

AN ADULT APPROACH **TO HANUKKAH**

By: Rabbi Robert S. Schriebman
(Hanukkah 5769)

© Robert S. Schriebman 2008, All Rights Reserved

PART TWO - THE NESS (MIRACLES) OF HANUKKAH

Introduction: This is Part 2 of my treatise on Hanukkah. We have been told since childhood that the miracle of Hanukkah was the fact that a one day supply of oil lasted 8 days. Assuming this to be true, was this event the true miracle of our holiday? In this part we will examine the nature of a miracle in our religious tradition and then we will see that there was a lot more to the miracles of Hanukkah than the story of the oil. The real miracle of Hanukkah, in this author's opinion, was the survival of our people as Jews.

What is a Miracle?: What is a miracle? It may mean different things to different people. What is a miracle to me may not be a miracle to you. Our sages teach us that what looks like a miracle may have been established at the

time of creation and sort of programmed into time as one would portion a certain action when designing a computer program. Events such as the exodus from Egypt, the parting of the Reed Sea, or even the great fish that swallowed Jonah may have been preordained by the Lord. Thus, the victories of Judah Maccabee, the rededication of the Temple, and the "miracle" of the 8 days of the Hanukkah menorah may have been preordained. Who knows?

I'm going to take the point of view that the victories of the Maccabees and the 8 days of light were not preordained. Sort of like God was watching the tactics and strategies of the Jewish army and was so impressed that the 8 days of light were His way of expressing His surprise and joy.

Let's look back on the days of Greek-Syrian influence in the Holy Land before the reign of Antiochus IV. Up until his time, the Greek governors were content to let Hellenism take hold and spread by peaceful means. The Greeks were willing to recognize and even accept the Torah if the Jews would agree that the Torah was not divine but manmade, like the Greek religion itself. The Torah would be changed from time to time to harmonize with the goals of the particular ruling class of Greek kings. The Torah, therefore, would not be God's Torah. The Greeks did not oppose the rekindling of the menorah. However, the oil would have to have that certain "Greek touch" since the Greeks deliberately defiled the oil to make it Greek.

The story of Hanukkah and the battles that won Jewish freedom (even if for a short time), were essentially cultural battles. The Greeks were a pagan culture and they wanted that culture to swallow up Judaism. Until the time of Antiochus IV, the end strategy of Greek rulers was to have their culture totally swallow up Judaism; no more Jews. The Greeks "packaged" their paganism in very subtle ways through art, poetry, sports, philosophy, theater, mathematics and logic. To the Greeks, logic was everything. The victory of Hanukkah actually used logic against the Greeks.

The Torah comes along and says that contaminated oil cannot be used to light the menorah. To the Greek mind, that kind of thinking is illogical and cannot be grasped by the Greek mind. The Greeks could not accept the concept of spiritual purity. The essential point of the Jewish rebellion was a clash of two cultures, not two armies. The Jews challenged the Greek culture and said, "Our God is beyond logic, beyond rationale, and so is our existence as a Jewish people." God showed the Greeks that the laws of logic were made by Him and can be broken by Him. The miracle of the oil lasting 8 days defied logic and defied the Greek culture. Think about it – there is no logical way that one small jar of oil could last 8 days. That was God's message to the Greeks and the world.

The Miracles of Hanukkah: The miracles of Hanukkah did not put an end to the Greek culture in the Holy Land or in the Middle East. The clash of cultures mentioned above continued for hundreds of years after the menorah was rekindled. Its influence did not wane until the fall of the Roman Empire. The Romans eventually conquered the Greeks physically but the Greeks conquered the Romans culturally. Greek culture and influence lasted almost 600 years after the death of Alexander the Great.

Indeed, if we could look back to the year 170 BCE, we would say that the Greeks won everything. At least 40% of the Jews were Hellenists (Saducees). Many great rabbis had Greek names and taught their students the beauty of Yafas (Greece in Hebrew). The basis of Greek culture was harmony. One's mind, body and all of nature were to be one harmony. Devout Jews, however, saw the world in a different way. Jews were exclusive and separate. They were not part of a whole humanity. They were not part of the general world. This point of view has been consistent with our people and has been one of the strongest contributing factors to anti-Semitism. Many believe this is the way God has made us. It's built into the system, so to speak. When we Jews have tried to assimilate over the centuries, assimilation has not worked out. When we have tried to convert to the popular religion of the land, our efforts have not been totally successful. One need only look at Jewish persecution during the 20th century and especially the Holocaust. The idea of separateness, the idea of exclusivity, makes many of us uncomfortable. Many of us just want to be like everyone else.

The initial miracle of Hanukkah was brought about by the oppression of Antiochus IV and those who followed him in power. Many Jews became Hellenized but did not go all the way. In other words, they were Hellenists outside of their homes but Jews in their homes. The oppression of the Syrian-Greek leaders brought out the Jewishness in these people. It made them sit up and take notice of what was happening to the Jewish people. It made them revolt against the system. This is the real "ness" of Hanukkah. This is what made the Maccabees go to war and build a successful Jewish army. This is what really rekindled the menorah.

That little jar of oil represents the Jewish soul, the Nashuma within each Jew. While we may appear to be contaminated on the outside, we are Jews on the inside. We want to do the right thing. We want to serve God. The victories brought about by the Maccabees were aided by God because He saw that spark of pure oil within the Hellenized Jews.

The "ness" of Hanukkah was a "Kiddush Hashem". The Hellenized Jews made it possible for the observant Jews to rise up and revolt against Greece. The Hellenized Jews did T'Shuva. They had had enough of Greek culture. They

"turned around". The strength of the Jewish revolt and the source of Hanukkah came from these Hellenized Jews.

The lights of the menorah burned without fuel. This is a metaphor for T'Shuva. It comes from within when there is no outer appearance that it exists. It's like a car that continues to run when the gas gage reads empty.

The Hellenist culture is gone. The historic oppressors of the Jewish people are all part of the ash can of history. However, we Jews are still here. That's a true miracle. That's the "ness" of Hanukkah.

In our lifetimes, we have seen modern versions of the "ness" of Hanukkah. The creation of the State of Israel and the victories in Israel's 1948, 1967 and 1972 wars are all part of the "ness" of Hanukkah.

Most likely, the starting point for examining the miracles of Hanukkah occurred before the menorah was rekindled. The oppression of Antiochus IV paved the way for a Kiddush Hashem. The Hellenized Jews made it possible for the observant Jews to rise up and revolt against Greece. Hanukkah represents a turnaround; an awakening within the Jewish soul of what it means to be a Jew. Therefore, the source of the miracle came from Hellenized Jews. This is the real miracle of Hanukkah. This is why the rabbis have stressed the light of the menorah over the military significance of the Festival of Hanukkah. The light from each and every menorah that burns around the world at the time of Hanukkah represents that inner spark that is the true miracle of the Festival.

Hanukkah is a lesson in taking advantage of a miracle. Everyone was suffering from the Greeks in those days. However, the Maccabees took hold of an opportunity and did something about it. Today, the Maccabees are still heroes and parents name their sons after them.

Hanukkah comes to restore the wonder in our lives. It comes to teach us that we must take advantage of miracles when we recognize them. It comes to tell us to participate in those miracles and not be a bystander. The lights of Hanukkah are more than the glow of the candles. They kindle light within us. They make us a people who can appreciate and understand the greatness of what it means to be a member of Klal Yisrael and to be associated with the Jewish people and with the Torah.

Do We Revere the Spirit of Hanukkah in Today's Modern World?: The sanctity and purity of Jewish life must be preserved at all cost. We need Torah and mitzvoth in our daily lives, and we need spirituality. The civilizations that have oppressed our people for the most part have disappeared into the ash can of history. Countries and civilizations that do still exist such as Egypt, Greece

and Germany are not the powerhouses that they used to be. One of the miracles of Hanukkah is that somehow we Jewish people are still here; we were saved. No other civilization has come back from near extinction as the Jewish people have come back. There is non-definable electric charge that binds the generations to each other. This too is a "ness" or miracle of Hanukkah.

Today we live in a world that worships materialism. Everyone seems to want to get rich quick; lotteries abound. Television shows and advertising campaigns give away millions of dollars. We live in a world that denies miracles and that makes light of everything. We live in a world of intellectual cynicism. We worship manmade "isms". How many people died in the name of communism – an experiment that failed? We still have many idols but they are subtle. We rely on science as the answer to all of man's issues and needs. We measure everything by the yardstick of human reason. Patriotism is a thing of the past. Consecration and commitment are sacrificed to convenience and compromise. Today's modern life, especially in western civilization cultures, is sort of like adding defiled oil to the menorah. With all of our electronic gizmos, cell phones, computers, and high speed Internet connections, we are lonelier than ever. We need to rekindle that light from within each of us.