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The Original Meaning of Chanukah

Why did Judah Maccabee establish the holiday? What were the religious and political factors ​that inspired the Maccabees to promote it throughout Judea and the diaspora?

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*The Story of Hannukah* (detail), by Ori Sherman 1985. Credit: Magnes Collection of Jewish Art, UC Berkeley

Chanukah has a special history. Early Jewish sources from the second century B.C.E. – 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, and the Maccabean epistles with which 2 Maccabees opens – attest to the religious sensibilities felt by those who called to celebrate it. This evidence, some of it is roughly dated to the days of Judah Maccabee, reveal that the main focus of the festival was the Temple.

It was not merely a celebration of a military victory over the Seleucids, but a religious one which put the Temple back at the center of the Jewish people, their practices and beliefs. This is borne out both by the way 1 Maccabees describes the piety of Judah and his followers in relation to the Temple and its purity as well as how 2 Maccabees emphasizes Judah’s religious piety in general. Nonetheless, the Maccabees and Hasmoneans’ later insistence that Jews in the diaspora would continue to celebrate it annually also stem from political reasons to enhance their own rule.

Historical Background of Chanukah

Shortly after Judah Maccabee defeated the Seleucid army at Beth Zur and Lysias, and the Syrian Greek army retreated from Judaea, the Maccabees entered Jerusalem. On the 25th of Kislev, 164 B.C.E., Judah purified the Temple. This was a crucial turning point in the history of the Jews in general. This began the process of Judea’s independence from the Seleucid Empire, and of the Jerusalem Temple in particular, which would grow in wealth and stature in the coming centuries.

Judah entered Jerusalem and the Temple in Kislev since this was his first opportunity to do so. A Babylonian inscription indicates that Antiochus IV Epiphanes died in Kislev 164 B.C.E., but we do not know exactly where he died, and it is impossible to ascertain when Judah heard of his death.[1] In any case, the preoccupation of Antiochus IV with the East allowed Judah to capture Jerusalem.[2]

The exact day of the festival of Chanukah was not chosen at random: it was the anniversary of the Temple’s desecration:

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 Kislev. (2 Mac 10:5 NRSV).[3]

The Sources

Our major sources for Chanukah are 1 and 2 Maccabees, written by Jews in the mid or late second century BCE. 1 Maccabees was composed in the Land of Israel, while 2 Maccabees was originally written in Cyrene (North Africa) by a man named Jason, and was shortened, most likely by an Egyptian Jew. Like most of the so-called Old Testament Apocrypha, these works were not preserved by the Jews.

The opening chapters of 2 Maccabees contain two letters that are attributed to Judah Maccabee and the assembly of Jerusalem (1:10-2:18), and to Simon, his brother, who ruled in 143-135 BCE (1:1-9). In these two epistles, the Jerusalem authorities call the Jews in Egypt to celebrate Chanukah.

1:9And now see that you keep the festival of booths in the month of Kislev, in the one hundred eighty-eighth year…1:18Since on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the festival of booths and the festival of the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices.

2:16Since, therefore, we are about to celebrate the purification, we write to you. Will you therefore please keep the days? 2:17It is God who has saved all his people, and has returned the inheritance to all, and the kingship and the priesthood and the consecration, 2:18as he promised through the law. We have hope in God that he will soon have mercy on us and will gather us from everywhere under heaven into his holy place, for he has rescued us from great evils and has purified the place.

These letters are the earliest evidence we have for Chanukah being celebrated by the Jews, and of its spread outside Judaea.

Chanukah in 1 Maccabees: The Dedication of the Altar

Chanukah was first celebrated in 164 BCE as a ritual festival in which the Temple was purified and special sacrifices were offered. The Maccabees dedicated the defiled Temple for eight days; it is therefore referred to as “the days of the dedication of the altar” (1 Macc 4:48; Hebrew, חנוכת המזבח).

Judah and his men purified the Temple, built a new altar, consecrated it, and prepared new sacred vessels; they prepared new incense, lit the lamps in the lampstand Menorah, placed the showbread on the table, and rededicated the altar with numerous sacrifices, singing, and prayer. 1 Maccabees explicitly states that the dedication of the altar lasted eight days and that Judah and his men declared that every year the eight days should be observed as a festival, beginning on the 25th day of Kislev (1 Macc 4:41-48).[4]

Chanukah in 2 Maccabees: “Sukkot” as days of Inauguration

The festival of Chanukah has several different names in 2 Maccabees. In fact, one of its names is included in the title of the book:

Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, and the *purification of the greatest temple and the rededication of the altar*(2:19).

In the two letters at the beginning of the book it is called “the Purification (of the Temple)” (1:18; 2:16).[5] Strangely, in these letters it is also called the festival of Tabernacles, namely Sukkot (NRSV: booths):

The days of (the festival of) Tabernacles of the Month of Kislev (1:9),

and

The twenty-fifth of Kislev the purification of the Temple… celebrate it as the holiday of Tabernacles and fire (1:18).

Chanukah and Sukkot

2 Macc 10:6-7 describes the link between Chanukah and Sukkot, which nevertheless is not fully clear:

Joyfully they held an eight-day celebration, after the pattern of Tabernacles, remembering how a short time before they spent the festival of Tabernacles like wild beasts, in the mountains and in the caves. Therefore, holding wreathed wands and branches bearing ripe fruit, and palm fronds, they offered songs of praise to Him Who had victoriously brought about the purification of His Place.

This explanation for naming the new festival after Sukkot seems to come after the fact, i.e., it is likely not the original reason, especially given that the body of the book is later than the epistles appended to it (which probably were written in the days of Judah and Simon). It seems that the author of 2 Macc did not have a better explanation for the strange name for the new festival. In fact, even if we would accept the author’s assertion, we are still left with the question of why the Maccabees would have celebrated the purification of the Temple as if it was Sukkot although it was already the month of Kislev, not Tishrei.

Both Tabernacles/Sukkot and the new festival later known as Chanukah last for eight days. They are relatively close chronologically – Sukkot falls two months and ten days before Chanukah. Both are also related to the days of Ordinances (*Milluʾim*), namely the days of inauguration of the Tabernacle or Temple (Exod 29; Lev 8-9).

Eight-Day Altar Dedications

Chanukah is named for “the days of the dedication of the altar” (חנוכת המזבח) which lasted eight days (1 Macc 4:56; cf. *Ant.*12.325; it is also called the festival of dedication in the New Testament, in John 10:22). The first dedication of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) in the wilderness also took eight days (Lev 8-9; cf. Exod 29:9). Although the Bible suggests that the Sanctuary’s dedication in the wilderness took place in the beginning of the month of Nissan (Exod 40:1), namely, in the spring, there were cases in history in which the actual days of *millu’im*, the inauguration of the Temple, occurred in the festival of Sukkot, or close to it, in the autumn.

Several similar ceremonies celebrating the dedication or inauguration of the Temple were held on or around Sukkot: the first Temple erected by Solomon was dedicated then (1 Kings 8:65), and the new altar which preceded the Second Temple was built in the seventh month, Tishrei, under the guidance of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jehozadak (Ezra 3:1-6).

Similarly, in Jubilees 32:2-7, Jacob celebrates Sukkot and then nominates Levi to priesthood (“filled his hands”) and likely offers additional sacrifices at Bethel which are related to this ceremony of the inauguration of Levi’s priesthood, a sort of ritual of ordination or dedication. Levi is ordained in the fourteenth of Tishrei, the date of Sukkot. It thus seems that Sukkot was the preferred time for the inauguration of a temple and for ordination ceremonies.

In any event, the varied designations for the festival reflect the fact that the Maccabees and their supporters had established a new festival, and at first were uncertain how to name it.

Judah Maccabee as a Pious Leader in 2 Maccabees

The religious aspects of celebrating of Chanukah correlate with the image of its hero, Judah Maccabees, in 2 Maccabees. Although almost half of the book describes the military conflicts between the Judah’s troops and the Seleucids, its emphasis is on the religious piety of Judah and his followers.

Judah and his first followers separated themselves from the impurity of Gentiles, eating what grew wild. Judah also made efforts to separate his people from sin. When it was discovered that certain soldiers who had been killed possessed illicit pagan idols, Judah collected two thousand drachmas from his troops in order that a sin offering (חטאת) might be sacrificed at the Temple for a remission of their sin and their future resurrection (12:42-45).

Judah prays to God before battles. Judah and his soldiers pray at the Temple altar before battle against Timothy in Idumea. They sprinkle dust on their heads and gird their loins with sackcloth, in supplication to God, falling upon the steps before the altar (2 Macc 10:25-26). At the climax of the battle against Nicanor, Judah offers a final prayer that refers to the miracle of an angel killing Sennacherib’s troops (Isa 37:33-38), asking for an angel to similarly chase away the enemies (2 Macc 15:21-24).

In fighting against Gorgias in Idumea, he cries and recites a hymn (12:37), and when the young Antiochus V began with new decrees against the Jews, Judah initiates a public prayer or supplication before God for several days, including weeping and fasting and lying prostrate, for three days (13:10-12).

Judah encourages his soldiers before the final battle by pointing out portions from the Law (i.e., the Torah) and the prophets. He then tells them his dream in which the deceased high priest, Onias III, appears to him while he is praying, together with the prophet, Jeremiah, who hands Judah a holy golden sword. Jeremiah’s appearance symbolizes that Judah acts under divine approval, while Onias’ appearance underscores how Judah is fighting for the sake of the Temple cult (15:9, 12-15).

This portrait of Judah demonstrates that his Jewish contemporaries, especially in the diaspora (2 Macc was written in Cyrene and Egypt), saw the Maccabees as religious leaders.[[6]](http://thetorah.com/the-original-meaning-of-chanukah/" \l "_ftn6) The festival of Chanukah was regarded accordingly as a sign for the Jews becoming closer to God and his Temple, and perhaps also closer to the eternal salvation.

Chanukah as a Hasmonean Political Festival

One important reason for promoting its celebration years after the purification of the altar was to celebrate and commemorate the Maccabees’ achievement and to support their successors, the Hasmoneans. The fact that the Maccabees, their followers and successors, encouraged Chanukah’s celebration in the two epistles, shows that Chanukah also had political significance.

Establishing a festival celebrating the ruler’s reign actually resembles Greek political festivals which marked political events.[7] In this sense, Chanukah is especially similar to the *Ptolemaieia*, whose aim was public recognition of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. The *Ptolemaieia*was first celebrated by Ptolemy II, and celebrated every four years, glorifying the founder of the dynasty, and by implication, his heirs. It included athletic and music competitions as well as equestrian events. Members of many Greek cities participated in the festival.[8]

Thus, Chanukah, which celebrates the rededication of the Temple under the Hasmoneans, would have been an effective political tool to reinforce Hasmonean government, since it was celebrated in the Temple and probably also in many Jewish houses.[9] It strengthened Hasmonean authority and was a kind of Hasmonean Independence Day also representing their collective identity.[10]

Chanukah was also helpful in constructing the Jewish social memory about the Maccabees’ achievements.[11] It was one of several festivals that the Maccabees instituted in order to commemorate their military victories for the coming generations. Additional festivals that served this role are the Day of Nicanor (13 in Adar; 1 Macc 7:48-49; 2 Macc 15:36),[12]and Hakra Day, a day of the removal of the citadel (*hakra*) in Jerusalem, the last remnant of gentile oppression (1 Macc 13:49-52). These three festivals stressed Hasmonean authority and rule.[13] Indeed, Chanukah became a holiday due to the intersection of its religious, Temple focus, with the political needs of the Hasmonean leaders who established it.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-original-meaning-of-chanukah)

1. David Flusser, “The Dedication of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus: Story and History” in, *The Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman World. Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern* (eds., Isaiah M. Gafni, Aharon Oppenheimer, and Daniel R. Schwartz; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1996), 55–78 [61-63, Hebrew].
2. For the military background of Judah’s achievement, see Betzalel Bar Kokhva, *Judas Maccabaeus. The Jewish Struggle against the Seleucids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 276-282. For the chronology of the books of Maccabees and the evidence on Antiochus IV’s death, see Flusser 1996.
3. See also 1 Macc 4:46. Antiochus Epiphanes originally placed the “loathsome structure” in the Temple on 25 Kislev, the date of festivities in honor of Dionysus, as well as his own birthday; see Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*. *Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2 vols. (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 2.201 n. 271, 2.203 n. 289. James C. VanderKam “Chanukah: Its Timing and Significance according to 1 and 2 Maccabees,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 1 (1987), 23-40 [34-36].
4. On the absence of the oil miracle in second temple literature, see Malka Simkovich, [“Uncovering the Truth about Chanukah,”](http://thetorah.com/uncovering-the-truth-about-chanukah/) *TheTorah.com* (2013).
5. On Chanukah as Sukkot and the relationship to other inaugurations of the Temple in chronological proximity to Sukkot, see in detail Eyal Regev “Hannukkah, Succot, and the days of *Milluim* in II Maccabees,” *Beit Miqra* 166 (2001): 227-243 [Hebrew]; Eyal Regev, “Hanukkah and the Temple of the Maccabees: Ritual and Ideology from Judas Maccabeus to Simon,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15.2 (2008) 87-114.
6. For other evidence for the Hasmoneans as religious leaders, see Eyal Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity* (Journal of Anthropology and Archaeology Sup. 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 104-120.
7. Elias Bickerman *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees*(New York: Schocken, 1962), 120-121, 131. Several features of Hellenism characterize the Hasmoneans; see, Eyal Regev, [“The Hellenization of the Hasmoneans Revisited: The Archaeological Evidence,”](https://file.scirp.org/pdf/AA_2017092616055524.pdf) *Advances in Anthropology* 7 (2017): 175-196.
8. Frank Walbank, *Polybius, Rome, and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 81-83; Dorothy J. Thompson “Philadelphus’ Procession: Dynastic Power in a Mediterranean Context,” in *Politics, Administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman World* (ed., Leon Mooren; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 365-388.
9. We have no details whatsoever regarding the manner it was celebrated in the Hasmonean period, but the fact that the letters preceding 2 Maccabees called upon the Jews in Egypt to celebrate it proves that there were specific acts of celebration outside the Temple, as also attested to in John 10:22. The lighting of candles is not mentioned prior to rabbinic literature, but Josephus’ designation of it as the “festival of Lights” (*Ant.*12.325) may refer to some candle-related ritual.
10. On how the Hasmoneans shaped and enhanced Jewish collective identity, for example, by the annual tribute of the half shekel to the Temple, see Regev, *Hasmoneans*.
11. For these aspects of ritual, see Steven Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration,” *Essays in Social Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press 1977), 52-72 [ 68 ].
12. For more on this, see Zev Farber, [“Yom Nicanor – 13th of Adar,”](http://thetorah.com/yom-nicanor-13th-of-adar/) *TheTorah.com* (2014).
13. On the Hasmonean ideology and the ways their tried to create a legitimacy to their rule (such as in arguing that they ae religious leaders and the defenders of the Temple), see, Regev,*Hasmoneans*.