

THE REAL MIRACLE OF HANUKKAH

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Hanukkah is an annual holiday celebrated for eight days beginning on the 25th day of the Hebrew month *Kislev*, which corresponds to late November or December. It is a Hebrew word meaning “dedication.” Thus this holiday is known as the Feast of Dedication.

It is also called the Festival of Lights. The central feature of the celebration is the lighting of a special menorah called a *hanukkiyah*. Each night for eight nights a new candle is lit. The daily candles are lit by another candle called the *shammash*, meaning “servant.”

Another custom at Hanukkah is a game that employs a four-sided top called a *dreidel* (pictured above). On each of the four sides is the initial Hebrew letter from the words, “*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*,” meaning “A great miracle happened there.”

What was that miracle? In order to answer that question, we must go back in history to the intertestamental period between the Old and New Testaments. The events that took place at that time were actually prophesied 400 years earlier in the book of Daniel. The 8th, 10th, 11th chapters of Daniel foretell in tremendous detail the events that would lead up to the story of Hanukkah. In chapter 8 we are given the vision of the Ram and the Goat.

And he came up to the ram that had the two horns, which I had seen standing in front of the canal, and rushed at him in his mighty wrath. And I saw him come beside the ram, and he was enraged at him; and he struck the ram and shattered his two horns, and the ram had no strength to withstand him. So he hurled him to the ground and trampled on him, and there was none to rescue the ram from his power. Then the male goat magnified himself exceedingly. But as soon as he was mighty, the large horn was broken; and in its place there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven. (Dan. 8:6-8)

This part of the prophecy was fulfilled in the 4th century B.C. when Alexander the Great conquered the civilized world and brought with him the Greek culture we know as Hellenism. Upon his death, the empire was divided into four kingdoms led by his four generals. But the influence of the Greek way of life was preserved.

The land of Judea was governed by one of these kingdoms—the Syrian Seleucids. 400 years earlier Daniel foretold what would happen next:

“And in the latter period of their rule, when the transgressors have run their course, a king will arise, insolent and skilled in intrigue. And his power will be mighty, but not by his own power, and he will destroy to an extraordinary degree and prosper and perform his will; he will destroy mighty men and the holy people. And through his shrewdness he will cause deceit to succeed by his influence; and he will magnify himself in his heart, and he will destroy many while they are at ease. He will even oppose the Prince of princes, but he will be broken without human agency.” (Dan. 8:23-25)

Daniel was describing the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes who ascended the throne in

175 B.C. Much of what we know that occurred under his reign is recorded in the historical books of the Maccabees. These books are some of the Apocryphal writings that were not considered to have divine inspiration like the rest of the Bible. But at least in the case of First Maccabees, it is considered quite reliable as a historical source. Here is what is recorded there:

One of the rulers was exceedingly wicked—Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled the divided kingdom of Syria. Antiochus went up against Israel and Jerusalem with a great army, and entered proudly into the Temple and took away the golden altar and the menorah and the table of shewbread, and the pouring vessels, and the censers of gold, and the veil, and all the golden ornaments that were before the Temple (1 Macc. 1:10,20).

In place of the biblical worship elements in the Temple in Jerusalem, he set up an altar to Zeus. Then, in an ultimate act of defiance against the worship of the God of Israel, he sacrificed a sow in the Temple as an offering to the Greek god Jupiter.

Sadly, many Jewish people, specially those in Jerusalem, accepted the changes that had been thrust upon them. They accepted the transformation of the Jewish culture to Hellenism. So Jews began using Greek names. They wore togas. Greek rationalism was taught. A gymnasium was erected in Jerusalem and the Greek games were conducted. With children now competing in Greek athletics, which were customarily performed naked, circumcision—the physical act that set Jews apart—was abandoned. The gods of the Greek pantheon were to be worshipped. The Torah was outlawed. The Seleucids put Jews who advocated Hellenism into the position of High Priest.

If you did not embrace the Hellenic culture, there was no place for you in society. For all intents and purposes, Israel's biblical culture was being replaced by hedonism, the philosophy that elevates pleasure as the desired goal in life.

But a small group of Jews who lived in the town of Modin, near Jerusalem, refused to be assimilated into the Greek culture.

But some in Israel were fully resolved and chose to die rather than to be defiled or to profane the holy covenant. And in those days arose a priest named Mattathias. When he saw the blasphemies that were committed, Mattathias answered and said with a loud voice, "Even though all the nations obey him, I and my sons will walk in the covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we should forsake the Law and the ordinances"(1 Macc. 1:62-63; 2:6,19-21).

Mattathias began a rebellion against the Seleucids in the countryside. Mattathias died early in the struggle, but his son Judah took up leadership of the rebels and conducted a campaign of guerilla warfare. He was known as the Maccabee. The meaning of the name is uncertain. It may have been derived from *makkabet*, the Hebrew word for "hammer." Or it may be from the first letters of the ancient phrase, *mi kamocha ba elim Adonai*—"who is like you among the Gods O Lord."

Eventually the Maccabees were victorious in the battle and overcame the Seleucids. When they came to the Temple in Jerusalem they set aside the defiled altar stones and built a new altar. We also know that:

They also made new holy vessels, and into the Temple they brought the menorah, and the altar of incense and the table. And on the 25th day of Kislev, they offered sacrifice according to the Law upon the new altar of burnt offerings which they had made. Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshiping and praising the God of heaven. Moreover, Judah and the whole

congregation of Israel ordained that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year over a period of eight days, from the 25th day of Kislev, with joy and gladness. (1 Macc. 4:49,52-53,55,59)

So the Temple was rededicated for worship of Adonai—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—on the 25th of *Kislev*, 165 B.C. This is the culmination of the story of Hanukkah from a historical perspective.

Three centuries later another tradition emerged. According to the rabbinical commentary *Gemara (Shabbat 21b)*, only a small amount of holy oil could be found to rekindle the golden menorah of the Temple, just enough oil to light the lamp for one day. It would take eight days for the priests to prepare more oil that would be sanctified for use in the Temple. Yet they lit the menorah anyway and it is said that the one day's supply of oil continued to glow in the darkness for those eight days. As a result, it was declared that a great miracle happened there.

Is this actually what happened? Tradition says so. First Maccabees. does tell us that they lit the menorah, knowing how long it would take to prepare more oil. And in 2 Maccabees 10:6-8 we are told that they celebrated for eight days because they were unable to observe the feast of Tabernacles that year, a holiday that lasts for eight days.

But the real miracle of Hanukkah is far more important than just God demonstrating His power, like some kind of special effect. The miracle of Hanukkah is that against very great odds, when it appeared that everything was lost, the biblical faith of Israel was restored and rededicated.

The reason for God to intervene and work a miracle in the days of the Maccabees was to preserve the setting that had been prophesied for the coming of Messiah.

Without Hanukkah, there would be no preservation of the culture of Israel. Without the commitment of the Maccabees, there would be no restoration of biblical worship and opportunity to remain faithful to God's teachings as given in the Torah. Without the dedication of the Temple, there would be no suitable place for Malachi's prophecy to be fulfilled:

“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 3:1).

So thanks to Hanukkah, there was a preservation of the culture that would shape Jesus into a learned, wise man of Israel. And thanks to the commitment of the Maccabees, Torah was available and studied, and God's program of worship still functioned, so that Messiah might come and reveal their fulfillment. And thanks to the dedication of the Temple, on the 25th of Kislev in the year 165 B.C, Malachi's words came to pass about two centuries after his prophecy, when Jesus appeared in the Temple.

All of these things we recognize in keeping with the exhortation of the Maccabees to celebrate “from year to year over a period of eight days, from the 25th day of Kislev.”

What about the word Hanukkah itself? What exactly is conveyed by this Hebrew word translated as “dedication?” When we think of dedication, a number of thoughts come to mind. It can refer to acknowledging someone in a special way. Years ago, it was popular to call a radio station and ask them to play a song dedicated to a loved one. It can refer to hard work and loyalty. An obituary might read, “he was dedicated to his career” or “she was dedicated to her family.”

But acknowledging someone or persistent hard work for worthy causes is not the kind of dedication conveyed in the original Hebrew language. It refers to a new beginning and responding to it in a godly way.

Biblical dedication involves what goes in to our lives

The root of *Hanukkah* is the verb *hanak*—“to begin, initiate, inaugurate,” but it is also used in the sense of “to train or dedicate.” An example is “Train (*hanak*) up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). Or to put it another way, “Get a child started the right way and he will live the right way all of his life.” So how do we get a child started the right way? Parents have to provide the right input in the lives of their children. It’s what goes into their lives that matter. That is why the Proverb uses the word “train” in this particular context.

A derivative of *hanak* is *hek*—“palate, gums, taste.” It is where the food first enters the body. So just as the kind of food you eat will have an impact on your physical health, the things that enter your mind will have an important impact on the way you live your life. The ancient sages of Israel looked at the usage of this word in Scripture and came up with an interesting application:

“Honey from the comb is sweet to your taste” (Prov 24:13)

“How sweet are your promises [words] to my taste” (Ps 119:103)

“Then I ate it [the scroll God commanded Ezekiel to eat] and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.” (Ezek 3:3)

Teachers, at that time, applied those verses in a rather interesting fashion. Students aged six to ten attended school that was called *Beit Sefer* (house of books or writings) and they used slates that could easily be written on and erased. On the first day of school the children were shown slates that had the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, plus two Scripture verses having to do with the Tabernacle and the Torah (Lev. 1:1; Dt. 33:4) and the sentence, “The Torah will be my calling.” After the teacher read those words to the children and they repeated them back, the slates were then coated with honey and the children licked it off. By literally doing as described in the verses above, the children were taught in a memorable manner about the goodness and the nourishing nature of God's Word. And that began the process of learning Scripture, so that by the time they reached the age of ten, the children would have memorized the entire Torah.

This principle is true in a general sense. Whatever we allow to enter our thinking, especially at those critical moments when we are at some kind of starting point in our lives, will have a major influence on the person we become. So if we taste and consume intellectual and spiritual junk food, our lives will be negatively affected by that, and this is particularly true for children. The point is that the Word of God is the starting point for godly living.

Yeshua spoke about this issue directly. He was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 when He said: “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Mat 4:4).

This is all based on the word *hanak* that emphasizes the importance of what goes into our lives, especially at the beginning. Dedication then, in the biblical sense, means putting God first in our lives especially by integrating His Word into our thinking. And that really has nothing to do with lighting candles and spinning dreidels and the legend of the oil. The principle behind the meaning of Hanukkah is putting God and His holy written Word first.

Biblical dedication also involves what comes out of our lives

We see this manifested in the way *hanak* is used when it comes to Biblical worship.

- The Tabernacle in the wilderness was dedicated with offerings from every tribe of Israel

(Num. 7:3,10-11).

- The dedications of both the First and Second Temples were marked by sacrificial offerings (1 Kings 8:63; Ezra 6:17) and “the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16).
- At the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem the Levites came “to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres” (Neh. 12:27).
- The rededication of the Second Temple by the Maccabees was done “with joy and gladness” (1 Macc. 4:59)

So the story of Hanukkah that took place in the intertestamental period is consistent with the ways that the tabernacle and the temples were prepared to begin worshiping YHWH. The Maccabees just followed the lead of those who dedicated the place of worship in previous generations. And we can see that there were three things in common in each of these historical dedications: giving generously, worshipping genuinely, and responding joyfully.

When God fills us with His truths, we understand the importance of giving sacrificially from our own resources so that the proclamation of His message can go forth. When we understand who He is and how much He loves us, our hearts become moved to express our adoration for what He has done on our behalf. And when He changes our lives through our belief in His son Jesus and through the power of the Spirit of God, we can't help but to sing with joy and to praise Him with our words.

That is what it means to dedicate ourselves by responding back with attitudes and actions that bring glory to God. It was true for the many faithful ones of Israel, including the Maccabees. The same can be true for us.

So this year and every year when Hanukkah is celebrated, it's not enough to enjoy the customs of the holiday. It's even not enough to understand the true history of this holiday. We need to apply its message to our lives. It is a holiday that teaches us to...

- Put God first, especially by allowing His Word to enter in and guide our thinking.
- Respond outwardly with generosity, worship and joy.
- Stay faithful to God, even when there are pressures around us to conform to ungodly ways.

This, then, is what we all ultimately need to know about the wonderful holiday of Hanukkah.