

(Exodus Rabbah 1:22)

6. Understanding: Pharaoh's daughter rescued Moses from the water, then raised him under her father's nose and let his biological mother nurse him. God renamed her Batya (daughter of God) in recognition of her great understanding of a people who were "supposed to be" her enemies. (Leviticus Rabbah 1:3)

7. Joy: Sarah demonstrated great joy after hearing that she was to have a child at the age of ninety—reminding us to celebrate everything positive, even the seemingly impossible. (Genesis 18:10-15)

8. Love: Lot's wife, Idit, looked back at her children and brethren while escaping Sodom, an act of selfless love that resulted in her being reduced to a pillar of salt (representing her tears). (Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer 25:160 a/b)

During a time of year when it's easy to be self-centered, remembering these great women of antiquity helps me remain Jewishly centered.

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In Search of a Miracle

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"Sukkot in Kislev." We know this from *Second Maccabees*, which begins with a letter the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea sent to the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt urging them to "...celebrate Sukkot in the month of Kislev" (1:1-9). A second letter to the Jews of Egypt, written in 164 B.C.E. and purportedly by Judah the Maccabee himself, reads in part: "Since we are about to celebrate [the first anniversary of] the purification of the Temple on the 25th of Kislev, we thought it proper to inform you that you too may celebrate this Sukkot [in Kislev]" (1:18).

Notably, "Chanukah" (Dedication) is not mentioned until *Megillat Ta'anit* (The Scroll of Days on which Fasting is Forbidden), which was written during the first century C.E.—two hundred years after the Maccabees purified the Temple! "On the 25th Day of Kislev," it reads, "Chanukah [begins]—eight days—mourning is forbidden." And in none of these sources is there mention

of the "little jar of oil."

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18b) relates a notable event in the first century C.E.: "The residents of Lydda declared a fast on Chanukah. Rabbi Eliezer [ben Hyrcanus] returned there and bathed. Rabbi Joshua [ben Hannaniah] also returned and had his hair cut. [Bathing and haircutting were forbidden on fast days.] [Later] they said to the residents [of Lydda], "Go now and fast in atonement for having fasted [on Chanukah]!"

From this we learn that some Jews must have opposed the celebration of Chanukah, which to them probably represented an "activist" approach to dealing with occupiers. Afraid that even non-violent opposition might unleash the wrath of the oppressor, these "passivist" Jews wished to play down the message of the Maccabees—that opposition to foreign rule is sometimes justified and, with God's help, can succeed.

In the years that followed, depending on the century or the location, either "activist" or "passivist" approaches would dominate. The Jews of Palestine, by and large, continued to favor activism, which often took the form of subtle literary derogation of the oppressor. In contrast, and perhaps because the ruling authorities typically gave them the right to self government, the Jews of Babylonia tended to favor accommodation, declaring, "The law of the government is the law" ("*dina de malchuta, dina*"), a dictum that occurs nine times in the Talmud.

Thus, for the Jews of Babylonia, the Chanukah story of the Maccabees' victorious struggle presented a problem: their young people might be influenced by the Maccabee model to become "activist" opponents of authority. It is at this point, six centuries after the Maccabean victory, that the miracle of the "little jar of oil" finally makes an appearance in the sacred literature. The festival of Chanukah had become so firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of the people, it was impossible to eliminate. So the Babylonian Jews changed the miracle story from the military victory against overwhelming odds to the little jar of oil that lasted eight days.

"Why Chanukah?" asks the *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat* (21b). The answer: "Our rabbis taught [in *Megillat*

Ta'anit] on the 25th day of Kislev begin the eight days of Chanukah on which eulogies [mourning] and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil; and when the Hasmonians prevailed and defeated them, they searched and found only one jar of oil with the official seal of the High Priest, but which was only enough for one day's lighting; yet a miracle occurred, and they lit the lamp with it for eight days. The following year these days were decreed a festival with the recital of Hallel Psalms and thanksgiving."

The real question of this Talmudic text is not "why do we celebrate Chanukah?" but rather "on the authority of what miracle are we permitted to recite Hallel Psalms on Chanukah, a custom usually reserved for biblical festivals?" Its answer is the miraculous "jar of oil," which, given its first appearance here, was probably borrowed from some other tradition or invented for the occasion.

This passivist version of Chanukah was not universally accepted. Three hundred years later in Palestine, another explanation was offered for the recital of Hallel during this holiday. *Pesikta Rabbati* (a Palestinian midrash completed in the year 847 C.E.) says: "The sons of the Hasmonian High Priest [were] victorious over the Kingdom of Greece... Upon entering the Temple they found eight iron rods which they thrust [into the ground] and kindled lights in them. On what authority is Hallel recited? Because [one of the Hallel Psalms] states: 'The Lord God has given us light'" (Psalm 118:27). In this version of the story, the Hasmonians were originally High Priests, which is not elsewhere confirmed; and the authority for reciting Hallel is not the miraculous oil, but rather the authority of God.

In the centuries that followed, Jews in dire straits in different parts of the world usually chose the "passivist" route of accommodation, and with it, the little jar of oil miracle. In modern times, however, activism has been restored as a valid Jewish option—one which made the modern miracle of the State of Israel possible and drives the Jewish goal to bring freedom to the oppressed, hope to those in despair, and peace to the world. □