

CHANUKAH: FINDING THE OIL

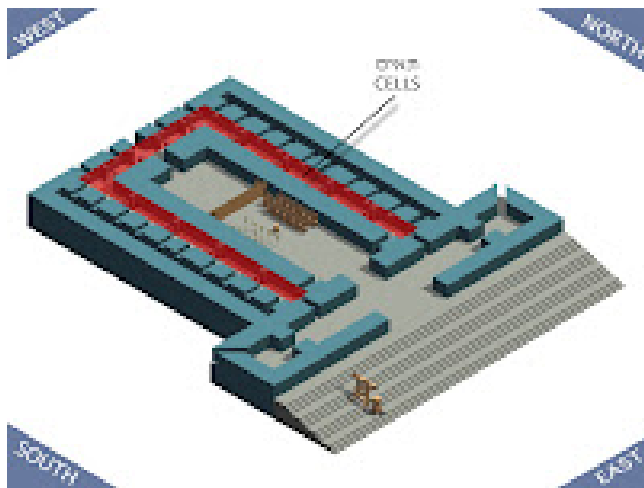
by Rabbi Yoav Elan

One of the most widely-known miracle of the Chanukah story involves the finding of the flask of pure oil. When the Jews returned to the Temple it appeared that all of the sealed containers of pure olive oil had been contaminated by the Syrian-Greeks and there was none left with which to light the Menorah. By Divine Providence a single sealed flask of oil was found and this miraculously fueled the lamps of the Menorah for seven days while more oil was prepared.

From the description of the Temple given in Tractate *Middos* (the tractate dedicated to recording the measurements of the Temple) we learn that the main storage area for oil was located in the southwest chamber of the Women's Courtyard - the Chamber of the Oil. Certainly all of the containers in this chamber would have been defiled, and it is more likely that the flask was found somewhere else. Here I present two opinions given by the commentators as to where this flask may have been found.

1. In the Sanctuary

The Talmud states that "when the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all of the oil in the Sanctuary." From here we learn that oil was stored in the Sanctuary as well. There were thirty-eight cells, or small rooms, built around three sides of the Sanctuary and the special olive oil used for the Menorah may have been stored here.

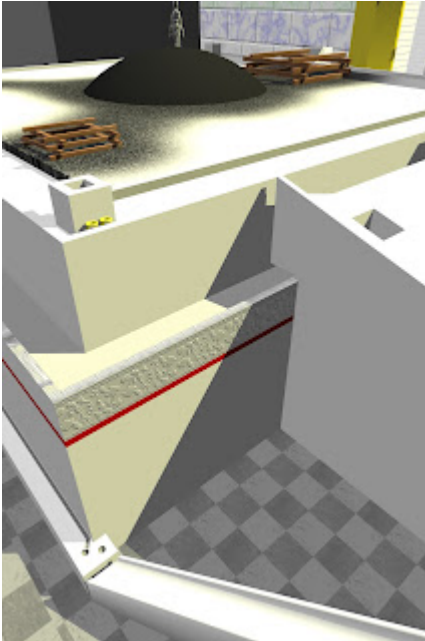


The Sanctuary. Area of the small rooms is highlighted.

Some maintain that the flask of oil of the Chanukah story was found in the Sanctuary. There was a

room in the Sanctuary (possibly one of the cells) or, according to a slightly different version, a niche in the wall, which was closed off by a door and sealed with the seal of the High Priest. This area had somehow escaped the notice of the Syrian-Greeks and when it was later opened by the Jews it was found to contain a single flask of olive oil. According to this view, it was not the flask itself which was sealed with the seal of the High Priest but rather the area in which it was found.

2. Beneath the Altar



Southwest corner of the Altar

At the southwest corner of the Altar's top were two receptacles where the wine and water libations were poured. The libations flowed down through the Altar into a deep subterranean cavity called the *Shissin*. Once every seventy years the *Kohanim* would enter the *Shissin* through an access hole in the Courtyard floor in order to empty it of the congealed wine. One opinion maintains that the sealed flask of oil was found within the *Shissin*, apparently hidden there by a quick-thinking *Kohen* before the Temple was taken. As for why the Jews were exploring the *Shissin* at this time, the Altar was in the process of being rebuilt and it is therefore likely that they stumbled upon this flask of oil as they were removing the old stones from the lowest level of the Altar.

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