

# Eight Days of Chanukah

By: Steve Epstein

## Why eight days

One of the most common questions asked regarding the festival of חנוכה is – ‘why is this holiday 8 days long?’ Many reasons have been given:

1. The מהרש"א, in his commentary on the Talmud (**שבת כ"א**), explains that during the times of Hellenization, the Greeks contaminated the מזבח (the altar that lies in the courtyard, outside the היכל and the אולם) by using it for idolatrous sacrifices. Therefore, after the war, the Jews could not use the contaminated מזבח<sup>1</sup> to worship G-d, but were required to build a totally new מזבח. Once this rebuilding was completed, the Jews of the Hashmonaic period celebrated an 8 day חנוכה המזבח<sup>2</sup> similar to that of King Solomon (דברי הימים ב ז), who had commemorated the completion of the בית המקדש with 8 days of ritual – 7 days of sacrifices followed by a day of contemplation (‘עצרת’).
2. רב יהושע בעז, in his שלטי גבורים, a commentary on the **רי"ף** (**שבת כ"א**), provides a different explanation. He notes that one of the rituals prohibited by the Greeks during the Hellenization of ישראל, ארץ ישראל, was that of the ברית מילה. Therefore, after the defeat of the Greeks and revocation of the Hellenistic legislation, the Jews celebrated the resumption of the ברית מילה ritual with an 8 day holiday corresponding to a baby's age at the time of the ברית מילה.
3. In ספר המכבים, another reason is offered. In addition to the ברית מילה, the Greeks, during the Hellenistic period, also prohibited the offering

1. See מידות א-ו that states that the remains of the contaminated מזבח was stored in the North Eastern compound in the second בית המקדש:  
מזרחית צפונית – בה גזרו בני חשמונאי את אבני המזבח ששקצו מלכי יון  
Also see Daniel Sperber's essay in מנהגי ישראל ה דף י  
מגילת תענית ט - Also look in: ומה ראו לעשות חנוכה זו שמונה ימים, אלא בימי מלכות יון נכנסו בית חשמונאי להיכל ובנו שם את המזבח ושדוהו בשיד ותקנו  
"בו כלי שרת והיו מתעסקים בו שמונת ימים"
2. Hence, the name חנוכה.

of קרבנות. The last Holiday before the war, during which the Jews were prevented from performing any ritual sacrifices in the בית המקדש, was חג הסוכות. Hence, immediately after the victory, once the practice of offering קרבנות was reinstated, the Jews offered the חג הסוכות של חג הסוכות for 8 consecutive days to commemorate the 8 days of sacrifices that were missed.

However, the classic, well known explanation for the eight-day duration appears in מצוות הדלקת נרות. מסכת שבת כ"א. The גמרא asks what the source of the מצוות הדלקת נרות is. The גמרא answers that after the war, the entire supply of olive oil required for lighting the מנורה was impure except for one pitcher of oil that was buried deep in the ground and contained the authenticated signature of the כהן הגדול. In this pitcher there was sufficient oil to last for a single day, but miraculously the oil lasted for eight days.

### Problem with the classic explanation

This Talmudic interpretation explains that the eight days of חנוכה commemorate a miracle that lasted eight days. What it does not explain is why there was a need for an eight-day miracle. What is significant about the number eight? Why did the oil not last for six days or twelve days? What happened at the end of the eighth day to deem the continuation of this miracle unnecessary<sup>3</sup>?

Two answers to the latter question are generally quoted: one by רב יוסף קרו in his בית יוסף and another by the ר"ן in his commentary on the רי"ף.

1. The רב יוסף קרו, in his commentary on the תר"ע, states that after the tragic deaths of so many soldiers and civilians during the war, the entire Jewish population, including all the כהנים, became טמא and were in a state of טומאת מת - the highest level of ritual impurity attained as a consequence of contact with a dead person. Thus, before performing the daily ritual of lighting the מנורה, the כהנים needed to first undergo the

3. The assumption here is clearly that G-d does not perform miracles for the sake of performing a miracle, but rather performs a miracle in order to solve a specific problem on Earth.

seven-day process of ritual purification<sup>4</sup> (טהרת פרה אדומה). Furthermore, once purified, another day was needed for the preparation of the olive oil by the newly consecrated כהנים – hence, according to the בית יוסף, an eight day miracle was needed.

2. On the other hand, (שבת כ"א) רבינו נסים contends that the miracle lasted eight days, not because of the duration of any ritual observance, but because of the round trip time from Jerusalem to the oil factory of choice. It took eight days to go and return with the newly pressed, pure, high quality oil.

As we will see, the answers of both the בית יוסף and ר"ן are problematic and require further analysis.

### Problems with the explanation of the בית יוסף

According to the בית יוסף, how was it possible for the כהן to light the מנורה immediately after the war before completing the purification process of the פרה אדומה? If he were in fact impure, he would make the oil and the מנורה impure while lighting<sup>5</sup>.

The רא"ם, a commentary on the רא"ש (שבת כ"א), suggests that the כהן lit the מנורה with a plain piece of wood with no receptacle, based on the law that plain pieces of wood cannot be made impure (פשוטי כלי עץ אינם מקבלים טומאה). Although this answer may explain how the purity of the oil was maintained during the lighting, the מנורה, in contrast, has a receptacle (בית קיבול), and must be touched during the lighting process. Therefore, the impure כהן would have made the מנורה impure. What, then, was the purpose of this miracle?

The טור, another commentary on the שו"ת, defends the explanation of the רא"ם by postulating that there happened to be at least one כהן who remained pure throughout the war and that this one pure כהן lit the מנורה. However,

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4. It is explained in פרשת חקת that before one can be purified from טומאת מת, one is required to be sprinkled with the ashes of the פרה אדומה on the third day and the seventh day.
  5. מגע – passed in many ways, but primarily by direct contact.

if there was indeed a pure כהן, why did he not prepare a new batch of pure olive oil immediately following the war, making this 8 day miracle entirely superfluous? The בית חדש answers this question by positing that this כהן was dysfunctional and did not know how to prepare oil.

### A second problem with the explanation of the הותרה בית יוסף – טומאה בציבור

Another problem with the explanation of the בית יוסף is the Tannaic commentary on 'יערוך את הנרות לפני ד תמיד' ויקרא כ"ד: The תורת כהנים explains 'אפילו בטומאה – תמיד'. The הלכה of הותרה בציבור permits the performance of a מצוה if the majority of the Jewish people are טומאים, even when that מצוה normally requires a state of טהרה. According to the תורת כהנים, this rule applies to the lighting of the מנורה as it does to מצוות such as קרבן פסח or קרבן תמיד. If this is the case, there was no need for pure oil at all. Hence, the נס פך השמן seems to be unnecessary.

Two answers are given, neither of which is totally convincing.

1. The מהרש"א, on his commentary to the שלחן ערוך, is followed by חכמת שלמה, that the lighting of the מנורה was part of the חנוכה המקדש celebration and in this case the principle of הותרה בציבור does not apply.<sup>6</sup>
2. ערוך השלחן תר"ע, in רב יחיאל מיכל אפשטיין, states that the category of טומאה that pertained to the oil was that of טומאת זב and not טומאת מת; therefore, the principle of הותרה בציבור does not apply.<sup>7,8</sup>

### Problems with the explanation of the ר"ן

As mentioned above, the ר"ן provides a second explanation for the necessity of an 8-day miracle. The ר"ן claims that the travel time to the place where the oil

6. See Daniel Sperber who gives a similar answer in מנהגי ישראל ה'דף י'.
7. This is based on the תקנה that all items that come in contact with idol worshippers are automatically placed in a state of טומאת זב. See also "אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק גזרו על תינוק עובד כוכבים שיטמא בזיבה" – שבת י"ז.
8. פסחים see טומאת מת of טומאה only applies to the הותרה בציבור.



one should be able to travel between Jerusalem and the Judean city Tekoa in no more than a half of a day.

## The true location of the city of Tekoa

The *עמוס א:א* and *שמואל ב' י"ד:ב*, on *רד"ק*, claims that unlike the Judean city of Tekoa where the fortified city of *רחבעם* was built, the Tekoa where Amos lived and the Tekoa where the *אשה התקועית* lived was a major city located in the upper Galilee - the part of Israel granted to the tribe of Asher (which is why Moses blessed the tribe of Asher with a plethora of oil in *כ"ד* - *יהי רצוי אחיו וטובל בשמן רגלו*: דברים ל"ג - *let him be the favored of his brethren, and let him dip his foot in oil*). Given that the tribe of Asher was located on the Mediterranean Sea between Tzidon and Naharriya, a 4 day journey could be expected.

Professor Shmuel Katz, in his book <sup>11</sup> *ארץ הגליל* (p 31-32), argues that the Galilean city of Tekoa was actually located next to the city of Meron. He brings multiple proofs, of which the following two carry the most weight:

1. The *תוספתא* of *פסחים* details that *רבי יהודה הנשיא* used to travel to learn with *רבי שמעון בר יוחאי*. Because this period was after the failed *revolt* and the subsequent destruction of Jewish Judea (including the Judean city of Tekoa), we can assume that this yeshiva was located in the Galil, where both *רבי יהודה הנשיא* (who lived in Tzipori and then in Beit Shearim) and *רבי שמעון בר יוחאי* resided. Furthermore, it is likely that this meeting place was nearer to the residence of *רבי שמעון בר יוחאי*, who lived in the city of Meron.
2. Professor Katz's second proof is even stronger. The *תוספתא* *שביעית* asserts that one can eat olives on the seventh year until the end of the olive harvest in Tekoa. However, a separate *ברייתא* *בכורות* states that the one can eat olives in the seventh year until the end of the olive harvest

11. Professor Katz emigrated from Hungary to Jerusalem to become one of the first professors of *תנ"ך* at Hebrew University. He wrote his seminal book *ארץ הגליל* on the locations of various cities in the Galil.

in Meron. Because the same הלכה is mentioned using the same language in two separate places, it is likely that either Tekoa is another name for the city of Meron or at least the Galilean city of Tekoa was a suburb of the ancient city of Meron.

Thus, if you are ever asked the question, which holiday focuses on the ancient city of Meron, the correct answer is not only ל"ג בעומר, but also חנוכה, for our 8 day holiday was instituted based on the travel time to this city from Jerusalem and back.

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