



# Why do we call it CHANUKAH?

Everyone knows the story of the small Jewish army triumphing over the mighty Greek military machine – and of the single jug of pure olive oil found in the Temple – but where does the name come from?

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



**DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ARE AN INTEGRAL** part of being Jewish, after all the Talmud is full of them. And who isn't familiar with sayings like: "two Jews, three opinions"? Sometimes, however, we don't realise just how far these differences of opinion go, cutting right to the very heart of things. Unlike the festivals that were commanded by the Torah, the festivals instituted by our Rabbis were also named by them. So it should be pretty clear how each one got its name, right? Guess again. Hard as it may be to believe, where the name Chanukah comes from is actually steeped in controversy, with our Sages offering many different explanations for why this Rabbinic festival, which simultaneously commemorates the

miraculous defeat of the Syrian-Greek Empire by a small band of vigilante Jews and the subsequent miracle involving a single day's worth of oil burning for eight straight days, received a name like Chanukah, which seems entirely unrelated to either of these two miraculous events.

## BECAUSE OF THE INAUGURATION OF A NEW ALTAR

The Talmud<sup>1</sup> tells us that, after taking control of the Beis HaMikdash (the Holy Temple located in Jerusalem), the Syrian-Greeks defiled the altar that was there by using it to worship their many gods. As a result, after the Chashmonai'im finally defeated the Syrian-Greeks and reclaimed control of the Temple, they needed to pu-

rify it, including building a new altar. It was for this reason that our Sages called the festival Chanukah after the inauguration of the new altar (from the Hebrew: chanukas hamizbeyach) that took place. Another opinion says that not only did the Chashmonai'im need to build a new altar, but they also needed to build new vessels to use in the service performed each day in the Temple because these too had been permanently ruined by the Greeks – and so the inauguration (chanukas), consisting of making these objects holy by anointing them with oil, was not just on the new altar alone, but upon the new altar along with all of the new vessels that were created to use in the Temple service as well.



## BECAUSE OF THE DELAYED INAUGURATION OF THE TABERNACLE

Our Sages teach that another significant event took place in our history on the 25th of Kislev, the same date on which the Chanukah celebration begins: the completion of the work for the Mishkan, the portable tabernacle that travelled with us in the desert. Interestingly, although the Mishkan was fit to be assembled and inaugurated on that same date, Hashem pushed off its inauguration by four months, until the first day of the Hebrew month of Nissan. So, besides sharing the same date in the Hebrew calendar, what's the connection between the Mishkan and the festival of Chanukah? The Midrash brings that when Hashem pushed off the inauguration of the Mishkan to Nissan, He said that He would "repay" Kislev in the future with the inauguration of the Temple that would take place in the times of the Chashmonai'im. Our Sages also note another interesting

connection: the portion of the Torah that describes the mitzvah of lighting the menorah daily in the Mishkan follows immediately on the heels of the portion that describes the gifts given by each tribe on the inauguration of the altar.

How are these two events connected? When Aaron saw the leader of each tribe coming forward to present gifts in honour of the inauguration of the Mishkan, with the noticeable exception of his tribe, Levi, he became upset. Aaron feared that it was due to his role in the sin of the golden calf that he had cost his entire tribe a chance to participate in this historic event. Hashem, however, told Moshe to comfort his brother, Aaron, by telling him that there would be yet another Chanukah (inauguration) down the line, which would involve the lighting of the menorah. Moshe told Aaron that many years later, Hashem would – through Aaron's own children, the Chashmonai'im – perform great miracles and save His people from destruction and

that these events would be named Chanukah after the inauguration of the altar and menorah that would take place at that time. As a hint to this, Hashem placed the Torah portion that describes the mitzvah of lighting the menorah adjacent to the Torah portion that describes the inauguration of the altar and the gifts from the tribes in its honour.

## BECAUSE THEY RESTED ON THE 25TH

The most common answer given by our Sages breaks up the word Chanukah into two separate words<sup>2</sup>:

חנו בכ"ה

The first Hebrew word, "chanu", means "they rested", and the second "word", formed from a combination of the Hebrew letters chaf and hey, isn't actually understood as a word, but rather according to the numerical values of those letters in the Hebrew alphabet, aka their gematria, with chaf being equal to 20 and hey being equal to 5, for a total of

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25. According to this answer, our Sages called this eight-day celebration Chanukah because: “they rested on the 25th”, referring to the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev on which the celebration of Chanukah begins.

This explanation, however, leaves us with one very obvious question: what exactly were they “resting” from?

Here again, our Sages are divided with two possible answers being offered: either the “rest” was from the war with the Syrian-Greeks or the rest (in the sense of “resting” on Shabbos) was from melacha (the categories of creative activity that are prohibited from being done on Shabbos). It’s admittedly not easy, even for our Sages, to understand what resting from melacha would have to do with a Rabbinically-ordained holiday such as Chanukah, on which the doing of melacha is permitted (unlike the Torah-ordained festival days which are comparable in their observance to Shabbos), since the days of Chanukah were established only as “days of thanksgiving and praises” to Hashem. At least one of our Sages connects the idea of resting from melacha to a practice of refraining from doing melacha at the time the Chanukah candles are burning<sup>3</sup>, as otherwise, he argues, there would be no basis for connecting the concept of resting from melacha to the name Chanukah. Other Sages argue, however, that the “rest” could not possibly refer to melacha, noting instead that the only resting from melacha that it could possibly refer to would be the wide-spread custom for women to not engage in melacha while the candles are burning, and they dismiss this entirely as a rather forced explanation for how the holiday got its name. Instead, they interpret the “resting” as referring to the newfound ability of the Chashmonai’im and their army to rest from the travels associated with their lengthy war against the Syrian-Greeks, citing as a proof the Torah’s description of our periods of travel and rest during our 40 years in the desert, which uses the same language of traveling and resting.



“THERE ARE MANY FAMOUS QUESTIONS SURROUNDING THE NUMBER OF DAYS WE CELEBRATE OVER CHANUKAH, WITH ARGUMENTS MADE, FOR EXAMPLE, FOR THE FESTIVAL BEING ALTERNATIVELY 7 OR 9 DAYS.”

## BECAUSE THE WORD IS REALLY AN ABBREVIATION

Another answer offered by our Sages is that the word “Chanukah” is not a word at all, but actually an abbreviation, which stands for:

ח' נרות והלכה כבית הלל

“Eight candles and the halacha is like Beis Hillel.”

The basic mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles is to light a single candle each night. But unlike most mitzvos, our Sages teach us that there is an even nicer way to fulfil the mitzvah: each person in the house lights a single candle each night. However, the nicest way of all to light, they teach, is for the head of the household to light a number of candles corresponding to that particular night of Chanukah (as we are all accustomed to doing nowadays). It’s not as simple as it appears though, as the gemara<sup>4</sup> brings an argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Beis Hillel (aka the school of Hillel) maintained that we should start by lighting one candle on the first night of the festival and then add a candle on each subsequent night, until we light a total of eight candles on the final night. Beis Shammai (aka the school of Shammai), however, maintained that we should do just the opposite,

light eight candles on the first night of the festival and then subtract a candle on each subsequent night, until we end up lighting just one candle on the final night. As in most matters, we follow the opinion of Beis Hillel, starting with one candle and then adding a candle each night thereafter.

So why does the abbreviation need to explicitly state the length of the festival?

There are many famous questions surrounding the number of days we celebrate over Chanukah, with arguments made, for example, for the festival being alternatively 7 or 9 days. According to the argument for a 7-day festival, since there was already one day’s worth of oil in the jug that was found, the miracle was actually only for 7 days – not 8. The argument for a 9-day festival is based on the concept of celebrating two days of each festival outside of Israel. Back when the declaration of the new lunar month was based upon witnesses coming to Jerusalem to give testimony before the Sanhedrin about their having seen the appearance of the new moon, communities outside of Israel would celebrate two days for each Torah festival because of the time it would take for messengers to arrive and inform these communities regarding when the new



month had been officially declared to begin (and, accordingly, remove any doubt that would arise regarding the specific date when any festivals would fall out during that particular month). Because each new moon could appear on only one of two possible days each month, we could narrow down when the new lunar month would begin, and subsequently when any given festival would fall out, with a margin of error of a single day, knowing that the new month, and accordingly any festival in that month, would begin on either day A or day B. Based on this approach, our Sages should have added an extra day to the Chanukah celebration to account for this difficulty in the calendar that would be experienced by communities outside of Israel, thus making the Chanukah celebration a total of 9 days.

The interesting thing about both of these arguments is that, were we to celebrate for either 7 or 9 days, it would not be entirely clear on each night of the multi-day celebration of Chanukah in

whose favour the question of whether to ascend or descend in number was decided. The problem is that, were we to celebrate for either of these periods of time, since each one results in an odd number of days being celebrated, the result would be that the middle day – the 4th day in the case of a 7 day celebration, and the 5th day in the case of a 9 day celebration – would result in the same number of candles being lit according to both Beis Hillel and Beis Shamai, thereby making it impossible to tell which opinion we follow by simply looking at the number of candles that have been lit on any given night!

1 2 3 4 5 6 7      1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1      9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

According to this explanation, the name Chanukah was chosen because it hints to both the total number of days of the festival that our Sages decreed that we celebrate – ie. eight – and the fact that we must add, rather than subtract, a candle each night in accordance with the opinion of Beis Hillel.

## BECAUSE IT MARKS THE INAUGURATION OF THE FUTURE REDEMPTION

Finally, some of our Sages teach that when we light the Chanukah candles each night, we reveal some of the original light that was hidden away at the start of the Creation of the world. According to this approach, the festival was named Chanukah because it serves as the inauguration of the future redemption.

We may argue over why we call it Chanukah, but, whatever the reason, may it be a wonderful holiday for Jews everywhere. Freilichen Chanukah! **IL**

*Adapted from Ha'moadim Be'halachah by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin*

<sup>1</sup>Avodah Zorah 52b

<sup>2</sup>Adding the Hebrew letter beis as a prefix to the second "word".

<sup>3</sup>The Shulchan Aruch paskens opposite to this, noting that we are permitted to do melacha while the candles are burning, but that women are accustomed to not do melacha during that time.

<sup>4</sup>Shabbos 21b

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