

Hanukkah – 5776 (2015) Should Christians Observe Hanukkah?

WARNING: This post is longer than normal.
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Today we're going to focus on the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. We're going to learn a lot about Hanukkah. I've entitled this teaching "Should Christians Observe Hanukkah?" By the end of today's lesson, I hope that you will agree with me that the answer is a resounding, YES!!

What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is an annual festival celebrated on eight successive days, during which no eulogies are delivered, nor is fasting permitted. It begins on the 25th day of Kislev, the third month of the Jewish calendar, corresponding, approximately, to December in the Gregorian calendar. This year (2015), Hanukkah starts at sundown on December 6th. Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of Lights, Feast of Dedication, and Feast of the Maccabees.

As an aside, the name Hanukkah can also be read as a combination of the two words "Chanu k'h" which means "they rested on the 25th" - an allusion to the "resting" that occurred after the Jews were victorious in their battles.

Hanukkah is not one of the feasts or festivals commanded in the Torah in Leviticus 23 (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot) but, like Purim and Yom HaShoah (The Day of Remembrance for those who died in the Holocaust) it is Rabbinically prescribed.

To learn some of the details of the Hanukkah story, we have to turn to the apocryphal books of I & II Maccabees. While the books are not a part of the established Hebrew or protestant canon of Scripture, they are considered authoritative accounts and are useful historical documents which can be read for example of life and instruction of manner, yet not for the establishment of doctrine.

History of Hanukkah

To fully understand this holiday, we need to go back to a tumultuous time in the history of Israel to the Hellenistic period around 168 BCE. A few generations earlier, the Greeks had come to world power under the remarkable leadership of Alexander the Great. After his untimely death, there was a scramble for political power among four generals, resulting in the division of the Hellenistic empire. Eventually, the Syrians, under the leadership of Antiochus IV, gained power and control over Israel.

Seeking to unify his holdings, Antiochus enforced a policy of assimilation into the prevailing Hellenistic culture. Many Jews in Judea had converted to the Hellenistic way and openly advocated adherence to it. However, there were a significant number of traditional Jews who were appalled at the changes in their society. An ultimatum was eventually given: either the Jewish community must give up its distinctive customs (Shabbat, kosher food laws, circumcision, etc.) or die.

In 168 BC, on a date corresponding approximately to December 25 in the Gregorian calendar, the temple was dedicated to the worship of the pagan god Zeus by order of Antiochus, who forbade the practice of Judaism. An altar to Zeus was set up on the high altar. Antiochus also ordered that a pig be sacrificed on the holy altar and insisted on being called 'epiphanes' which means "god manifest".

Pushed to their limit, the Jews revolted. Chapter two of 1 Macc introduces the man credited with leading the revolt: ***"In those days Mattathias son of John son of Simeon, a priest of the family of Joarib,***

moved from Jerusalem and settled in Modein. ²He had five sons ... [including] ⁴Judas called Maccabeus. ...⁶He saw the blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem, ⁷and said, "Alas! Why was I born to see this, the ruin of my people, the ruin of the holy city, and to live there when it was given over to the enemy, the sanctuary given over to aliens?⁸ Her temple has become like a person without honor;⁹ her glorious vessels have been carried into exile. Her infants have been killed in her streets, her youths by the sword of the foe.¹⁰ What nation has not inherited her palaces and has not seized her spoils? ¹¹All her adornment has been taken away; no longer free, she has become a slave. ¹²And see, our holy place, our beauty, and our glory have been laid waste; the Gentiles have profaned them. ¹³Why should we live any longer?" The rebellion had begun.

In 165 BC, Judas Maccabee recaptured Jerusalem, he had the temple purged and a new altar put up in place of the desecrated one. The temple was then rededicated to God with festivities that lasted eight days. A year later the Rabbis designated these days as Yomim Tovim (Holidays) on which praise and thanksgiving were to be said.

The Miracle of the Oil

When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils, and when the Maccabees defeated them, they searched and found only one remaining jar of oil with the seal of the Cohen Gadol (the High Priest). According to tradition, only a one-day supply of non-desecrated olive oil could be found for the rededication, but that small quantity burned miraculously for eight days. Jews commemorate this event by lighting candles for the eight nights of Hanukkah.

The rabbis decreed that the eight days beginning with the 25th of Kislev should be days of rejoicing; that Hallel (praise) be recited and that lights be lit in the entrance to their homes each of the eight nights, in order to publicize the two-fold miracle: the miracle of the oil as well as the miraculous military victory.

Why Is Hanukkah Celebrated For Eight Days?

Questions have arisen over the years about the actual miracle of the oil. If there was enough oil in the flask that was found to last one day, then the miracle of the oil lasting was really only a miracle for the latter seven of the eight days. Yet, we know that the Jews celebrate Hanukkah for eight days! What is the reason behind the eight-day celebration?

The Jewish sages offer three possible answers:

1. Those who were preparing the Menorah for lighting knew that it would take eight days until new oil could be obtained. They therefore divided the flask into eight parts, so that at least the Menorah would be lit every day, albeit not for the entire day. A miracle occurred and the small amount of oil that was placed in the Menorah each day lasted an entire day. Hence, there was a miracle on the first day as well.
2. On the first night, the contents of the flask were emptied into the Menorah. This would enable the Menorah to be lit for one entire day. However, after filling the Menorah, it was discovered that the flask miraculously was still full. This miracle repeatedly occurred for each of the days. Hence, there was a miracle on each of the eight days.
3. On the first night, the entire contents of the flask were emptied into the Menorah. This would enable the Menorah to be lit for an entire day. When the Menorah was checked on in the morning, it was discovered that none of the oil burned up, and the Menorah was still full, although the flame was lit. This miracle occurred for each of the days. Hence, the first day when the oil did not burn up was miraculous as well.

I'll leave it to you to determine which of these three explanations or some other is the correct answer to the question.

When And How Does One Light The Candles?

Unlike the Shabbat candles that are always lit before sundown, the Hanukkah menorah is lit after dark by the head of the household, usually in connection with a festive meal. There is also a custom of using an extra candle, the Shamash to light the other candles. For messianic believers, the Shamash is symbolic of Yeshua, the Light of the World.

To be kosher, the eight candles of the menorah must be in a straight line with the Shamash, or middle candle, a little bit above them. Any menorah that is fancily shaped in a circle or square...is not permitted to be used since the candles must be in a straight line and none may be higher or lower than the others, except for the Shamash. There must also be enough space between one candle and another so that the flames of each are not intermingled.

On the first night of Hanukkah, one candle is lit and on each successive night another candle is added until by the eighth night all the candles are lit. When one lights the candle on the first night, one lights the candle on the extreme right. The following night he adds one immediately to the left and kindles it first. He then turns to the right and kindles the light of the previous night. He follows the same procedure each night always adding from right to left but always lighting from left to right. The reason for this procedure is that the additional light recalls the greatness and growth of the miracle.

[Go to the last page for the traditional Hanukkah blessings and prayer.]

Foods Associated With Hanukkah

Like most of the other festivals, there is specific food associated with the celebration of Hanukkah. There is a custom to eat dairy products and cheese on Hanukkah. This custom stems from the heroism of Yehudis, of the Chashmonean family. Yehudis, a beautiful woman, was taken by the leader of the Greek troops. While she was with the Greek officer, Yehudis fed him a dish cooked with cheese so he would become thirsty. Once he became thirsty, she gave him wine to drink so he would become drowsy. When he fell asleep, she took his sword and beheaded him. She then carried his head back to Jerusalem and displayed it, so that the Greek troops would become demoralized. Her plan worked, and the troops retreated.

There is a custom as well to eat foods cooked in oil. The reason for this custom is because by eating these foods, we are reminded of the miracle that occurred with the oil. Two of the most common foods associated with this custom are "Latkes", potato pancakes and "Sufganiot," which are doughnuts (or flour pancakes), both of which are fried in oil.

The Dreydel - The Hanukkah Top

On Hanukkah, there is a custom to play with a four-sided top. It is said that the Jewish children of Judea, during the Hellenistic period, wanted to study the Torah, but the anti-Semitic policies of Antiochus made this difficult. They came up with a creative answer: they would study the scrolls in the streets until a foreign soldier came. Then they would quickly hide the scroll, bring out the dreidels, and pretend to be engrossed in a game of tops! When the soldier left, the Torah study would begin again.

What Do The Letters On The Dreydel Stand For?

The letters will vary depending on where you are. In the Diaspora, the letters are "nun" "gimel" "hay" "shin" which stands for **"Nes gadol haya sham"** - "A great miracle happened there." In Israel, the "hay" is replaced with a "peh" which stands for "poh," so that the sentence reads "A great miracle happened here."

Traditionally, Hanukkah was one of the only times that rabbis permitted games of chance. Before play, each player puts a certain number of coins, candies, or another object into a "pot." One player then spins the Dreydel. Each of the four sides of the Dreydel bears a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the side that lands up when the Dreydel stops spinning indicates which part of the pot the player will receive. The Hebrew letter *nun* indicates "nothing"; the letter *gimel*, "all"; *hay*, "half"; and *shin*, "put in" or "match the pot." Children also play by guessing which letter will appear when the Dreydel stops, with the winner claiming the pot.

More recently, the custom of giving gifts has found its way into the celebration of this joyous festival. Each day a new gift is given to the children. This appears to be Jewish response to the Christmas gift-giving custom.

Hanukkah - A Spiritual Holiday

There have been many times that oppressive nations sought to destroy the Jewish people, and they were miraculously saved from their designs. Upon two of these occasions (Purim and Hanukkah), the Rabbis saw fit to establish an annual holiday commemorating the miraculous salvation, providing us with an opportunity to remember **ADONAI'S** kindness and thank him for His salvation. Hanukkah is observed in a spiritual way, with expressions of thanks and praise to **ADONAI**.

The oppressive acts of Antiochus and the Syrian-Greeks, were of a different nature. Had the Jews agreed to abandon their own customs and beliefs, and become integrated into the Greek lifestyle, they would have been left alone. Their oppressors sought only to destroy them spiritually. And so, when **ADONAI** granted the Maccabees victory over the Syrian-Greeks, he was preserving the spirituality of the Jewish nation. Our appreciation for this gift, the opportunity to serve **ADONAI** and recognize him as our God, is best acknowledged through spiritual expressions of His praise.

Hanukkah is a holiday on which we celebrate our freedom from religious oppression. The Syrian-Greeks' oppression of the Jews was not physical. They did not want to annihilate the Jews. They did, however, want to annihilate Judaism. They applied whatever pressure they could to "convince" the Jews to abandon the ways of their fathers. Many Jews indeed succumbed to this pressure. Hellenism made inroads into the Jewish communities. At times, the pressure to give in to popular culture was overwhelming. Ultimately, the Jews withstood this pressure and fought with all their might against it. The Jews were victorious. Today, all that we know of the Syrian-Greeks is from history books, while Judaism lives on. When we look at the olive oil burning bright on Hanukkah, we should be reminded that the olive is a symbol of the fortitude our spiritual forefathers had. They withstood the pressure to deviate from the word of God. We should allow the light of the olive oil to inspire us to stand steadfast against the pressure, what ever it may be, to deviate from the word of God.

Significance of Hanukkah to Messianic Believers

So now, we come to my original question, should Christians observe Hanukkah? Although the story of Hanukkah is contained in the apocryphal book of I Maccabees, it is foretold in the Book of Daniel 8:21ff. Daniel has seen a vision and the Angel Gavri'el is giving the interpretation. Surprisingly, the clearest mention of Hanukkah in the Bible is in the Brit Hadashah in John 10:22. This brings us to the first reason believers in Yeshua should celebrate this holiday – it appears that Yeshua may have celebrated it! At the least, He observed the celebration in the same Temple that had been cleansed and rededicated just a few generations earlier under the Maccabees.

Because Hanukkah is a celebration of deliverance, it has also become a time to express messianic hope. The festival commemorates a time when the true worship of God was restored in Jerusalem. Certainly, all believers in Yeshua have important reasons to remember this Feast of Dedication. Messiah, our deliverer, has come!

I started this teaching by asking should Christians observe Hanukkah? The answer is a resounding, YES!

Hanukkah Candle Lighting

Blessings before you light the candles

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hallowed us by your commandments and allowed us to light the Hanukkah lights.

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who worked miracles for our fathers in days of old, during this season.

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who kept us alive, sustained us and privileged us to reach this season.

Light the candle(s)

We light these candles because of the miracles, deliverance and wonders you performed for our fathers by means of your holy priests. During the eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred. We look at them in order to remember to thank you for your miracles, deliverance and wonders.

Hanukkah Prayer

We praise you for the miracles, for the deliverance, for the great deeds and victories, for the battles you fought for our fathers in those days at this time.

In the days of the Hasmonean, Mattityahu ben Yochanan, the great priest, and his sons, when a wicked Hellenistic government rose up against Israel, your people, to make them forget your Torah and to break the laws you gave, you with great mercy stood by them in the time of their distress. You championed their cause, defended their rights and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the ungodly into the hands of the godly and the arrogant into the hands of the students of Torah. You made a great and holy name for yourself in the world, and for your people Israel you performed a great deliverance. Where upon your children entered your sanctuary, cleaned the Temple, purified your house, kindled lights in your holy courts and instituted these eight days of Hanukkah for thanksgiving and praise to your great name.

And for all these blessings, we will thank you always and praise your name faithfully, God of salvation and deliverance. Deserving of praise are you, O Lord, gracious One, to whom it is pleasant to give thanks. AMEN