



Miracles, Old and New

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We think of a miracle as a moment in time, a unique event in history. But Hanukkah teaches us that miracles are actually deeply ingrained patterns in the world, surfacing and re-surfacing throughout time.

Hanukkah is a brilliant example of a holiday seemingly created to celebrate the new. After all, it would be impossible to celebrate the core aspects of the holiday—whether the military victory of the Maccabees, or the miracle of the oil—before they happened in real time. And no source mentions the miracle of the long-lasting oil before the Talmud (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 22b).¹ But the miracle of the lights of Hanukkah is also, literarily, an old story that is re-experienced, renewed for this moment. And in this analysis, we might experience the core themes of the holiday in a new way.

Our rabbis (Pesikta Rabbati 2; 5a) inform us that Hanukkah (literally: dedication) is nothing new. In fact, it is the sixth of seven dedications in human history. The first is the dedication of the world, followed by the dedication of the *mishkan* by Moses, the dedication of the first

¹ This idea is not even found in the original work of the pre-Talmudic Megillat Ta'anit, as shown by Vered Noam. Only in the later “expanded” version of Megillat Ta'anit, influenced by the Talmud, is the miracle present. See Vered Noam, *Megillat Ta'anit* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2003), p. 268. Josephus knows the name of Hanukkah as “Lights” but doesn’t know why it is called that, writing (*Antiquities Book 12*, chapter 7, ed. Whiston, p. 416): “And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.”

and second Temples, the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, the (re)dedication of the Temple by the Hasmoneans, and the future dedication of the world to come. What we now call Hanukkah is the penultimate dedication that foreshadows the final dedication at the end of time.

But the fifth dedication—of the walls of Jerusalem—which immediately precedes our Hanukkah in this list, has an added element of miracle, itself foreshadowing the miracle of the lights of Hanukkah. This component emerges from the Second Book of Maccabees, a non-canonical, ancient text that tells the story of the Hasmoneans. There we learn that the holiday of Hanukkah is based on the “festival of the fire” when Nehemiah offered sacrifices (II Maccabees 1:18).

The story goes like this: When the Jews were exiled during the destruction of the First Temple, some priests hid the sacred fire of the altar in a pit. When it came time to rebuild the Temple and its walls, Nehemiah sent the children of these priests to find the fire. They couldn’t find the fire, but they found some “thick liquid” instead. Nehemiah told the priests to pour this liquid on the altar. When the sun emerged from the clouds, the liquid ignited, and the sacrifices burned. The people responded by offering a prayer of thanks and singing Psalms (I Maccabees 1:20-30).

This miracle is recalled later in II Maccabees 10:3, when the Maccabees purify the Temple and, “ignite rocks, taking fire from them,”² thereby re-dedicating the altar.

Of course, Nehemiah’s miracle of fire itself recalls earlier miraculous stories of fire bursting forth from heaven to consume sacrifices, including the original dedication of the *mishkan* (Leviticus 9:24) and Solomon’s dedication of the Temple (II Chronicles 7:1), as well as Elijah’s showdown with the priests of Ba’al, in which he poured water over the altar, and

² Translation according to *Outside the Bible*, eds. Louis Feldman et al. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), p. 2863.

then fire came down, consuming the sacrifices and the surrounding materials (I Kings 18:34-38).

In fact, we gesture to this continuity of miracles in the very blessing at the core of candle lighting on Hanukkah. The second blessing we recite at candle lighting thanks God for performing miracles “for our ancestors in those days at this time” (*ba-yamim ha-hem, ba-zman ha-zeh*), where “this time” seems to refer to this season.³ But most textual versions of this blessing actually read: “in those days **and** at this time” (*ba-yamim ha-hem u-va-zman ha-zeh*),⁴ which means something more like: miracles happened to us throughout time, then and now.⁵ In this version, the miracles of “those days” could be Hanukkah, and “this time” could be more modern miracles. Or the miracles of “those days” could be the miracles before Hanukkah, and the reference to “this time” could be Hanukkah itself. Either way, it is a blessing that marks the repetition of miracles.

The miracle of the Hanukkah lights is a familiar one. For those who choose to see them and experience them, miracles are not anomalies, but deep patterns of the world. The patterns are out there and predictive of a future filled with light.

There is one other aspect of the establishment of the Hanukkah holiday that is striking, this one related to its date. The Hasmoneans declared Hanukkah to be on the 25th of Kislev. This is a striking date because it is *on that very day* a few years earlier that the Temple was defiled: “It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the 25th of the same month, which was Kislev” (II Maccabees 10:5; cf. I Maccabees 4:52-54). The date of destruction transforms into a date of dedication and celebration.

³ This phrase also appears in the recitation of “*Ha-neirot hallalu*” following candle-lighting.

⁴ For instance: “Selections from the Eretz Yisraeli prayer collection from the Genizah,” *Collected Articles of Ezra Fleischer* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2012), vol. 1, p. 181. See further: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/miracles-those-days-and-our-own-note-hanukkah-blessings>

⁵ See, for instance, Levush Ha-Hur 682:2.

This recalls another day of Temple destruction—Tisha B'Av—which, we are promised, will be a day of great celebration in future times (based on Zakhariah 8:19). The notion of transforming the very day on which the tragedy happens into a day of repair and rejuvenation is a powerful model of renewal. Imagine a world in which September 11th, or Pearl Harbor Day, or any number of tragic days becomes not only neutral, but celebratory. This shift—almost unimaginable—is perhaps its own, potential miracle.

This is the power of the possibility of Hanukkah. It is a holiday not just of miracles, but of miracles that are deep patterns of the world, miracles that emerge and re-emerge, offering hope for the future. And it is a holiday in which the prayer of turning mourning to joy becomes very real, a model for a world in which our days of tragedy might become holidays, mitigating the pain experienced only a short while ago.

May we all experience the deep and powerful miracles of Hanukkah this year.