

# Hanukkah from Alef to Tav

It's almost Hanukkah! Hanukkah has nostalgic vibes for me. When I first started attending a Messianic congregation 25 years ago, it was just a couple weeks before Hanukkah, so this was the first holiday I had the opportunity to experience with others.

My parents got me a 2-CD set of Hanukkah music. And it was not just cheesy Hanukkah classics for kids, it was a compilation of a bunch of contemporary Jewish musicians, some of the songs not even really closely connected to Hanukkah. I didn't even have the context to understand which ones were Hanukkah songs and which ones weren't, and I definitely couldn't understand any of the Hebrew or know who was singing with an Ashkenazi or Sephardi accent. But the songs were just so beautiful and captured my spirit and imagination.

Three years later, Hanukkah also became Beth Immanuel's birthday. It was Hanukkah of 2002 that we branched out as our own independent congregation. Twenty-two years ago. Twenty-two, the number of the letters of the Hebrew alef-bet. We've gone from Alef all the way to Tav. What comes after Tav? In English when we run out of letters we move on to Greek ones, but if Hanukkah teaches us anything, it's that going Greek is not a great idea. As Jews when we end one cycle, we immediately start another. Back to the beginning. Back to Alef.

## What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is such a fitting time for "beginning," because the Hebrew word *chanukkah* means "dedication." It is related to the word *chinuch*, which means education, especially children's education. It is the perfect time for a "reboot" as this was when they rebooted the Temple back in ancient times. And just in case you might be just booting up on this path, and aren't even sure what Hanukkah is, let me tell you the story.

The Bible talks about how Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land of Judah, destroyed the Temple, and took the people as captives back to Babylon. Later, the Persian Empire defeated Babylon and became the rulers of the land. Persian king Cyrus authorized the return of the Jewish people to the land and the rebuilding of the Temple. You can read all about this in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We were still under the occupation of Persia, but we were allowed to live in relative peace.

That might be where the Biblical narrative leaves off, but the story continues. In the course of time, Alexander the Great and his army swept across the entire region and defeated the Persian Empire. Alexander's approach to ruling an empire was different from Persia's. As far as Persia was concerned, just pay your taxes and you can do whatever makes you happy. But Alexander believed that the way to prevent revolution was to unify the culture. So he imposed Hellenism on every region he conquered, requiring the residents to adopt the Greek language, religion, and culture.

Jewish history has it that he was going to impose this rule on the Jewish people but was talked out of it by a righteous high priest named Shimon, whom Alexander had seen in a dream. He decided not to destroy the Temple or convert it to idolatry, nor did he impose Greek culture on the Jews. Out of gratitude, many Jews named their kids Alexander, which has remained a significant Jewish name to this day.

But Alexander died at a young age, and his kingdom was divided into four kingdoms, as prophesied in the book of Daniel. The region covering Israel and Syria was ruled by a general named Seleucus, and so it became known as the Seleucid empire. Seleucus and the rulers who came after him honored Alexander's policy of exempting the Jewish people from Hellenism.

However, over the course of generations, many Jews Hellenized voluntarily, and a rift developed between those who stayed faithful to Judaism and those who assimilated. During the reign of a king named Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in the 160s BCE, the infighting led him to end the Jewish people's exemption from Hellenism. He formally banned the practice of Judaism, circumcision, the Jewish calendar, and the study of Torah. He set up an idol of Zeus in the Temple (with his own face), confiscated its treasures (including the golden menorah), and had pigs slaughtered on the altar. He forced the people to celebrate his birthday as a pagan festival.

This led to an all-out revolt. There was a family of priests whose father was named Mattityahu. He had five sons, Yehudah, Shimon, Yochanan, Yonatan, and Elazar. They were known as the Maccabees. The word *makkabi* happens to mean "hammer" in Hebrew, and it also forms the initials of the phrase *מי כמוך באלים ה'* (who is like you among the gods, O LORD). But the best explanation I have heard for the actual source of this name is that it stands for *משמרת כהנים בני יהויריב*: the order of priests in the family of Yehoyariv, one of the twenty-four priestly orders mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24.

The Maccabees led a rebel militia and fought back against the Seleucid army for about two years. Finally, Antiochus died in a freak chariot accident, and the ensuing chaos allowed the Maccabees to move in and chase away an army many times their size, and to reclaim Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel for the first time since king Nebuchadnezzar conquered it.

Upon entering the Temple, they had a lot of work to do. They had to tear down the defiled altar and build a new one. They had to construct a makeshift menorah. And they had to re-light it. They found only one jug of oil left with the seal still intact and the hechsher of the high priest. It was only enough oil to burn for one day, and it would take eight days to produce more oil. They decided to light it nonetheless, according to the Torah's command.

In the meantime, they reflected on the fact that they had completely missed Sukkot that year due to Antiochus' persecutions. So they grabbed their lulav and etrog and sang the Hallel for eight days.

And throughout those days, the oil in the menorah kept burning, attesting to the fact that God was with them. He performed this great salvation and was pleased with their work.

The next year, they marked the anniversary of this event by instituting the holiday of Hanukkah as an expression of praise and thanks to God.

### **A particularly "Messianic" holiday**

Hanukkah is a great symbol for us, the Messianic Jewish community. We were deeply assimilated into Christianity, but in the nineteenth century, a fire kindled inside of us. We speak of these early Messianic pioneers as our "luminaries," and rightly so. I think of Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein who declared,

I will remain among my own nation... I am not drawn to join Christendom. Just as the prophet Jeremiah, after the destruction of Jerusalem, in spite of the generous offers of Nebuchadnezzar and the captain of his host, chose rather to remain and lament among the ruins of the holy city, and with the despised remnant of his brethren, so will I remain among my own brethren, as a watchman from within and to plead with them to behold in Yeshua the true glory of Israel.

Or I think of Chaim Yedidiah Pollak who insisted:

It is because I am a Jew, who conscientiously tries to live according to the Torah of Moses and the prophets, that I believe the Messianic hope of Israel has been fulfilled in Yeshua. Many call me a convert, a proselyte. That is not true. I have not gone over to the Gentiles—Yeshua is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

Avram Poljak likewise stated:

God wants the Jews to remain Jews. The roots of our spiritual strength lie in Judaism. As Jews, we are God's people. Falling away from Judaism—denial of being Jewish—is punished. God will find the assimilated in every country until all Israel turns around and sets out for the Father's house—for the essence of what is Jewish is the spirit of the eternal, martyred, unlimited faith of sincere, honest Judaism. On this path the Messiah—Yeshua of Nazareth, King of the Jews—will encounter us.

This is the spirit of the Maccabees. In fact, Chaim Yedidiah Pollak lamented that Jewish Christians he encountered often refused to celebrate Hanukkah, deeming it man-made. He said we should be the leading celebrators of this holiday. It was Hashem who performed these miracles.

Messiah—*mashiach*—means “anointed with oil.” How much more Messianic can you get than a holiday that is all about oil? Messiah is the “Light of the world.” What could be more Messianic than a holiday about the light of the menorah?

According to our sages, God almost made Hezekiah the Messiah. But then the attribute of justice objected and said, “Not fair. You didn't make King David the Messiah, and he sang so many songs to you. Hezekiah hasn't sung a thing.” On Hanukkah, what is the other important mitzvah apart from lighting the Hanukkah menorah, the hanukkiah? Singing the songs of David. We sing the *Hallel*. And we, the disciples of our Master Yeshua, sing it on his behalf.

And what does Hanukkah celebrate? The rededication of the Temple and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. It reminds me of this intensely Messianic passage at the end of Ezekiel 37:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules (*mishpatim*) and be careful to obey my statutes (*chukkot*). They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince (*nasi*) forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary (*mikdash*) in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place (*mishkan*) shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I

am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary (*mikdash*) is in their midst forevermore." (Ezekiel 37:24-28)

Technically we could even say that Hanukkah is a biblical holiday, even though it is a rabbinic institution. It shows up in the New Testament, in a verse that always deserves a mention this time of year, in the Gospel of John 10:22-23: "At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Yeshua was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon." Dedication is simply the translation of Hanukkah, and the New Living Translation does a great job here and just translates it that way.

And as I like to point out, the most popular names in the New Testament are the names of Maccabees. Why were three of the twelve disciples, a full quarter of the disciples, named Yehudah? And this does not include Yeshua's brother Yehudah? Why were two of them named Shimon? Again, not including Yeshua's brother Shimon? Matthew, Lazarus, John? They were named after their heroes.

Additionally, they were no longer enjoying the freedom secured by the Maccabees, and they aspired to do so again. Imagine if the United States were occupied by a foreign power, and people started naming their kids things like "George Washington" or "Paul Revere." That sends a subtle message about our aspirations.

In that vein, Hanukkah is not a holiday of "peace and love." Non-Jews have given it that spin because they want Jews to have something to mirror Christmas. But our holiday of peace and love, of decorating and treats and songs happens in the fall. It's called Sukkot. If anything, the true spirit of Hanukkah is more like the Fourth of July—not peace and love but "the rockets' red flare, bombs bursting in air."

But it's Rabbinic, that's true. Yeshua celebrated, but it is Rabbinic. If you want to see the Biblical holidays, you have to turn to Leviticus 23. It lists for you Shabbat, Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret. If it were to list Hanukkah, where would it be? At the end. Now look what happens. The very last verse of Leviticus 23 says, "Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed times of Hashem." Then Leviticus 24 begins, "Hashem said to Moses, 'Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly'" (Leviticus 24:2). Is that a prophetic allusion to Hanukkah in the Torah?

Or how about this: Hanukkah means "dedication," right? Numbers Chapter 7 describes the original dedication of the Tabernacle. You could read the whole thing but if you jump right to the end, Numbers 7:88, we read:

"All the cattle for the sacrifice of peace offerings twenty-four bulls, the rams sixty, the male goats sixty, the male lambs a year old sixty. This was the dedication offering for the altar [*chanukkat ha-mizbeach*] after it was anointed." (Numbers 7:88)

It actually uses the word Hanukkah here. Then what is the very next thing discussed? Chapter 8:2:

"Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand." (Numbers 8:2)

Again a fascinating, potentially prophetic allusion to Hanukkah in the Torah itself.

But there is one other factor that potentially could help elevate Hanukkah to a Biblical holiday. That is the principle of publicizing the miracle.

In the Torah's laws of sacrifices, it includes instructions for a thanksgiving offering. This is the offering that a person is required to give when they experience a miraculous salvation. You will find its rules starting in Leviticus 7:12. The way this sacrifice works is that you bring the animal, perhaps a bull, to the Temple. The priests apply its blood to the altar, burn its sacred portions, eat their share, and the bulk of the animal is returned to you. The rule is that entire animal must be eaten that day. How is this possible? You have to invite lots of friends to help you, which naturally implies that you will tell them the story of how you were miraculously saved.

This establishes a Biblical principle for us that God's miraculous acts of salvation must be publicized. We are obligated to praise and to thank God and as Psalm 145 says "to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds."

The Maccabean Revolt is not a small footnote in history. If the miracle of Hanukkah had never taken place, the Jewish people would have ceased to exist in any identifiable form before the time of the New Testament. They would be as obscure and nameless in this world as the Phoenicians or the Nabateans. Every one of us in this room would be an idol worshiper, probably serving the gods of Greece or Rome, God forbid. So we have much to be thankful for.

Do you know about the Streisand Effect? Barbra Streisand tried to silence people who were spreading pictures of her house, but the result was that it drew even more attention to it. A Streisand Effect happened to the Seleucids, who tried to make us forget the Torah. Instead, under the rulership of the Maccabees and their successors, the Jewish identity and observance of the Torah became stronger than ever.

So how do we do this? You probably know about the special menorah for Hanukkah. Its design is not the same as the one in the Temple, and that is intentional, because it is forbidden under the laws of idolatry to duplicate Temple service and the holy vessels outside the holy place. So it's similar, but intentionally distinct. There is a special order to light the candles, I won't get into it now. But we have a helper candle called the shamash and then we use it to light one candle the first night, two second night, and so on. The purpose is to accomplish the goal of publicizing the miracle, which is why it is customary to set it outside your front door or by the window.

Our other task for the days of Hanukkah is halel vehoda'ah: praise and thanks. We sing the Hallel Psalms each day, Psalms 113-118. We also have nice meals but we are careful to include words of thanks and praise at the meal.

Because Hanukkah is not officially one of the appointed times, it has no holiness of its own. You have to supply the holiness yourself. It's like buying a toy that says "batteries not included." Other days, like Passover or Yom Kippur are holy automatically, by Hashem's command, whether you know it or not. But Hanukkah only has significance through your observance of it. So if you have a meal of oily foods but don't utter words of thanks and praise, all you accomplished is breaking your diet.

On other holidays, you make sure to say the blessing *Shehecheyanu*, “who has kept us alive, upheld us, and let us reach this time.” You say it as soon as the holiday starts just because holy time has arrived.

But on Hanukkah, you have to supply the holiness. So when do you say *Shehecheyanu*? Not when Hanukkah starts. You might think that you should say it the first time you light your hanukkiyah. But that’s not technically true either. You should say it the first time you see a hanukkiyah lit, even if it was lit by someone else.

Because the holiness of Hanukkah is not in the lighting of the candles. It’s in the seeing of the light.

We have this recitation after lighting the candles: “All eight days of Hanukkah, these candles are holy, and we do not have permission to make use of them, but only to look at them in order to give thanks and praise for your miracles, wonders, and salvations.”

We are supposed to look at them. And Hanukkah is not a Shabbat, so there is generally no prohibition of work, except for the thirty holy minutes right after you light the candles. It’s like the silence in heaven in Revelation 8:1. Just stop and look, look at the light. This prohibition is even more strict on women than men. Don’t go frying latkes. Stop. Look at the light. Try to see something.

### **What are we supposed to see?**

What do we hope to see? Remember, the light of the hanukkiyah reflects the light of the Menorah in the Temple.

A midrash (Tanchuma 6:2) comments, “The blessed Holy One said to Israel: In this world, you were obligated to the light of the Temple, but in the world to come, in the merit of that light, I will bring you King Messiah, who is compared to a lamp. As it is written in Psalm 132:17: ‘There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed (*mashiach*).’ As if to say, “a lamp as my *mashiach*.” This is the light of the world—the light of the seven days of creation.

How many candles do we light in total? Not including the shamash, we light 1 the first night, 2 the second night, 3 the third night, and so on. In all, we will have lit 36 candles. This is intentional and significant.

When you read the creation narrative, after describing each day’s events, what does the Torah say? “And there was evening, and there was morning, one day.” “And there was evening, and there was morning, a second day.” And so on until the sixth day. But regarding Shabbat, the Torah never says “there was evening.” What happened?

A midrash teaches that Hashem would have put away the light of the world, but he decided to keep it revealed through Shabbat. That means that from sunrise on Friday morning, we had twelve hours of normal daylight, then twelve hours Friday night of holy light, then twelve more hours on Saturday, a total of thirty-six hours. Then on Saturday, night, Adam and Eve experienced darkness for the first time, and they were scared. So God taught them how to make light themselves by lighting a fire. God took two stones made a spark, and with it he lit the first Havdalah candle and taught them the blessing, בּוֹרֵא מְאוּרֵי הָאֵשׁ, “who creates the illumination of fire.”

Yeshua said:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:15-16)

This is the light of the hanukkah. It's a glimpse of what is in store for us in the Messianic era. Isaiah speaks about it when he says in Isaiah 60:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)

The sages teach that when the Torah says that God separated the light from the darkness, it is describing how he concealed the light of the world, separating it from the darkness, separating it from the wicked, so that he could give it as an inheritance to the righteous in the times of Messiah.

This is what the first chapter of John is also getting at when it says,

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not [taken hold of] it. (John 1:4-5)

The light of the world is separated from the darkness. Hanukkah is the darkest time of the year. Not only is it near the winter solstice but it also always takes place over Rosh Chodesh, the disappearance of the moon. It's the darkest moment according to both the sun and the moon. That specifically is when we light, in the deepest darkness. It's like firing a proton torpedo into the Death Star's reactor core and setting the whole thing ablaze. This is what we are doing on Hanukkah, and what we are supposed to be seeing when we look into the candles.

### **Preparation**

It's not Hanukkah yet. This year Hanukkah begins on the night of December 25. That's when you light your first candle. I wanted to share these ideas with you before Hanukkah so you will still have time to prepare. According to Jewish law, one should prepare for holidays thirty days in advance, but any amount of preparation is worthwhile.

Preparation is the necessary ingredient that transforms an empty shell of meaningless ritual into an act of intention. The Kotzker Rebbe told a parable. A man is hired for one hour to chop down a tree. He could spend that entire hour smacking his dull axe blade against that tree, or he could spend the first 50 minutes sharpening his blade, and then the last ten minutes slicing easily through the tree. Either way, the pay is the same.

Preparation for a mitzvah can be even greater than the mitzvah itself. Which act is more holy: the lighting of the menorah in the Temple, or the preparation of its wicks and lamps?

The Torah's command that the menorah must be lit is addressed to the Children of Israel. It was normally a kohen who did this and all of the functions of the Tabernacle. However, by Jewish law, derived directly from Scripture, any Jewish man is permitted to perform the function of lighting the lamps. But the Torah is explicit that the preparation of the lamps must only be done by a kohen. This

restriction implies that the preparation of the menorah is at a higher level of holiness than the lighting itself. And this should inform us about how we approach mitzvot in general. Don't skimp on the preparation.

In this way every mitzvah is a bit like Shabbat. On Shabbat you only have what you prepared in advance. Shabbat is the ultimate example of "preparation makes the mitzvah." The same is true of every mitzvah. The Gemara tells us that the pious men of old used to meditate for an hour before prayer so that they would be in the proper frame of mind for prayer. So don't let Hanukkah arrive before you've done a little spiritual preparation so that your heart is full of pure intention and your mind is focused on the goals you seek to accomplish as you look into the light of the first candle.

I want to bless you, and I ask you to bless me as we enter this special season that you would have a *lichtege chanike* (a brilliant, light-filled Hanukkah). May Hashem grant you insights and inspiration as well as resolve to resist the pressure to give in to the world's expectations. Instead, may you grow stronger and more dedicated as disciples of Yeshua, and we see him transform this world from darkness to light soon and in our days.