

Topic: Chanuka

Key Idea –Chanuka is a post-biblical holiday. The earliest version of the events behind the festival of Chanuka is found in the non-canonical books of Maccabees I and II (late second century BCE). Mattathias, a priest living in Modi'in, leads a zealous struggle against a decree by the Seleucid (Greco-Syrian) king Antiochus IV which banned the practice of Judaism. After Mattathias's death, his son Judah wages a guerilla war against the Seleucids (165-162 BCE). The account of the first century Jewish historian Josephus closely follows the Maccabees I version, as does the version of the story found in *al ha-Nissim*, but *al ha-Nissim* ends with Judah and his loyalists reclaiming and purifying the Temple. In Maccabees I and Josephus, Judah and his brothers continued to fight both the pagans and non-practicing Jews of the region, and established a hereditary dynasty of militaristic high-priestly ethnarchs. Their Hasmonean descendents further expanded Judea's borders, arrogating for themselves both kingship as well as high priesthood, and eventually degenerated into fratricidal tyrants fomenting civil war. Chanuka is not mentioned at all in the Mishna (c. 200 CE). The explanation of Chanuka found in the Talmud redirects our attention away from the military and political struggles of the historical Hasmoneans and focuses on God's miraculous intervention in human history to assure Jewish survival. Modern Zionism has re-emphasized the military activist aspect of Chanuka, replacing divine intervention with self-reliant nationalism

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Berakhot on lighting Chanuka candles.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzeevanu lehadleek ner shel Chanuka. (Blessed are You, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has made us holy through your commandments and commanded us to light Chanuka lights.)

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam. sheh-asah nissim l'avoteinu, bayamim haheim bazman hazeh. (Blessed are You...who worked miracles for our ancestors, back "in those days" and in our own time. **And, first**

Text 2: *Al HaNissim* - "For the miracles." A prayer of thanksgiving inserted into the *Amida* and *Birkat HaMazon* on Chanuka and Purim. The Chanuka version ("Bimay Mattityahu" used today dates from the eighth century, and contains a summary of the basic events of the Chanuka story. It thanks God for all the miracles victories and liberations that have enabled the Jewish people to survive, with particular focus on the Maccabean revolt.

Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b. A rabbinic explanation for celebrating Chanuka for 8 days:.

Text 4: I Maccabees 4: 36-58. The earliest account of the Chanuka story, probably written in Hebrew (135-104 BCE).

Text 5: II Maccabees 10:1-8. An epistle written in Greek around 120 BCE to persuade the Egyptian Jewish community to join in the observance of the festival of Chanuka.

Text 6: Maimonides-the lighting of candles in a doorway to proclaim the miracle.

Text 7: *Hanayrot Hallalu*. The lights we light the 8 days of Chanuka are holy, and they may not be used for any purpose other than to look at them and be reminded of the great miracles God has performed on our behalf.

Text 8: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b. How many candles to light each night? A rabbinic explanation for celebrating Chanuka for 8 day.

Text 9: Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Interpretations of Chanuka.