



# CHANUKAH: REBUILDING THE ALTAR

by Rabbi Yoav Elan

One of the more shocking discoveries made by the  Rebuilding the Altar of the Temple Maccabees after expelling the Syrian-Greeks from the Temple was that the Outer Altar had been used for idol worship. Although the stones of the Altar were attached to the ground and legally impervious to the defilement of idol worship, the Jews felt that it was unconscionable to resume the holy sacrificial service on such stones. One of the lesser-known facts of the Chanukah story is that amidst the cleaning up of the Temple, searching for pure oil, and assembling a new *Menorah*, the Jews also dismantled the entire Altar and rebuilt it using new stones. See this [earlier class](#) for a more detailed description of the Outer Altar.

The stones of the original Altar were stored within the Hall of the Fire, a large structure built into the northern wall of the Courtyard. The main purpose of the Hall was to serve as sleeping quarters for the watch of *Kohanim* currently on duty and it also provided them a place to warm themselves during the day, a necessary amenity since they had to walk around barefoot on cold marble floors as they performed the sacrificial service. The large warming fire located here gave it its name.

In each of the four corners of Hall of the Fire were smaller chambers. The northeast contained the Chamber of Receipts where the *Kohanim* would issue receipts to individuals purchasing wine, oil, and flour from the Temple treasury. It was in this chamber that the stones of the Altar were stored. Now, it was impossible to fit a volume of stones the size of the Altar into this very small chamber. It is therefore likely that this chamber had a massive basement within the tunnels beneath the floor of the Courtyard where the large majority of the stones were stored, while some of the stones were left on display in the chamber upstairs

 Chamber of Receipts. Three of the original Altar stones are displayed above the fireplace.

to serve as a reminder of the miraculous events of the Chanukah story.

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