

## *Facts of Hanukkah*

If justification were required for the re-creation of the Hanukkah to serve the needs of our generation, critical study of the origins of Hanukkah support this right. Although there is disagreement among scholars regarding the precise nature of Hanukkah's genesis, two points appear clear. One is that Hanukkah was created by the Jews of the second century, B.C., to meet the religious needs of their time; the other is that the story of the miraculous cruse of oil that lasted eight days is not fact.

The problem in attempting to arrive at exact knowledge regarding the origin of Hanukkah is that the early sources from which we acquire all our information themselves disagree, and thus call in question one another's credibility. These sources include I MACCABEES, II MACCABEES, Josephus, and the TALMUD. Critically speaking, then, we simply have no sure source of information on the origin of Hanukkah. This much appears to be undisputed. Hanukkah was instituted by Judah Maccabee and his brothers, along with the elders of the congregation of Israel, on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev in the year 165 B.C. to celebrate the dedication of the altar and purification of the Temple at Jerusalem. Three years earlier, on that very day, a pagan altar had been set up in the Temple by



Antiochus Epiphanes upon which sacrifices were offered to the idol "Zeus Olympius."

The sources give conflicting accounts of the circumstances surrounding the first Hanukkah. Did a miracle occur, and is commemoration of this miracle the reason for lighting the eight lamps of the menorah? The two sources, acknowledged by scientific scholars as the most reliable, I MACCABEES and Josephus, say nothing of a miracle. I MACCABEES simply says "they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days" (4:56). Josephus does not even mention the term Hanukkah, calling the festival "Lights." The lights, he says, are symbolic of the freedom of worship obtained by the Jews because their liberty came unexpectedly, like a sudden light (ANTIQUITIES XII; 7). Neither does the third source II MACCABEES say anything of a miracle in connection with Hanukkah, although mention is made of miracles having occurred in earlier times among the Jews (10:1-7; 1:18ff.; 2:1ff.). Thus the familiar miracle story of Hanukkah, a small cruse of consecrated oil sufficient for one day lasting eight days, appears only in the talmudic sources, whose supernatural accounts of historical events are generally discredited by modern critical scholarship.

It is significant to observe that the oldest sources of the story of Hanukkah, I and II MACCABEES, agree there had been no Jewish holiday at the time of the year Hanukkah is celebrated prior to its having been established by the Maccabees. As was stated earlier, Hanukkah was instituted on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, 165 B.C., to purify the Temple because three years earlier, on that same day, Antiochus Epiphanes had an altar erected upon which pagan sacrifices were offered. Accordingly, a number of scholars have arrived at the conclusion that Hanukkah, at least in part, is a holiday created as a Jewish response to pagan festivals held at the same time. Julian Morgenstern advanced the theory that a pagan festival celebrating the winter solstice, about December twenty-second, existed before Hanukkah and contributed to its ritual. The solstice, he notes, is marked in many parts of the world by the lighting of candles or fires, hence the Hanukkah ritual of candles and fire.

On the other hand, Theodore Gaster proposes that Hanukkah was intended partly to satirize the Rural Dionysia. This pagan festival, celebrated every other year, fell toward the end of December. The worshippers of Dionysus would dress themselves in the skins of animals and, carrying torches tipped with pine cones, rush to the mountains. There, orgiastic revels by torchlight were held throughout the night. The torches would be dipped momentarily in wine, and the spurting flames were taken as symbolizing the fiery nature of the god. To ridicule and repudiate these pagan rites, Judah Maccabee instituted opposing rites. Among these, in place of the frenzied waving of the Dionysian torches, the sacred menorah was lit.

Although it is not possible to know with certainty which explanation of the genesis of Hanukkah is correct, and there

have been objections to both, one inference may reasonably be drawn. This is that the original Hanukkah was in considerable degree a Jewish response to a potent non-Jewish festival present in the general culture. Moreover, the fact that Hanukkah served as a response shaped the form that the Hanukkah took. Since fire, for example, was a key symbol in the non-Jewish rites, it was made a key symbol of Hanukkah. Since the winter solstice or the Rural Dionysus, whichever celebration Hanukkah comes in response to, took place in late December, Hanukkah is set in late December. The sources state explicitly that the twenty-fifth of Kislev was chosen for Hanukkah because a pagan rite had been celebrated three years previously to the day in the Temple at Jerusalem.

This discussion above of scholarly inquiry into the genesis of Hanukkah helps to place into historical perspective the re-creation of the Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation, which makes it a holiday of first rank in the Jewish ceremonial year. Two objections are raised in conservative Jewish circles to such re-creation. One is that to be true to our Jewish heritage fundamental changes cannot be made in traditional holidays. The other is that the re-creation of Hanukkah is artificial and assimilationist, coming as a reaction to the power of Christmas, a fundamental theological holiday of the Christians.

Considered in the light of the true and dynamic nature of the Jewish religious enterprise, as is evidenced by scientific scholarship, these objections are faulty and invalid. For one thing, really to be true to the Jewish heritage is to be open to change and novelty. Hanukkah was created entirely new in the year 165 B.C. by persons like ourselves, to satisfy the need they felt for a new festival. We behave in the same dynamic spirit when we re-create Hanukkah to satisfy our own needs and purposes. So far as the objection is concerned, that the need for the recreation of Hanukkah comes in part to respond to Christmas, the development of many holidays and rituals of the Jews historically comes as a response to other religions present in their general environment. This is exemplified by the history of Hanukkah, which, as we have seen, was created and formed in part as a response to non-Jewish religions. Moreover, just as Hanukkah was created to provide a vehicle of expression for the deepest convictions and feelings of Jews at a time when there were such occasions available to non-Jews, so do we have the right to serve the contemporary needs of the modern Jew through re-creation of the Hanukkah. It is, of course, a fundamental over-simplification to think that the primary environmental need for a major Hanukkah comes from the power of Christmas. Rather, the primary need results from the basic economic, social and natural rhythms of Western culture and the physical world in which we live. These provide our existential context, and it is in this context that our Judaism must find its meaning.

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