable to bring the Passover sacrifice in the 1st Month during Feast of Unleavened Bread than he must bring it one month later on the 14th of the 2nd Month in the evening. Essentially this is a "make-up" Passover for those who missed the first one! In post-Biblical writings this make-up Passover is called *Pesach Sheni* פֶּסַח שֵׁנִי (Second Passover). The Maccabees had missed the Sukkot pilgrimage while they were fugitives in the mountains. So they celebrated a *Sukkot Sheni* on 25th Kislev and combined it with a *dedication of the altar* celebration. Perhaps the fact that Solomon and Zerubabel dedicated their altars around Sukkot time also suggested to the Maccabees that Sukkot was the appropriate festival to associate with dedication. Channukah was so much identified as a *Sukkot Sheni* that 2 Mac 1:9 even refers to it as "the feast of booths in the month of Chislev"! In 2 Mac 1:18 the Jews of the Land of Israel write to their brethren in Egypt:

"Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislev we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the feast of booths"

Again, Channukah is referred to as "the feast of booths" in the month of Chislev, that is, *Sukkot Sheni*! So the eight days of Channukah had nothing to do with magical oil in the candelabrum or eight days of free fire. It was simply the first opportunity the Maccabees had to make their pilgrimage to the Temple and celebrate Sukkot for eight days. Even in the following years when they were able to celebrate Sukkot in its proper time, they continued to celebrate Channukah which they called "Sukkot in the month of Kislev".

We must question whether the Maccabees were justified in establishing a Second Sukkot. After all, Pesach Sheni is established by the Torah but nothing is said about Sukkot. In 1Ki 12:32-33 Jeroboam I is criticized for observing his own *Sukkot Sheni*

in the 8th month. Jeroboam's 8th-month-Sukkot was closer to the Torah precedent of Pesach Sheni which is exactly one month after the first Passover. Yet this is still reckoned as one of the great "sins of Jeroboam" (1Ki 15:30; 1Ki 16:31; etc.). The Maccabees celebrated their *Sukkot Sheni* two months and 10 days after the first Sukkot which has no biblical precedent. Then again this was their first opportunity to celebrate the pilgrimage-feast in the Temple which had been under Greek control during the original Sukkot. Whether justified or not it is clear that the Maccabees observed Channukah for 8 days because of the 8-days of Sukkot which they had missed while Jerusalem was in foreign control.

Sukkot: Seven or Eight Days

One of the questions surrounding Sukkot is whether it is 7 days or 8 days. We read in Lev 23:34, "... on the fifteenth day of this seventh month is a feast of booths for seven days to YHWH" and then v.42 says "Seven days you shall dwell in booths". So clearly Sukkot itself has 7 days. However, the same passage refers to an eighth day which is a day of assembly on which work is forbidden, as we read, "The eighth day shall be for you a holy convocation... it is an assembly to YHWH, no manner of work shall you do" (Lev 23:36) and again "The first day is a rest-time and the seventh day is a rest-time" (Lev 23:39). So we see that Sukkot itself has seven days, but there is also an eighth day which is a holy day of assembly but not strictly speaking part of Sukkot and the dwelling of the booths only applies to the first seven days (see above). This 8th day is often referred to as "Eighth of Assembly" or in Hebrew *Shemini Atseret* שְׁמִינִי עֶצְרֶת (based on Nu 29:35). When the Maccabees decided to observe an eight day festival in lieu of Sukkot they must have struggled with the question of whether to do it as 7 days or 8 days. In the end they chose to observe 8 days and they cited the example of King Solomon in 2Chr 7:9. As already mentioned, this passage describes the dedication of the altar of the First Temple. Solomon's celebration was fifteen days long: seven days of dedication, seven days of Sukkot, and an eighth day of assembly. Apparently the reference in 2Chr 7:9 of "the Eighth day as an Assembly" was to the Maccabees support for an 8-day *Sukkot Sheni* celebration and this is the reason they gave to their brethren in Egypt for an 8-day *Sukkot Sheni*: "Likewise Solomon also kept the eight days" (2 Mac 2:12).

The Feast of Fire and the Magical Nephtha-Oil

We have seen that Channukah was both a celebration of the "dedication of the altar" and a *Sukkot Sheni*. 2 Maccabees gives a third reason for Channukah which is something called "Feast of the Fire".

(18) Since on the twenty-fifth day of Chislew we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the feast of booths and the feast of the fire (του πυρος) given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices.

The "Feast of the Fire" is not mentioned anywhere in the Tanach. 2 Maccabees itself explains that the Feast of the Fire is based on the biblical descriptions of fire descending from heaven and consuming sacrifices.⁵ This heavenly fire was a sign that YHWH accepted the sacrifice. The first time this is mentioned is in Lev 9:24 which describes the sacrifices offered up on the altar as part of the ceremony of the consecration of the priests:

"And fire came forth from before YHWH and consumed upon the altar the whole burnt-offering and the chelev-fats, and the whole nation saw it, and sang, and fell upon their faces." (Lev 9:24)

The heavenly fire is also described as consuming the offering of David (1Chr 21:26). When Solomon dedicated the altar of the First Temple the offerings were also consumed by the heavenly fire:

"And when Solomon finished praying, the fire came down from heaven and consumed the whole-burnt offering and the meat-offerings" (2Chr 7:1)

When Elijah faced the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel he challenged them to call upon their false god to send a fire to consume their sacrifice:

"... let them not place fire... and I will not place fire. (24) And you shall call in the name of your god and I will call in the name of YHWH. It shall be that the god who answers with fire is truly God..." (1Ki 18:23-24)

The great miracle of the fire and accompanying celebrations in the time of Moses and Solomon is cited explicitly by 2 Maccabees as a precedent for the "Feast of the Fire" (2 Mac 2:10). Yet no mention is made of the heavenly fire in relation to Nehemiah's dedicatory celebration. However, 2 Maccabees refers to a miracle of fire which was

⁵ 2 Maccabees 2:10

believed to have taken place when Nehemiah dedicated the altar. This miracle is explained in 2 Maccabees:

(19) For when our fathers were being led captive to Persia, the pious priests of that time took some of the fire of the altar and secretly hid it in the hollow of a dry cistern, where they took such precautions that the place was unknown to any one. (20) But after many years had passed, when it pleased God, Nehemiah, having been commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to get it. And when they reported to us that they had not found fire but thick liquid, he ordered them to dip it out and bring it. (21) And when the materials for the sacrifices were presented, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid on the wood and what was laid upon it. (22) When this was done and some time had passed and the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled... (31) And when the materials of the sacrifice were consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured upon large stones. (32) When this was done, a flame blazed up; but when the light from the altar shone back, it went out... (36) Nehemiah and his associates called this "nephthar," which means purification, but by most people it is called *Naphtha*. (2 Maccabees 1:19-22, 31-32, 36)

Of course, the magical black liquid supposedly discovered by Nehemiah's men was some combustible substance such as tar or oil. They even identify this liquid as the Aramaic *naphtha* or *nephta* נִפְתָּא meaning "oil".⁶ The fact that the book of Ezra-Nehemiah makes no mention of the supposed miracle of the magical *Naphtha*-oil makes the veracity of this legend doubtful. Even if the legend of Nehemiah's magical oil is not authentic, the Maccabees certainly believed it. To the Maccabees the fact that they were unable to celebrate the "feast of fire" commemorating Nehemiah's alleged miracle while they were rebels in the mountains was another reason to celebrate Channukah to make up for this missed festival. At the same time, the Maccabees were not presumptuous enough to invent a fire-miracle of their own. On the contrary, when 2 Maccabees describes the dedication of the altar by Judah the Maccabee it emphasizes:

⁶ Jastrow p.923. *Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath* 26a remarks, "One must not light a lamp with white *Naphtha* on weekdays, and all the more so on the Sabbath. As for white *Naphtha*, that is well, the reason is because it is volatile. "

"They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices" (2 Mac 10:3)

So Judah the Maccabee's fire was made the old fashioned way, out of striking stones together, and not from a heavenly fire or from miraculous Nephta-oil. But the miracle that supposedly occurred when Nehemiah dedicated the altar was an extra reason why the Maccabees dedication of the altar should be celebrated.

We have seen that in 1 Maccabees Channukah is, as its name implies, a "dedication of the altar" celebration. The miracle was the Maccabean victory over the mighty Seleucid army and the liberation of the desecrated Temple. 2 Maccabees adds two more elements to Channukah. According to 2 Maccabees Channukah not only celebrates the "Dedication of the Altar" in the time of Judah the Maccabee but it also commemorates the dedication of previous altars which were associated with Sukkot in the time of Solomon and Zerubabel and with the mythical "Feast of the Fire" in the time of Nehemiah. In general, it appears that 1 Maccabees emphasizes the miracle of the military victory while 2 Maccabees emphasizes the religious aspects of the miracle and the dedication.

There are two important points we can glean from 1-2 Maccabees. The first is that although these books describe the events surrounding the historical Channukah in great detail, they make no mention whatsoever of the miracle of the magical oil which supposedly burned for eight days in the candelabrum. In fact, their utter silence on the matter proves that this miracle was still unknown when 1-2 Maccabees were written in the late 2nd century BCE. At the same time, 2 Maccabees records the elements which would later be transformed into the supposed miracle. It mentions magical oil, although the miracle of the magical oil of 2 Maccabees is that it spontaneously combusted on the altar, not that it burned for eight days in the candelabrum.

Channukah in Megillat Ta'anit

Clearly the historical Channukah had nothing to do with the alleged miracle of the eight days of fire in the candelabrum. But at what point was this miracle invented and associated with Channukah. One of the most important sources for learning about Second Temple festivals is a document written in the 1st century CE called Megilat

Ta'anit or "The Scroll of Fasts". *Megillat Ta'anit* is in fact the oldest preserved Pharisaic document and the only complete Pharisaic book to have survived from Second Temple times. *Megillat Ta'anit* goes through the year, month by month, listing a total of 35 holidays of national celebration on which fasting or mourning was forbidden by the Rabbis. Channukah is mentioned as one of these days of celebration:

These are the days on which is is forbidden to fast and on some of them it is forbidden to mourn... On the third of Kislev the insignias were removed from the Temple [therefore it is forbidden to fast]... on the twenty-fifth thereof the day of the eight-day dedication on which it is forbidden to mourn.

So in *Megillat Ta'anit*, a 1st Century CE Pharisaic document, no mention is made of the miracle of the magical oil in the candelabrum. Channukah is simply a celebration of the "eight-day dedication".⁷

Channukah in Josephus

Another 1st Century Pharisaic author was Josephus Flavius, the Jewish general who defected to the Roman camp during the Jewish uprising in 66-73 CE. Josephus writes in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*:

(7) Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights (φωτα). I suppose the reason was,

⁷ It is worth noting that another 1st century CE document, John 10:22, relates as follows: "(22) And it was at Jerusalem the dedication (εγκαίνια), and it was winter". The Greek word *εγκαίνια* means "dedication" and is simply a literal translation of the Hebrew word Channukah. The same word is used in the Septuagint translation of Ezra 6:16-17 [Aramaic] *הַנְּכִיחַ בַּיַּת אֱלֹהֵי* "Dedication of the House of God" *εγκαίνια του ικου του θεου* (literally: "dedication of the house of <the> God"). The word *εγκαίνια* also translates the word Channukah in Neh 12:27 which describes the *הַנְּכִיחַ חוֹמַת יְרוּשָׁלַם* "Dedication of the wall of Jerusalem". The reference to Channukah as the *Dedication* festival in John 10:22 is consistent with the other 1st century CE evidence that Channukah was still a *dedication of the altar* festival and not yet connected to the miracle of the candelabrum.

because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival. (Antiquities 12:316-325 [7:6-7])

In Josephus's time the festival of Channukah was known as "Lights" or in Greek φωτα (*phota*). Some historians claim that Josephus's *Lights* are the candles of the Channukah Menorah. However, were this the case, we would expect Josephus to say that the reason for the festival being called "Lights" is that the Jews light lamps to commemorate the miracle of the magical oil that burned for eight days in the candelabrum. But Josephus does not say this! In fact, he admits that he is unsure why Channukah is called Lights. Josephus hypothesizes that Channukah is called *Lights phota* "because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival". This proves that when the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the practice of lighting Channukah lamps was either non-existent or not widespread enough for Josephus to have known about it.

Why was Channukah really called "lights" in the time of Josephus? Was it because there was a group somewhere lighting Channukah lamps? The problem with this explanation is that the Greek word for "Lights" *phota* (φωτα) does not mean "lamps" or "candelabrum". The word *phota* derives from the Greek word *phos* (φωτα is plural accusative of φως, φωτος pl.) which is the source of the modern word "photography" and which denotes the abstract concept of "light". *Phos/ phota* can even mean a "bonfire" (1 Mac 12:29) but not a lamp or candelabrum.⁸ The answer can be found in 2 Maccabees which uses this Greek word to describe the magical Nephtha-oil fire which burned on the altar:

"(31) And when the materials of the sacrifice were consumed, Nehemiah ordered that the liquid that was left should be poured upon large stones. (32) When this was done, a flame blazed up; but when **the light** (φωτος) from the altar shone back, it went out. " (2Mac 1:31-32)

So Festival of *Lights* is a name that commemorates the magical Nephtha-oil fires that burned on the altar and on the stones near the altar in the time of Nehemiah. It is possible that this "festival of fire" was even commemorated by bonfires (*phota*). Yet, by Josephus' time the origin of the name was forgotten so that Josephus had to guess

⁸ See also UBS Lexicon which cites examples of *phos* as bonfire in Mark 14:54 and Luke 22:56.

that it had an allegorical origin as signifying that "this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us", i.e. that the miracle happened suddenly like a flash of light.

The Miracle of the Candelabrum in the Talmud

The earliest source to tell the story of the miracle of the magical oil which burned for eight days in the candelabrum is the Babylonian Talmud tractate of *Sabbath* which relates:

"What is the reason for Hanukkah? For our rabbis taught: "*On the twenty-fifth of Kislev are the days of Hannukah, which are eight on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden*" [*Megillat Ta'anit*]. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty [i.e. the Maccabees] 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 oil 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 days were appointed a Festival with the recital of praise and thanksgiving." (**Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath 21b**)

This passage opens with a quotation from *Megillat Ta'anit* and then adds for the first time the miracle of the lone cruse of oil which burned for eight days in the candelabrum. Although the Talmud was completed in 500 CE, the above tradition about Channukah is an earlier source called a Brayta which can be dated to around 200 CE. So the first time in history that Channukah is said to have anything to do with a candelabrum is 200 CE.

We will be considering several "Brayta" sources so it is important to understand what exactly this is. A Brayta is an "early" Hebrew source quoted in the Aramaic Talmud and is usually introduced by the formula "Our Rabbis taught". A Brayta usually cites the early Rabbis called Tanaites who lived up until around the year 200 CE while the main body of the Talmud usually cites Amoraites who lived 200-500 CE. Most historians consider the Braytas to be "apocryphal Mishnah", that is, Mishnah traditions which were not included in the final redaction of the Mishnah. The significance of a Brayta is that it dates to the period of the Mishnah (c.200 CE) even though it is preserved in the Talmud (c.500 CE).

The actual Rabbinic practice of lighting the Channukah Menorah may be earlier than 200 CE. The Babylonian Talmud records a debate between the 1st century CE Schools of Hillel and Shammai concerning the method of lighting the Channukah lamps:

Our Rabbis taught: The precept of Hanukkah is one light for a man and his household; the zealous have one light for each member [of the household]; and the extremely zealous, — the School of Shammai maintains: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced; but the School of Hillel says: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased... (Sabbath 21b)

As we have already seen, Josephus, himself a Pharisee, was unaware that Channukah had anything to do with lighting lamps. The debate between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel confirm that during late 2nd Temple times the practice of lighting an eight-branched candelabrum was a rarity. We can see that in this period there was a practice to light a single lamp for an entire family. Some Pharisees lit one lamp for each member of the household while it was only the rare Pharisee that lit one light for each day of the festival of Channukah. Again, even this must have been so uncommon, that Josephus did not think of connecting this with the name festival of "Lights" nor did he mention this custom in his detailed excursus on Channukah.

It is worth noting that in this first century debate between the Houses of Shammai and Hillel, no reference is made to the alleged miracle of the eight days of magical oil in the candelabrum. It was only the most zealous that light eight lamps, one for each day. But the reason for lighting the eight lamps is even more revealing. The Talmud explains:

"The House of Shammai's reason [for lighting eight lamps on the first day and decreasing by one each day] is that it shall correspond to the bullocks of the Festival; while the House of Hillel's reason is that we promote in matters of sanctity but do not reduce." (Sabbath 21b)

When the Talmud says "the Festival" without specifying which festival, it means Feast of Booths or Sukkot (so also in the Tanach, e.g. 1Ki 8:65). We see that the House of Shammai still connected Channukah to Sukkot! Shammai's disciples lit eight candles on the first day and decreased one each day in commemoration of the

bullocks offered on Sukkot which also decreased by one for each day of the feast until only a single bullock was offered on the 8th day (Nu 29:12-39).⁹ So in the first century there was still some remnant of Channukah as a *Sukkot Sheni* and some lit lamps to signify the bullocks offered in the Temple on Sukkot! However, most Pharisees only lit a single lamp although the reason for this lamp is unclear.

Origin of the Channukah Lamps

Where did the practice of lighting a single lamp on Channukah come from? We can find a clue to its origin from a statement in the Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: It is incumbent to place the Hanukkah lamp by the door of one's house on the outside (**Babylonian Talmud**, Sabbath 21b)

This is another Brayta, a 2nd century CE Hebrew source quoted in the Aramaic Talmud. The Brayta makes it clear that the Rabbinic precept concerning Channukah is that one is required to place the Channukah lamp outside, next to the entrance of the house.

Some historians have suggested that the placement of the Channukah lamp is significant. In ancient times the Hellenized Jew was identified by two marks: Firstly, he participated in the processions of Dionysus and secondly he built a small altar outside the entrance to his home. These small altars come from the Greek household altar used to scare off evil spirits that the Greeks believed entered the house through the front door. These door-side altars are even mentioned in 1 Maccabees as one of the measures taken by Antiochus IV to Hellenize the Jews:

(54) Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding cities of Judah, (55) and burned incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets. (1 Mac 1:54-55)

Some historians suggest that the placement of the Channukah lamp outside the main entrance was in imitation of the door-side altars of the Hellenized Jews. In later times the Rabbis connected the Channukah lamp with the supposed miracle of the magical oil in the candelabrum. So the public placement of the Channukah lamp was understood as "publicizing the miracle". However, the concept of the lamps

⁹ However, the Sukkot bullocks began with 15 on the first day, decreased by one each day, until there

publicizing the miracle only appears in late Rabbinic source while the earlier Rabbinic sources make no mention of it.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Rabbis had an ancient law that the main aspect of the lamp was to light it outside. In fact, according to one Rabbinic tradition, if the lamp is lit inside and then taken outside it is invalid and must be extinguished and re-lit. The idea here is that the essence of the ritual is to light the Channukah lamp outside whereas the placement is incidental. Certainly if the Channukah lamp were for publicizing the miracle the placement would be the main act, not the actual lighting. However, the pagan concept of frightening off the spirits that enter the house through the main door lays emphasis on the fire offering actually being offered at the entrance.

We cannot say with certainty that the Channukah lamps derive from the door-side altars of the Hellenized Jews since after all lamps and altars are quite different from one another. All we can say is that it is possible that the placement of the Channukah lamps was influenced by the placement of the door-side altars. But the Channukah lamps themselves probably originate from a different source. The Romans celebrated a holiday called *Saturnalia* which was celebrated on the eight days preceding the winter solstice. One of the main rituals of *Saturnalia* was lighting candles. Many pagan societies had a similar practice and would light lamps, candles, or bonfires around the time of the winter solstice. The idea behind lighting the candles or other fires was that the sun was "dying" and the fire was believed to "help" the sun. The reason these pagans thought the sun was dying was because in winter daylight gets increasingly shorter each day until the winter solstice which is the shortest day of the year. To a sun worshiper this appears as if the sun is dying. Lighting the fires was believed to help the sun regain its light.

Saturnalia in the Talmud

It is hard to imagine the Rabbis being influenced by a pagan festival which they despised. In the *Mishnah, Avodah Zarah* 1:3 *Saturnalia* is listed along with *Kalenda*, another solstice festival, as the "holidays of the Gentiles". The *Mishnah* then explains that it is forbidden for a Jew to participate in a solstice celebration. In light of this

were 7 bullocks on the seventh day. Then it jumped down to one single bullock on the 8th day.

¹⁰ Reference to "publicizing the miracle" only appears in the late Aramaic parts of the Talmud such as Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath 23b; 24a; Rosh Hashannah 18b.

attitude how could the Rabbis have adopted elements of sun worship from a Roman solstice festival? The Talmud provides the answer to this in the following passage which comments on the aforementioned Mishnah:

Said R. Hanan b. Raba: *Kalenda* is kept on the eight days following the winter solstice. *Saturnalia* on the eight days preceding the winter solstice. (*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a*)

So the Talmud starts out by simply explaining when *Saturnalia* is observed. Then the talmud cites a Brayta, a 2nd century Hebrew source:

Our Rabbis taught: When Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, ‘Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!’ So he began keeping an eight days’ fast [=*Saturnalia*]. But as he observed the winter solstice and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, ‘This is the world's course’, and he set forth to keep an eight days’ festivity [=*Kalenda*]. In the following year he appointed both [*Saturnalia* and *Kalenda*] as festivals. Now, he fixed them for the sake of Heaven, but the heathens appointed them for the sake of idolatry. (*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a*)

So according to the Rabbis *Saturnalia* was invented by Adam during the first year of his existence and he observed this festival out of fear of the Almighty. But later the pagans came along and "stole" *Saturnalia* and used it to worship their pagan gods. We see that the Rabbis believed that *Saturnalia* was originally a Jewish holiday and even in its pagan form preserved some of the original characteristics of that holiday. The only thing the Rabbis disagreed with the pagans about was their idolatrous intentions, not their actual observance of the feast. So it would not be too surprising for them to be receptive to certain aspects of this pagan feast such as the lighting of lamps.

It is possible that the adoption of the lighting of lamps was far less deliberate. Both Channukah and *Saturnalia* were 8-day feasts held around the time of the winter solstice. It would not be surprising for aspects of one feast to influence the other. A modern example of this is Channukah in the United States. When Jews came to America in the early 20th century they were inundated with the Christmas atmosphere

created by the American toy industry. Most Jews prided themselves in their resistance of Christmas but at the same time they began a custom of exchanging gifts on Channukah, something which was unheard of only 150 years ago! In a sense, the gift giving was adopted to compete with Christmas, that is, to satisfy the children jealous of their idolatrous neighbors. But over time this was forgotten and today Channukah is known among American Jews as a festival of gift giving. There have even been recent attempts to find the ancient source of Channukah gift giving! We can imagine that a similar thing might of happened in early Pharisaic times. It was known that Channukah was a festival of "Lights" although the origin of this name was long since forgotten. There was even a memory of miraculous oil (Nephtha) but the exact miracle was also forgotten. At the same time the Roman conquerors celebrated *Saturnalia* at about the same time and marked this occasion by 8-days of lighting candles. The non-Romans also celebrated this seasons with lamps and bonfires. The Rabbis were convinced that this was a universal holiday beginning with Adam. It is easy to understand how this resulted in the lighting of Channukah lamps. At first this was a single lamp as part of the seasonal festivities. Some Rabbis associated this fire with the Sukkot bullocks while others considered it a holy fire. Later, when the Temple was destroyed Channukah became less relevant as a "dedication of the altar" festival and the ritual of lighting the lamps became the central aspect of the holiday. Sometime between the destruction of the Second Temple and 200 CE the story of the magical oil burning for 8 days in the candelabrum was invented. And the rest, as they say, is history.