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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

Hanukkah Candles
in a New Light

by Rachel Kohl Finegold

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At our December Women's *minchah* service a couple of years ago, we went around the room after the *tefillah*, sharing our favorite Hanukkah memories. Most of these included experiences such as gathering in a cozy house while snow fell outside, eating latkes and drinking hot chocolate, and other winter-related memories. I was jolted when Dalit, a young woman who had recently moved to Chicago from Australia, pointed out, "But for me, Hanukkah falls in the summertime!"

This intrigued me. Associations that I consider intrinsic to Hanukkah simply did not apply to her experience of the holiday. She had celebrated this holiday without the winter trappings that have become so familiar to me. It made me wonder: What are the essential elements of Hanukkah? If we strip away the seasonal/cultural associations that we have with this holiday, what really lies at its core?

It is interesting to imagine what might have been the thought processes of the rabbinic minds when constructing a holiday from scratch. Hanukkah and its sister holiday, Purim, were dramatic innovations by the leaders of the Rabbinic period, innovations that have lasted through the generations. What would the founders of Hanukkah say lies at the holiday's core?

The *Beraita* that is quoted in the famous *sugya* "Mai Hanukkah" in B.T. Tractate Shabbat 21b, utilizes a phrase that hints at this essential core of the holiday.

לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאוים ימים טובים
בהלל והודאה

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The following year, these [days] were appointed a Festival with praise and thanksgiving.

The phrase *hallel veHoda'ah* (praise and thanksgiving) seems to signify the essence of the holiday—Hanukkah is designated for gratitude to God. How is the implementation of *hallel veHoda'ah* accomplished, practically speaking? This is a matter of debate. Rashi says that *hallel veHoda'ah* refers to liturgy: the additions of *Hallel* and *Al Hanissim*. Rambam, however, has a very different take.

Rambam assumes that the practice of *hallel veHoda'ah* refers to the lighting of the Hanukkah candles. His paraphrase of the *Beraita* concludes:

Accordingly, the Sages of that generation ordained that these eight days... should be commemorated to be days of happiness and praise [of God]. Candles should be lit in the evening at the entrance to the houses on each and every one of these eight nights to publicize and reveal the miracle.

The assertion that *hallel veHoda'ah* refers to candle lighting is quite far from the simple meaning of the phrase. But Rambam wishes to assert that lighting candles lies at the core of Hanukkah, that it is the definitive ritual of the holiday.

Rambam, of course, is taking his cues from the rabbis of the Talmud themselves. The sections of the Talmud surrounding the "Mai Hanukkah" are focused primarily on the *mitzvah* of lighting candles—who is obligated to light, where to light the candles, when to light, and so on. The medieval commentators and halachic codifiers follow suit, so that by the time we get to *Shulhan Arukh*, the laws of Hanukkah revolve almost exclusively around the laws of candle lighting. Certainly in our own day, the holiday of Hanukkah is known as the holiday of lights.

Purim was designed quite differently. Although there are several *mitzvot* associated with Purim—such as giving gifts to the poor, sending *Mishloach Manot* packages to friends, and eating a festive meal—the focus in the Talmud and later codifiers is mostly on the reading of *Megillat Esther*: who reads the *megillah*, when the *megillah* should

be read, whether one should stand or sit while reading, and so on. The reading of the *megillah* is established as the definitive ritual of Purim, much like the lighting of candles on Hanukkah. In fact, Rambam draws a clear connection between these two *mitzvot*: “All who are obligated in the reading of the *megillah* are obligated in the lighting of Hanukkah lights.”²

The comparison to Purim emphasizes the fact that the focus on lighting Hanukkah candles was a conscious choice by the rabbis. They chose not to recount the Hanukkah story in any formal or legalized way. Instead, they insisted that the candles become the definitive *mitzvah* of Hanukkah.³ Why was candle lighting developed as the focus of the holiday; why was this *mitzvah* placed at the holiday’s core?

In addition to the importance of memorializing the miracle of the oil, this emphasis on the lighting of candles is likely connected to the time of year in which the story of Hanukkah happened. At the winter solstice, we are in need not only of physical light, but of God’s light and the assurance of God’s protection. Our midrashic tradition picks up on this:

ת"ר: לפי שראה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך, אמר: אוי לי, שמא בשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי וחוזר לתוהו ובוהו, וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים, עמד וישב ח' ימים בתענית [ובתפלה], כיון שראה תקופת טבת וראה יום שמאריך והולך, אמר: מנהגו של עולם הוא, הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים, לשנה האחרת עשאו לאלו ולאילו ימים טובים

Our Rabbis taught: When primitive 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-day fast. But as he observed the winter equinox and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, “This is the world’s course,” and he set forth to keep

an eight-day festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals.⁴

For Adam, the return of the light of day gave assurance that God had not abandoned him. Our biblical holidays mark important moments in the context of the seasonal cycle: the spring (Passover), the first harvest of summer (Shavuot), the final gathering of crops before winter (Sukkot). The rabbis likely have used the biblical holidays as a model for the rabbinic ones. Hanukkah’s emphasis on the candles helps it to mark the winter solstice, giving the holiday a place in the annual cycle of our holiday calendar. Although it may not have been possible to do so with Purim, the rabbis imbued Hanukkah with the same dual nature that the biblical holidays contain—remembrance of a historic event for the people of Israel, coupled with a connection to the seasonal cycle of the year. Hanukkah becomes not only a celebration of the military victory of the Hasmoneans, but also a celebration of hope amidst the darkness of winter, of God’s light in moments of uncertainty.

And so, I wondered: If Hanukkah candles help us mark the winter solstice, what happens to Hanukkah in a dramatically different geographic context? What does it look like when Hanukkah is celebrated in Australia, which is experiencing the summer solstice instead? What role do the candles play?

Dalit explained that for her, Hanukkah always served as the gateway to summer vacation. She writes,

“I remember going to an outdoor festival, where Jews gathered in a tent when it was dark, which was not until around 9 p.m., to light the candles. Imagine people wearing sundresses and flip-flops while singing *Ma Oz Tzur*. This is Hanukkah in Oz. While we had imported many of the images of Hanukkah in the snow through American illustrations and videos, no one ever questioned the incongruity.”⁵

The trappings may look different, and the

² Rambam, *Hilchot Hanukkah* 3:4.

³ See Lisa Schlaff’s article in *Shema Bekolah* 2006, where she discusses the reason for the shift away from memorializing the military victory toward a focus on the miracle of the oil.

⁴ *Avodah Zara* 8a.

⁵ Thank you to Dalit Kaplan for sharing her personal experiences of Hanukkah in Australia.

candles take on an altered set of associations. However, the message of the candles can remain intact, whether at the summer or winter solstice. Hanukkah is a moment to gather with fellow Jews to practice *hallel veHoda'ah*—to pause and praise, to express gratitude for God's presence in the natural order of the world as well as in our everyday lives.

Hag Orim Sameah!

חג אורים שמח!

Rachel has found her niche. As scholar, Education and Ritual Director, pastoral counselor, daughter, sister, wife, mother, Rachel enriches so many lives. I feel privileged, as her mother, to celebrate her accomplishments!

Telchi m'chayil l'chayil!

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