

The Complex History of the Hashmonaim

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The Rambam's introduction to the *Laws of Hanukka* gives an impression of the story of the Hashmonaim which leaves out many troubling details.

In the time of the second Temple, when the Greeks ruled over Israel, they issued evil decrees against them, proscribing their religion and forbidding them to study the Law and to fulfill the commandments. They laid hands on their property and on their daughters, and they entered the Temple and made breaches in it, and defiled that which was ritually pure. Israel was in dire straits because of them and suffered great persecution until the G-d of our Fathers took pity on them and saved and delivered them from the hands of the Greeks. The Hashmonaim, descendants of the high priests, won a victory over them in which they slew the Greeks and saved Israel from their hands. They set up a king from among the priests and restored Israel's kingdom for more than two hundred years until the destruction of the Temple. The day that the Israelites were victorious over their enemies and destroyed them was the twenty-fifth day of Kislev. When they re-entered the Temple, they found only one cruse of ritually pure oil, enough to burn only one day. Yet they were able to light with it the candelabrum for eight days, until they had time to press olives and produce new ritually pure oil.

Rambam Hilkhot Hanukka 3:1

The full history of the Hashmonaim and the dynasty that they created is much more complex. Their taking on the dual role of high priest and king was problematic and they did not maintain their loyalty to halakhic Judaism. Internal division and civil war led to their descendants being replaced by Herod, who was not Jewish according to halakha; he became the ruler many years before the destruction of the Second Temple.

Even the miracle of the cruse of pure oil only temporarily restored the Temple service to a high standard. The low level of high priests which marked the era of the Second Temple did not

בבית שני כשמלכו יון גזרו גזרות על ישראל ובטלו דתם ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ובמצוות, ופשטו ידם בממונם ובבנותיהם ונכנסו להיכל ופרצו בו פרצות וטמאו הטהרות, וצר להם לישראל מאד מפניהם ולחצום לחץ גדול עד שריחם עליהם אלהי אבותינו והושיעם מידם והצילם וגברו בני חשמונאי הכהנים הגדולים והרגום והושיעו ישראל מידם והעמידו מלך מן הכהנים וחזרה מלכות לישראל יתר על מאתיים שנה עד החורבן השני וכשגברו ישראל על אויביהם ואבדום בחמשה ועשרים בחדש כסלו היה ונכנסו להיכל ולא מצאו שמן טהור במקדש אלא פך אחד ולא היה בו להדליק אלא יום אחד בלבד והדליקו ממנו נרות המערכה שמונה ימים עד שכתשו זיתים והוציאו שמן טהור
רמב"ם הל' חנוכה פרק ג הלכה א

significantly change. The Temple was restored but its requirements were not properly maintained.

The Rambam is not attempting to distort history. He is giving an intriguing perspective on our celebration of Hanukka. To deepen the question and to fully appreciate the message, details of our observances of Hanukka need to be analyzed. First, in contrast to Pesach, the founding event of the emergence of a Jewish nation, when despite many open miracles, Hallel is recited only on the first day (the half Hallel we recite the rest of Pesach is merely a custom), Hallel is recited on all eight days of Hanukka. Second, in order to spread awareness of the miracle, the Gemara, *Shabbat* 23a, introduces the recital of the blessing *she'asa nissim* made by one who sees the lighting even though he did not light the candles himself. Third, the Gemara, *Shabbat* 21b, offers enhanced levels of observance: through more people lighting and through lighting more candles than the single candle required on each night.

The Talmud states:

What is the situation where [the Mishna emphasizes] reciting a blessing for something good? Such as someone who finds an item. Even though it will be bad for him if the government finds out and confiscates it, right now it is good.

Berachot 60a

ועל הטובה כו' היכי דמי כגון
דאשכח מציאה אף על גב דרעה
היא לדידיה דאי שמע בה מלכא
שקיל לה מיניה השתא מיהא טובה
היא.

ברכות ט.

We are required to make a positive blessing on a good that is not only temporary but has negative consequences. We learn to appreciate and acknowledge the good that Hashem does for us even when it isn't permanent. Hashem enabled the brave and committed Hashmonaim to fight against superior numbers to preserve the sanctity of the Temple, and to protect Jewish women and Torah observance. The miracle of the cruse of oil, even if it only increased the lighting of the Menora with pure oil for eight days, was the stamp of Divine approval on their actions.

Although we pray for our ultimate and permanent redemption, it is also necessary to celebrate partial and temporary victories.⁹ Precisely because the accomplishments of the Hashmonaim were not preserved by their descendants we have to thank and praise Hashem for what was accomplished. An additional eight days of pure oil is a miracle that needs to be promoted and spread. There is a blessing recited upon seeing lit candles because seeing the lit candles is a reminder that the miracle occurred. Each day becomes more precious when the impact of the miracle will diminish as the Hasmonean dynasty comes apart. Symbolically, we add candles distinguishing between days. One day's miracle did not guarantee that there would be any oil the following day. Saying Hallel daily stresses the ongoing aspect of the miracle while hinting that when eight days have passed, the future might not be as bright.

Megilat Taanit, the earliest preserved written work of the Oral Law, enumerates days in the calendar that are minor festivals when fasting and, on some of them, eulogies were forbidden. After the destruction of the Temple this listing was no longer binding. Both the Talmud Bavli

⁹ See R. Zadok in *Divrei Sofrim* 32, who attributes this theme to Purim (suggested by Rabbi Yitzchak Blau).

(*Rosh Hashana* 18b) and the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Megilla* 1:4) state that Hanukka remained. The Bavli explains that Hanukka is different from the other days mentioned because its observance included a specific mitzva.

In the balance of Jewish history, the enormity of loss in the destruction of the Temple, the loss of Jewish sovereignty, and our exile, outweighed celebrating victories, both physical and spiritual, over opponents. Hanukka is the exception because it related to the Temple, was blessed with a miracle, and had ongoing impact for 200 years. During the long and arduous exile, we celebrated the time that we defeated enemies who tried to destroy Judaism and defile all that we consider holy.

In the new State of Israel, if we focus our observance of Hanukka on the meaning of the miracle of the oil, we will recognize that we celebrate partial victories, and that military successes should be followed by a spiritual awakening.