

Parshat Vayeshev - Chanuka Celebrating Milestones

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The story of Chanuka is retold in the Gemara Shabbat by a citation from Megillat Ta'anit.¹ "On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary. And when the Hashmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that remained (undefiled) with the seal of the High Priest. And there was only sufficient oil in it to light the Menora for one day. A miracle occurred and they were able to light the Menora from it for eight days. The next year they instituted and made them holidays with Hallel and thanksgiving."² The Rambam codifies this in his opening to the Laws of Chanuka, "During the period of the second Temple, when the Greek's were the governing power, they proclaimed decrees against the Jewish people, abrogating their religion and forbidding them to study Torah or to perform Mitzvot. They pillaged their wealth and absconded with their daughters; they entered the Temple and breached its walls and defiled that which was pure. The people of Israel were sorely distressed by their enemies, who oppressed them ruthlessly until the God of our fathers had mercy on them, rescued them from their repression and saved them. The Chashmonean great priests overcame them, defeating them and saving Israel from their tyranny. They appointed a king from among the priests and Israel's kingdom was restored for more than two centuries, until the destruction of the second Temple. The Jews emerged victorious over their foes and destroyed them on the twenty-fifth of Kislev; on that day they re-entered the Temple where they found only one jar of pure oil, enough to be lit for only a single day; yet they used it for lighting the array of lamps for eight days, until they managed to press olives and produce pure oil. Because of this, the sages of that generation instituted that the eight days beginning with the twenty-fifth of Kislev should be observed as days of rejoicing and praising the Lord. Lamps are lit in the evening by the doors of the homes, on each

of the eight nights, in order to display and publicize the miracle. These days are called Chanuka, when it is forbidden to eulogize or to fast, similar to the days of Purim. The daily lighting of the lamps on Chanuka is a rabbinical directive, like the reading of the Megilla on Purim."³ The impression one intuitively gets from the Gemara's historical synopsis is that Chanuka was the celebration of a moment of historical significance in the struggle of the Chashmonaim against their Greek oppressors. Against the odds, the insurrection culminated in a decisive victory for the Chashmonaim who were able to cast off the yoke of Greek tyranny and reverse their repressive religious decrees. This pivotal moment was enshrined as a holiday for posterity with the establishment of the eight-day celebration of Chanuka. The Rambam extends and enhances the significance of the moment when he notes that the triumphant Chashmonaim established for the first time since the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile autonomous Jewish rule in the Land of Israel that lasted "for more than two-hundred years until the destruction of the Second Temple."⁴ It is a fairytale-like story where the underdogs decisively defeat their enemies and usher in a period of religious renaissance, political autonomy and economic prosperity.

The most authoritative history of the time surrounding the story of Chanuka is found in the Sefer HaMakabim.^{5,6} Within Sefer HaMakabim, time is chronicled based on Minyan HaShtarot or the ancient Macedonian calendar. It was a unique Greek calendric system that measured time from a particular event rather than by the reign of the current monarch.⁷ This allowed for a more consistent and continuous enumeration of time which was much more efficient and efficacious in dating events and documents especially their chronological placement relative to other events or records. It was similar to the Jewish calendar which enumerated years from the Exodus from Egypt and in later times from the creation of the world. There is much controversy as to why Minyan HaShtarot was adopted by Chazal as the default Jewish calendar.⁸ It was used for dating contracts, marriage contracts and bills of divorce and it

¹ גמרא שבת כא: ומגילת תענית פ"ט (הסכוליון)

² מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמיני אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשנכנסו יוונים להילכיל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאוים ימים טובים בהלל והודאה. (שם שם) ועיין במגילת תענית ביתר הרחבה.

³ בבית שני כשמלכו יון גזרו גזרות על ישראל ובטלו דתם ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ובמצות, ופשטו ידם בממונם ובבנותיהם ונכנסו להילכיל 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 מאתים שנה עד החורבן השני... (רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ג,א-ג)

⁴ קשה לקבל את טענת הרמב"ם כי אחרי מאה שנה הרומאים כבר נכנסו לתמונה והמלכים אז הפכו להיות מלכי וסאליות לרומא וגם יש פקפוקים לגבי הייחוס של חלק ממלכי החשמונאים ובמיוחד מהורדוס ואילך

⁵ זה רק נאמר לגבי ספר מכבים (מקבים) א ובוודאי שהספר כתוב מנקודת מבט של תומך בחשמונאים אבל מהפרטים והיכרות במקומות הנזכרים נראה שזה מחובר זמן קצר לאחר האירועים ובדרך כלל מסכימים החוקרים על אמיתות התיאורים בכללם

⁶ ספר מכבים א במקורו נכתב בעברית אבל לא נשאר כתב-יד מהמקור בעברית. מה שנשאר לנו הוא מה שמתורגם ליוונית (Septuaginta) וגם מה שנמצא בספר יוסיפון בספר קדמוניות היהודים (שבחלק גדול סמך על ספר המכבים). לפיכך כל ציטוט בין בעברית ובין באנגלית הוא תרגום של תרגום.

⁷ מלכות יוונים לא היו מונין בו לכל מלך ומלך כמו שהיו מונין לשאר מלכים אלא לתחלת המלכות היו מונין לעולם ויראה לי הטעם מפני שהיה כבוש גדול ודבר מפורסם ביותר ועשאוה כשנת העיקר לענין החשבון: (מאירי ע"ז י.)

⁸ אמר רב נחמן: בגולה אין מונין אלא למלכי יונים בלבד. הוא סבר: דחיי קא מדחי ליה, נפק דק ואשכח, דתניא: בגולה אין מונין אלא למלכי יונים בלבד. (עבודה זרה י.)

remained in use by Jewish communities deep into the thirteenth century. Some Rishonim claim that the base year for the calendar was Alexander the Great's ascension to the throne or possibly the year he successfully vanquished the Persian Empire.⁹ Others suggest that the more likely starting point is the year in which the Seleucid dynasty was established which might be connected with the defeat of Antigonos I by Ptolemy I and Seleucus I (the founder of the Seleucid dynasty) which then freed Seleucus I to take control of his appointed position as Satrap of Babylon, the region that was allocated to him at the Partition of Triparadisus. Based on the Gemara, the starting date for Minyan HaShtarot is 311-312 BCE.¹⁰

In Chapter Four, Sefer HaMaccabim describes the rededication of the Temple by Judah Hamaccabi and the establishment of the holiday of Chanuka in the year 148 or what would be 163-164 BCE. The narrative elucidates the painstaking efforts undertaken by Judah and his fellow Kohanim to purify and rededicate the Temple service. They repair the breaches in the walls and rebuild the altar from scratch since it had been defiled by service to idolatry. "And then early in the morning on the 25th day of the 9th month, that is the month of Kislev, in the year 148 of the kingdom, they arose and offered burnt-offerings according to the law on the new sacrificial altar. And at the exact time of the month on which the nations had profaned it, on that very day, it was consecrated with songs, and lutes, and harps, and cymbals. And all the people fell on their faces, and bowed down before God worshipping and blessing the God of heaven, who had given them success, strength and salvation. So for eight days they celebrated the consecration of the sacrificial altar and offered burnt-offerings, thanksgiving offerings with heartfelt joy...And there was great celebration among the people for now the reproach of the nations had been removed. Then Judah and his brothers and the entire assembly of Israel decreed that the days of the consecration of the sacrificial altar should be observed with Hallel and thanksgiving to God on the anniversary every year for eight days, from the twenty-fifth day of the month Kislev. And at that time, they built reinforced walls and strong towers around the Temple on **Har Tzion** in order to prevent the nations from once again trampling and defiling it as they had done before. And Judah placed a force there to protect it; and he fortified the city of **Beit-Tzur** in order to protect it, so that the people might have a stronghold facing Edom."¹¹

The retelling of the Chanukat HaMizbeach and the rededication of the Temple as well as the description of the establishment of the holiday of Chanuka is very similar to that which is quoted by the Gemara.¹² What is more intriguing is the introduction to this section where, "Judah and his brothers said, 'Now that our enemies have been discomfited and crushed, let us go up to purify the holy places and rededicate them.' So the whole camp gathered together, and went up to **Har Tzion**. And they found the holy-place desolate, and the sacrificial-altar profaned, and the gates burned down, and plants growing in the courts as in a thicket or on one of the mountains, and the priests' chambers demolished. Then they rent their garments and they sprinkled ashes on their heads and mourned gravely. They trumpeted the trumpets and fell on their faces and their cry rose to the heavens. **At that time, Judah appointed a regiment of men to lay siege against those in the citadel, while he purified the holy places.** And he chose undefiled priests, **who had remained faithful to the covenant of God** and he commanded them to purify the Temple and dispose of the defiled stones to an impure location..."¹³ The fact that Judah appoints those that had remained faithful to God to lead the purification of the temple implies that there were a large camp of individuals, and priests, who were not steadfast in their beliefs and practices. Many of the Jews at that time had Hellenized and were opposed to the unenlightened ancient practices of their fellow Jews. They adopted and promoted the Hellenistic culture and worship and they sought to wrest control from the "religious zealots" and compel their brethren to follow in their ways. These Hellenists flourished until they encountered resistance from a small band of radical Kohanim led by Mattityahu and his sons. These priests steadfastly stood by their faith and began an insurrection that was exceedingly successful and gained popularity and momentum with their continuing military victories. It is very likely that the Seleucid-Greek decrees and military intervention against the Jews and later the Hashmonaim was initiated and requested by the Jewish Hellenists who were under siege and suffered heavy setbacks from this new agile military force who was resisting the process of Hellenization.¹⁴ Only twelve years before the story of Chanuka, Yerushalayim had been turned into a Greek polis and the process of profanity climaxed seven years later with Antiochus IV's return from a successful battle against the Ptolemies in Egypt; his advances were eventually thwarted by the intervention of the rising Roman Empire. On his return through Jerusalem, he

⁹ ...וכבר נהגו כל ישראל למנות בגיטין או ליצירה או למלכות אלכסנדרוס מקדון שהוא מנין שטרות... (רמב"ם גירושין א, כז) וגם עיין במיאירי שמצוטט בהערה 7

¹⁰ עבודה זרה י, וגם עיין **מנין שטרות**.

¹¹ מכבים א ד, גא-נט

¹² חסרון בולט הוא נס פך השמן ואפילו יותר בעיני מה שנמצא בספר יוסיפון קדמונית היהודים יב, ז על חג האורים שצריך שיעור מיוחד ואכמ"ל

¹³ מכבים א ד, לו-מא

¹⁴ אפשר שחלק מהמלחמת אחים גם היה קשור למחלוקת לגבי תמיכה בממלכת הסלאוקית (יונים) בצפון לתמיכה בממלכת התלמיית (יונים) בדרום שלחמו כמה מלחמות ביניהם לשליטה על ארץ יהודה (שנכבשה ע"י שניהם יותר מכמה פעמים בשנים אחרי מות אלכסנדר מוקדון)

ransacked the city, slaughtered the Jews, erected a statue to Zeus in the Temple and instituted religious decrees against the Jews in an attempt to possibly secure his control over Judah, or subdue a Jewish revolt or lend support to the Hellenists.¹⁵ **He established the citadel in Yerushalayim, manned with loyalist troops** to enforce the decrees, collect tributes and thwart any Jewish attempt to reestablish worship in the Temple. That citadel, which was highlighted above, remained as a source of difficulty for the Hashmonaim during the dedication of the temple and celebration of Chanuka and for many years after. Professor Yishaya Gafni suggests that many of the Hashmonean battles were not actually attempts to conquer Yerushalayim, but rather endeavors to obstruct the Seleucid reinforcements from breaking into Yerushalayim to save those holed up in the citadel. There was no decisive victory on Chanuka, but rather a small success and a détente between the warring parties before the troubles resurfaced shortly after. The Maccabim were engaged in continuous battles and all of Matityahu's sons were killed in military campaigns after the story of Chanuka.

In Chapter Six, Sefer HaMaccabim, a book authored by someone clearly sympathetic towards the Hashmonean dynasty, describes that after the death of Antiochus IV in the year 149 (162 BCE), in the following year which was two to three years post Chanuka, Judah Hamaccabi lays siege to the citadel in Yerushalayim in order to finally rid it of its Hellenists. Once again, the Seleucid Greeks were called in to rescue their loyal subjects and King Lusias came with a large force to break Judah's siege of the citadel. Judah is forced to abandon the siege and engage the invading enemy forces in a battle at Beit Zecharia where his brother Elazar attempts to kill their leader with a suicide attack on what he mistakenly identified as the elephant with the royal harness. He was successful in his mission, but it unfortunately did not yield the desired results due the misidentification. After that battle, the Seleucid Greeks move on **Beit Tzur**. The city is unable to resist the forces due to it being a Shmittah year which left the people famished due to the lack of sustenance. The citizens surrender and abandon the city in favor of the Greeks who set up a garrison there to begin their siege and attack on the Maccabean stronghold in the rededicated Temple. There were no provisions for those defending Yerushalayim because the limited supplies (Shmittah) had already been consumed by the refugees who had sought sanctuary in Judah from the other areas occupied by foreigners. "There were but a few men left in the sanctuary, since the famine had prevailed over the rest and they

scattered, each to his own place." The temple would have been once again lost had it not been for a fortuitous situation where a competing protégé of Antiochus IV had returned to Antioch to seize the crown that required the hasty withdrawal of Lusias's armies to defend his claim to power. Before leaving, Lusias has the stronghold walls of **Har Tzion** torn down in order to prevent future Jewish insurrections from barricading themselves in the Temple to stave off Seleucid Greek attacks.

In both the years 151 (160 BCE) and 152 (159 BCE), with the ascension of Demetrios to the Seleucid kingship, once again Jewish instigators encourage the king to send large forces to defeat Judah the Maccabee. They were thoroughly defeated in their first attempt, but successfully kill Judah in the second campaign. The Hellenists become ascendant and persecuted the Hashmonean followers. In the year 153 (158 BCE), the Greeks and their loyalists return to Yerushalayim and its surroundings where they **reinforce the citadel** and surrounding cities and station garrisons in each of the fortified locations. They also begin **tearing down the wall of the inner court of the Sanctuary** which had been there since the time of the prophets and which was only impeded from being completed by the death of the leading collaborator. Judah's brothers, Jonathan and Simon finally lead a new insurgency and successfully wrest control from the Seleucid Greeks and their loyalists.

In the year 167 (144 BCE), Jonathan, the beneficiary of a civil war in the Seleucid kingdom, tries once again to take the citadel in Yerushalayim. It seems that he was not successful in this endeavor, but he does begin to expand the borders of the Hashmonean kingdom beyond the narrow areas of Yerushalayim and the surrounding cities of Judah. He is captured and killed when he falls prey to a deceitful peace initiative set as a trap by the Seleucid invaders at the city of Ptolemias in the Galilee. He is succeeded by his brother Simon. Two years later, **in the year 171 (140 BCE), Simon finally successfully conquers the citadel in Yerushalayim** after laying siege to it. "And in the year 171, in the 2nd month, on the 23rd day, Simon's forces entered the citadel with shouts of praise and thanksgiving, and with palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and lyres, and with the singing of hymns and songs, because a great enemy of Israel had been crushed. And Simon ordained that this day should be celebrated every year with gladness. He also further fortified the temple's mountain alongside the citadel, and he and his companions dwelt there."¹⁶ Simon rules as the king and high priest until he is assassinated along with

¹⁵ עיין מכבים א פרק א

¹⁶ שם יג, נא-נב

his two eldest sons by his son-in-law in 135 BCE. He is succeeded by his third son John Hyrcanus. Simon's military escapades help to greatly expand the Hashmonean kingdom as the Seleucid Empire is beginning to crumble from pressure within and without and those borders are further enlarged by his son John Hyrcanus. Simon's reign begins a golden age of prosperity and autonomous Hashmonian rule that lasts until the civil war between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II which in ~63 BCE sees the Roman occupation of Judah by Pompei.

From the above historical synopsis, one sees that Yerushalayim and the Temple grounds were not secured for nearly twenty-three years after the celebration of the Chashmonean victory of Chanuka. In addition, the Jews faced many trials and tribulations, persecutions and tragedies in the intervening years. Our intention is not to challenge the historicity of Chanuka, but rather adjust the prism through which it is seen and the context in which it is found. For a people in exile for millennia, the dream of a return to the Land of Israel with autonomous rule was just that – a far-fetched dream with remote to no chances of ever coming to fruition. A downtrodden people in a bleak state of exile and oppression are not interested in the intricacies and difficulties of developing such an autonomous governing rule. They do not want to hear of the ongoing military battles and sacrifices that it will take

to securely establish oneself as a formidable force and a nation with legitimacy. Rather, they want to dream of a utopian future that offers them hope and a light at the end of the endless tunnel of exile. They need to celebrate a fairy-like story of Chanuka to keep alive that pining desire for something glorious and better in the future. They are interested in a dream not reality. That over-simplification comes at a price, because people start to believe that the reality will come true like a dream (בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים). That is where the "real" story of Chanuka has so much to say (speaks) to our generation. The Chanuka success of the Chashmonaim was a first-step in a long process. It was far from perfect and it would not be for nearly twenty-three years that the victorious Chashmonaim would actually establish a vibrant autonomous empire. In the interim, even in the dark moments, they would celebrate the annual eight-day holiday of Chanuka with Hallel and thanksgiving to remember the tremendous munificence shown to them by God. It was only the first-step in a difficult multi-year battle filled with colossal highs and lows, but it still was the turning point that set the trajectory for the restoration of "Israel's kingdom." As we annually recite in the Haggada, Dayeinu (דיינו), each step is worthy of consideration, reflection and thanksgiving, especially the starting point.

Shabbat Shalom and Chanuka Sameach

