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Shedding New Light On Chanukah



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The cruse of oil story that explains the origins of Chanukah has fallen into disrepute. Many people feel that it appeals to children only, because Chanukah for adults is about a military victory against overwhelming odds. The Babylonian Talmud, they say, composed the story to downplay the Maccabean triumph. But they are wrong. If we read the cruse of oil story in context, we will see how “authentic” it is, and what purpose its authors intended it to serve.

After the Babylonian Talmud notes which oils and wicks are appropriate for Shabbat lamps, it segues into a discussion of Chanukah lamps and how they are used (Shabbat 21b). For example: each home needs to light at least one lamp on each night of Chanukah; the lamp must be placed outside the door or, if the dwelling is upstairs, in a window facing the public way; one may not benefit from the light of a Chanukah lamp; it must be lit during the evening “rush hour.” The Talmud then asks, “What is Chanukah?” and launches into the famous cruse of oil story: when the Hasmoneans overpowered the Greeks and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem, they found only one cruse of ritually pure oil, sufficient to burn in the Temple menorah for one day only, but — miraculously — lasted for eight. And so we celebrate Chanukah for eight days.

If we continue reading the Talmud’s discussion of Chanukah, we are surprised to find, just one page later (22b), another menorah story. It first appears in Sifrei Bemidbar (sec. 59), a midrashic text that predates the Talmud. Unlike the cruse of oil story, this one is little known. The Talmud asks, “Why does God need a menorah burning continuously in the Temple?” and answers that it informs all inhabitants of the world that the Shechinah, God’s presence, rests upon the people Israel. How is this so? Because every night the designated kohen would pour the same amount of oil into all seven branches of the Temple menorah. By the next morning, six of the flames would have gone out. But the seventh, called the Western lamp, would

remain lit until the following evening when the kohen would come back to light the menorah. He would use the one remaining flame to kindle the six others. That is, the oil of the Western lamp lasted twice as long as it should have.

It cannot be a coincidence that two such similar stories about the Temple menorah appear so close to each other in the Talmud. It seems much more likely that, with just a little tweaking, the "miraculous menorah" story morphed into the Chanukah story, which speaks of the same menorah and the same phenomenon of "burning on empty." If the cruse of oil story is an altered version of an older one, then we now have to ask: why did the rabbis do this? Why did they adapt the older story and add it to the report of the military victory?

A very likely reason for the rabbinic rewrite was to fight assimilation. The Babylonian Jews lived among Zoroastrians and hence saw everywhere, in this darkest month of the year, Zoroastrian holy fire, a key feature of that religion. By consciously adapting the old Jewish legend of a continuously burning Western lamp, by requiring Jews to place their Chanukah lamps on public display, and by forbidding them the use of the lamps for a practical purpose, the rabbis gave Babylonian Jews a way to light their own holy fires, at a time when the Zoroastrians were kindling theirs. For these Jews, Chanukah assumed added importance.

This new understanding of the cruse of oil story should resonate with Jews living in a Christian culture today. There is no denying that Christmas, with its twinkling lights and exchange of gifts, exerts a strong pull on many American Jews. Ramping up Chanukah with presents, songs, a chanukkiah for each person in the family, and even an electric menorah in the window, are contemporary responses to living in an open society. Some look askance at these new practices. But taking our cue from the rabbis of the Talmud, we should celebrate, not denigrate, the transformation of Chanukah from a minor to a major holiday. The cruse of oil story, therefore, is as "true" today as it was back then. No need to be embarrassed to tell it to our children and grandchildren, of whatever age.

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