

Jewish Study Network

Chanukah

On Chanukah we celebrate the Jews' victory over the mighty Greek army. We also recall the miracle of the Menorah. After they miraculously won over the Greeks, the Jews returned to the Temple to try to restore order after the Greeks had demolished it. They searched for pure oil that had not been contaminated by the Greeks, but were only able to find one small jar of oil, enough to burn for one day. G-d made a miracle and the oil burnt for eight days. Although the Greeks defiled as much of the Temple as they could, the story of Chanukah seems to only focus on the Menorah and the oil. Why is celebration focused mainly on the Menorah? It takes a deeper understanding of the Menorah to understand its importance as the focal point of the Greek-Jewish conflict.

It would seem to be that the purpose of the Menorah was to cast light. The Talmud (Shabbos 22b) points out that G-d does not need us to light his Temple for him. He was the one who lit the way for us in the desert for forty years. In fact the Torah (Numbers 8, 2) tells us that all the lights of the Menorah faced towards the middle light and not straight up as flames naturally do. Rashi explains that this was to show that the Menorah was not lit for the sake of giving light, for if that was so, it would have made more sense for the lights to be facing straight up, maximizing the light. Rather, the Menorah served as a testimony to the world that G-d resides in Israel's presence. The Menorah was different than all the other vessels in the Temple in that its purpose was not to serve G-d, rather it was so G-d could demonstrate His presence to the world. This is also the reason why the Menorah was hammered out of one piece of solid gold rather than taking smaller pieces and connecting them. G-d wanted the Menorah to come from one piece of gold to symbolize G-d's oneness.

The Talmud explains that the way the Menorah proved G-d's presence in the Temple was through the middle light. This light was identical to all the other lights in size, had the same amount of oil and the same sized wick. Yet it was always the first to be lit and the last to go out. This showed that although G-d has established laws of nature by which He runs the world, he is not bound by these rules. G-d can, and will change the laws of nature when He sees fit. Furthermore G-d commanded the priests to light the Menorah, rather than have it lit by itself, to show that we too are essentially above the laws of nature. By connecting to G-d and His Torah we will create for ourselves an entirely new existence. The survival of the Jewish people throughout the ages is not something that follows the normal patterns of history. We survived the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusades, pogroms and even the Holocaust. Nations have desired to wipe us off the map. Throughout our history there have been many nations who have tried to destroy us. Yet we are very much still here. This can only be attributed to the spirituality that we have im-



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This concept is the opposite of Greek philosophy. The Greeks worshiped physicality. They idolized the physical human body, which led to the creation of the Olympic games. They praised the human intellect claiming it was the highest possible form of knowledge. There was no room in Greek culture for spirituality. This led to their attack on the Jews' religious practice which were all focused on spirituality. One of the mitzvot they targeted was brit milah. This was because milah represents the fact that humans are not perfect and our life's goal is to work on improving ourselves. The Greeks believed that the human body was already perfect. The Greeks also specifically targeted the Temple because the Temple served no practical physical purpose. The entire purpose of the Temple was spirituality. It is interesting to note that when the Jews came to look for oil, the problem was not that they could not find any oil. The problem was that they could not find pure oil that was not defiled by the Greeks. It seems like the Greeks purposely did not just spill out the oil. Instead they chose to contaminate it. They were trying to send a message that they did not agree with the concept of spiritual impurity. If the oil still looked the same it was not different than pure oil.

When the Maccabees returned from the war and looked to restore the Temple, they looked to the Menorah. This was a sign of G-d's presence and a symbol of spirituality and rising above nature. G-d performed a miracle to allow the Jews to keep the Menorah lit to affirm these ideas in their, and the rest of the world's, mind - that there exists a higher level of existence than just the physical, natural world. By connecting to spirituality we can put ourselves in an existence that is a little closer to G-d.

Happy Chanukah and Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Gavriel Rudin

