

## In Search of a Miracle

*Why did it take 600 years after the Maccabees recaptured the Temple for the story of the miraculous jar of oil to emerge?*

BY MANUEL GOLD

Ask any Jew to tell you how Chanukah began or why we celebrate this festival for eight days and you will no doubt be told the story of how Syrian Greeks defiled the Temple, and how, after Judah the Maccabee and his brothers recaptured and cleansed it, they found a little jar of oil that miraculously burned for eight days. But, in fact, Chanukah was observed for 600 years before the “jar of oil” story made its debut in Jewish literature!

Where, then, did the story of the “jar of oil” come from? And what was the miracle of Chanukah for our ancestors?

The answers can be found in the written sources. Forty-four years after the Maccabean victory in 164 B.C.E., two books chronicled the war and the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple.

*The First Book of Maccabees*, compiled some time after 120 B.C.E., recounts: “They...made new sacred vessels, and they brought the lampstand... into the Temple. They burned incense on the altar and lit the lights on the lampstand, and the Temple was filled with light...For eight days they celebrated the dedication of the altar....Then Judah, his brothers and the entire community of Israel decreed that the days of rededication of the altar should be celebrated with a festival of joy and gladness at this same time every year beginning on the 25th of the month of Kislev and

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lasting for eight days” (4:49-59).

This early account does not mention the “little jar of oil” miracle. Apparently the author did not know of the story. At the time, the miracle was the victory itself: that God had enabled the Judeans to overcome the far mightier Syrians.

*The Second Book of Maccabees*, compiled at about the same time as *First Maccabees*, reports: “Judah the Maccabee and his men, under the Lord’s leadership, recaptured the Temple and the city of Jerusalem... After purifying the Temple, they made another altar. Then by striking flint they made a new fire and...offered sacrifices and incense, lit the lamps...On the anniversary of the very same day on which the Temple had been defiled, the 25th of Kislev, they now purified the Temple. They celebrated joyfully for eight days, just as on Sukkot, knowing that [a few months before] on Sukkot they had spent the festival [hiding] like wild animals in the mountains and caves.... That is why they came carrying stalks wreathed with branches—palm fronds—and ripe fruit

[the *lulav* and *etrog*], and sang hymns of praise [Hallel] to Him Who had given them the victory that had brought about the purification of His Temple. By a vote of the community they decreed that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate these festival days every year” (10:1-8).

Like *First Maccabees*, *Second Maccabees* makes no mention of the “jar of oil.” It does, however, shed light on why Chanukah is an eight-day holiday.

A few months earlier, the Jews had been unable to pray in the Temple on Sukkot—known as “The Holiday” (*HeChag*)—the most important festival on the Jewish calendar because it included *Tefilat Geshem*, the prayer for rain. During the eight days of this festival, vast numbers of Jews would travel to the Temple in Jerusalem to thank God for the crops just harvested and pray for rain and a good yield in the next year.

Once the Temple was back in Jewish hands, the Jews’ first act was to celebrate a belated Sukkot, now in the month of Kislev. They carried the *lulav* and *etrog*, sang the Hallel Psalms for eight days as on any Sukkot, and participated in torch-light processions during which jars of water were carried up to the Temple and symbolically poured onto the altar (part of the Sukkot ritual). The large golden oil lamps burning in the Temple courtyard lit up the entire city of Jerusalem (Mishnah Sukkah 5:3).

Initially the new festival was called  
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