

The Gemara (Shabbos 21b) asks מאי חנוכה, "what is Chanukah"? Rashi interprets the question as for which miracle was it established. The Gemara attributes the prohibition of fasts or eulogies during the 8 day period to after the Maccabees defeated the Greeks they found that they had defiled all the oil in the Temple except for one flask with the seal of the High Priest that was hidden. That oil burned for 8 days until fresh pure olive oil was pressed for the Menorah. The following year they established this 8 day period as one of הלל והודאה, praise and thanks. The Gemara in Shabbos mentions only the miracle of the Menorah as the basis for Chanukah.

Rambam (Hilchos Chanukah 3:1-3) mentions that the Jews were successful in ousting the Greeks from the temple and restored the Jewish monarchy for an additional 200+ years. This victory took place on the 25th of Kislev. He then mentions the miracle of the oil, as mentioned in the Gemara. The Rambam then says that there are 2 manifestations to Chanukah:

1) ימי הלל ושמחה - days of praise to Gd and happiness. This is the reason that fasts and eulogies are not permitted on Chanukah, similar to Purim;

2) 8 days when we light candles to reveal and demonstrate the miracle that Gd performed for us.

It is interesting to note that Rambam mentions these days are called Chanukah when he mentions that these are days of שמחה והלל, joy and praise, in that they are forbidden to fast and offer eulogies. For some reason he did not mention it in reference to the lighting of candles.

The Rama (Hilchos Chanukah 2) quotes Reb Avraham from Prague who held that there is קצת מצוה, somewhat of a Mitzvah, to have a סעודה, a festive meal, on Chanukah. This would only be a סעודת רשות, a voluntary meal. The reason for this is that the חנוכת המזבח, dedication of the altar, took place on those days. According to some opinions one would be required to eat bread, פת, on Chanukah to fulfill the obligation of סעודה. (To say that there is a requirement to eat bread on Chanukah, would be sensational, as it would make Chanukah stricter than סעודה שלישית on Shabbos). Rambam says these are days of Simcha, not Seudah. There is a negative manifestation (prohibition to fast and eulogize) and a positive side, to be happy.

The reason for requiring a Seudah on Chanukah may be based on the Midrash on Parshas Bhaaloscha. The original date for the dedication of the Tabernacle in the Sinai Desert was supposed to be the 25th day of Kislev. However, with the sin of the Golden Calf and period of repentance and forgiveness, it was delayed to the first of Nissan, preceded by the 7 preparatory days beginning with the 23rd of Adar. Kislev had a complaint, so to speak, as to why it lost out on this great honor. The Midrash says that

Gd, כביכול, consoled Kislev saying that in years to come there will be another dedication held in Kislev, during the time of the Hasmoneans. Therefore on Chanukah we celebrate both the dedication of the altar in the time of the Hasmoneans and the original intended day for the dedication of the Tabernacle.

The Gemara in Shabbos mentions only the aspect of Chanukah related to the lack of pure oil after the Greeks were ousted. However the Gemara elsewhere (Yoma 16a) talks about the fact that the stones of the altar were defiled by the Greeks. There were other problems after the ouster of the Greeks, besides the lack of oil for the Menorah. The altar itself had to be rebuilt in order for sacrifices to be offered.

Rambam is of the opinion that the Halacha of חנוכת המזבח, dedication of the altar, is a הוראת שעה, a temporary directive, and the requirements stated in the Torah for the dedication of the altar in the Tabernacle do not apply for all subsequent generations. However the חנוכת המשכן was a period of Yom Tov. Ramban says that according to Rabbeinu Yonah there is a מצוה לדורות, a perpetual obligation, to dedicate the vessels of the Temple through עבודה, Temple service. Whenever an altar is dedicated, there must be מלואים, a period of fulfillment, when an altar is dedicated a Yom Tov is associated with that period. This aspect of Yom Tov does not apply to the dedication of all vessels. But it does apply to the altar. The sacrifices brought in the Tabernacle during its dedication were a הוראת שעה. However the obligation to perform the dedication applies for all time. Gd “informed” Kislev that it will not lose the Yom Tov that was originally scheduled for its 25th day. The חנוכת המזבח that will take place in the times of the Hasmoneans will be a Yom Tov as well, since it will be the day in which the altar will be dedicated and will make up for moving of dedication of the Tabernacle from Kislev to Nissan.

On Chanukah, we read from the Torah the dedication of the Tabernacle by the tribe elders, נשיאים. If Chanukah was simply a commemoration of the miracle of the oil and Menorah, then we would be hard pressed to see the connection between the reading from the Torah and Chanukah. We should have read from Parshas Tsav or one of the Parshios that talk about the Menorah.

However if we view Chanukah from the perspective of the day on which the dedication of the altar took place, the intended day in the time of the Tabernacle and the actual day of dedication in the time of the Hasmoneans, then the connection is obvious. Each day of Chanukah was part of the dedication process. Each day is connected to the other days of Chanukah in that it was one of the days that comprised the חנוכת המזבח. The days of חנוכת המזבח are indeed a Yom Tov. The Torah reading over Chanukah is confined to the dedication of the altar only. However, on Shabbos, both aspects of Chanukah are mentioned: the Torah reading mentions the dedication aspect and the Haftorah mentions the Menorah.

As Rambam says, the reason these days are called Chanukah is because they were the days of שמחה והלל associated with the dedication of the altar. For this reason, fasting and eulogizing are forbidden. These days also commemorate the miracle of the oil that burned for 8 days. The term Chanukah has nothing to do with the candles. Rather it is associated with the חנוכה המזבח.

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