

There is Nothing Minor About Chanukah

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According to Jewish tradition, Chanukah is considered a “minor” holiday in the Jewish calendar. Chanukah is relegated to this lower holiday position because it did not originate in the Tanakh (Jewish Bible) like the holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, Pesach, Shavuot, and the holiest of all, Shabbat. Be that as it may, my friends, there is nothing minor about the holiday of Chanukah. Let us cast some light on our festival of lights.

After years of torment, persecution and forced conversion to Hellenism under the Assyrian Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, Judaism in the 2nd Century BCE was like a flickering flame - about to go out. The Temple in Jerusalem became an annex of Antiochus’ throne, with the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) appointed by the Assyrian governor. The Jews of this time tolerated numerous abhorrences to themselves, their children, their Temple, all for the sake of living like their neighbors.

Most of those faithful to Judaism, fled Jerusalem and kept Judaism alive in the countryside. In one village northwest of Jerusalem, Modi’in, lived Mattathias and his sons, descendants of priests. Rather than submit to the forced conversions of Antiochus’ troops, this family attacked the soldiers and thus began a three-year revolt against Antiochus.

The Rabbis of the Talmud taught when the Maccabees, as the Hasmoneans had become known, rededicated the Temple, they found one small crucible of oil, enough to burn for one day, which lasted eight days - a miracle. However, when one reads the Books of Maccabees, one is in for a big surprise. Brace yourselves for this — nowhere in

the Book of Maccabees is there any mention of the miracle of oil. So, why the eight-day celebration?

According to the Book of Maccabees, during the time the Temple lay desecrated and occupied by Antiochus and his troops, Jews were unable to observe Sukkot. Upon successfully defeating Antiochus’ troops and rededicating the Temple to Jewish worship, the Maccabees instituted a winter thanksgiving holiday in order to observe Sukkot and as gratitude to the God for helping them in their victory.



In the days of the Talmud, there were four different ways of observing Chanukah. For some, it was as simple as lighting only one light on each night of Chanukah. Others lit one light for every adult member of the household on each night of Chanukah. Still others lit eight lights on the first night, seven lights on the second night, six lights on the third, and so on. Finally, others lit one light on the first night, two on the second, three on the third,

and so on (sounds familiar).

The really neat thing about all this variety in observances is that there were so many different ways of observing Chanukah – and there was no fighting! The one light a night people didn’t throw stones at those who lit eight on the first night. Those that increased the candles with each night of Chanukah didn’t battle with those who lit eight and decreased by one light for each night. One gets the idea that there was great freedom and tolerance towards the various ways in which Chanukah was observed. How fitting, given that Chanukah is a holiday that celebrates religious freedom – our ancestors right to worship the Holy One according to Jewish custom and ritual!

Why the shift from a winter Sukkot to a miracle about oil? Troubled by the military implications of the story of the Maccabees, and wanting to “re-tool” Judaism to a more peaceful religion, applying the principles and processes of commentary and midrash, the Rabbis explain that the reason for the eight day celebration is because of the miracle of the small crucible of oil lasting for 8 days.

Chanukah is a holiday with major implications. Its message of freedom to worship and tolerance is all the more important today. May the lights of our Chanukiyot remind us of the miracles and sacrifices of our ancestors in order that Judaism survive. May we bring the light of Chanukah to our families and our communities, dispelling the darkness of intolerance and stubbornness that once again threatens to devour us and those we love. 🕎