

THE REAL STORY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The story of Chanukah is one of the most well-known among the Jewish holidays. As the Chofetz Chaim writes in his preface to the Laws of Chanukah, the Jews "came up onto the Temple Mount, and could not find pure oil in the Temple -- with the exception of a single container bearing the seal of the High Priest. There was only a single day's supply of oil in this container, but a miracle occurred. They lit the Menorah from it for eight days, until they were able to press olives and extract pure oil."

Many Jewish children cannot tell you what Shavuot celebrates (the holiday of the Giving of the Torah), but they know the Chanukah story well!

Or do they?

The truth is that the story of Chanukah is much greater than the story of the Menorah alone. In fact, the oil is such a minor detail that our Sages omitted it from the special prayer "for the miracles" which they added to the daily prayers during the holiday.

To learn the more critical elements of the story, we can read the Chofetz Chaim's preface from the beginning. "During the Second Temple period, an evil [Greek] kingdom ruled and enacted decrees upon Israel. They nullified their religion, and did not permit them to involve themselves with Torah and Mitzvos. They took their property and their daughters. They entered the Temple, violated its sanctity, and defiled the pure. And this was very painful upon Israel...

"Until the G-d of our forefathers had mercy upon them, and rescued them from [the Greeks]. And the Chashmonayim [Hasmoneans], of the house of the High Priest, were victorious over them... and the Kingdom was restored to Israel for more than 200 years, until the Destruction of the Second Temple."

Compared to the restoration of Jewish practices to the Holy Temple, freedom to practice Judaism, and an end to Greek oppression of the Jews -- now we understand why the miracle of the Menorah was omitted. It is almost trivial by comparison.

In fact, according to Jewish Law, it was not even necessary. It takes a full week to purify oneself from a state of impurity. In a situation where most of the people are in an impure state, Jewish law permits them to perform Temple services while still impure, even though they pass impurity to the vessels and objects used. In other words, they could have lit the Menorah using impure oil, when no pure oil

was available!

Why, then, is the miracle of the oil so important to the story? Why do we light our own Menorahs throughout the holiday? To understand this, we must try to look at Chanukah from the eyes of those who experienced it.

This was truly a dark period in Jewish history. When the Greeks came, they did not merely exert military control -- as the Chofetz Chaim wrote, they also worked to nullify the Jewish religion. They were successful to a considerable extent, to the point that many Jews abandoned Judaism in favor of idolatry. When the Greeks set up a stadium in Jerusalem, many Jews participated, even though the original Greek games were conducted in the nude. The Jews were so contaminated by Greek thinking that these athletes attempted to hide the signs of their circumcision, because the Greeks considered the body perfect in its natural state.

In the midst of this darkness, a small group of Jews led a revolution. They not only faced the Greek Army -- unfortunately this war was Jew against Jew as well. And when they regained the Temple Mount, they found it in a contaminated state, with idols set up within the Temple itself.

Had the Jews, in fact, strayed so far that the Hasmonean rebellion was futile? Was there to be another exile -- as actually came to pass, 200 years later?

In this context, we can see the miracle of the oil for what it truly was: a sign from Heaven. It was a message from G-d that He was still watching over the Jews, and accepted their return. No matter how far we have strayed, the message of the Chanukah lights remains the same: we can always return, we can always rededicate ourselves -- and G-d is always waiting for us. May that message warm our hearts, and our homes, throughout the holiday -- and throughout the year!

A very Happy Chanukah,

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