

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Chanukah

We can discover much about Chanukah by analyzing the song Maoz Tzur, written by a 13th century poet, which we customarily sing after lighting the candles.

The poet starts by praising Hashem in the first line, but the rest of that stanza is a prayer for the future dedication of the altar in the third Temple, which seems to have no connection to Chanukah. The next four stanzas describe the oppression the Jews endured from the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. The Midrash refers to these four points in Jewish history as exiles, difficult situations when the Jewish people looked to G-d for salvation. But, as the first stanza implies, we have been in exile for two thousand years and await a return to the Temple to once again serve G-d in the ideal way.

It seems like the exiles in Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia are a distraction from the story of Chanukah. Why do we bother mentioning all of the exiles now; why not simply mention the Greeks challenging the Jewish people and Hashem propelling them to victory? Secondly, why does the poet offer a prayer for the new altar of the third Temple? We do not sing this song on Purim, the only other Rabbinnically instituted holiday, even though it contains a similar stanza about the Purim story. This too begs for an explanation.

Maybe we could answer that Chanukah relates to the Temple service more so than Purim because on Chanukah we light the menorah, one of the daily services done in the Temple, while the story of Purim took place when there was not a Temple. But this alone is a weak explanation, because our lighting differs completely from the mitzvah of lighting in the Temple. We light an eight-branched Chanukah, while in the Temple they lit a six-branched menorah. We light in every home, whereas in the Temple, one lighting sufficed for the whole nation. So we are back to the original question: why do we diverge on a tangent about all of the past exiles and also include a plea for the future return to Jerusalem?

R' Yoel Sirkis (16th century) points out a fundamental difference between Purim and Chanukah, which sheds light on this topic. In the Purim story, Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people, and therefore the holiday celebrates our physical survival. This threat to Jewish existence occurred in Persia, in between the First Temple and Second Temple, when the Jews lived in exile outside Israel. G-d saved the Jewish people from Haman's plan to annihilate them, but this salvation did not involve a return to Israel or Temple service.

On Chanukah, on the other hand, the enemy did not try to destroy the Jews physically, but rather to remove their spiritual identity. We say in the special al hanisim prayer on Chanukah that they wanted the Jews to forget G-d's Torah and no longer to keep his mitzvot. More specifically, they directly stifled service of G-d by defiling the Temple. When the Jewish people overcame the Greeks, they purified the Temple and strengthened their commitment to the service in the Temple and to all Torah pursuits.

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We mention the exiles of Egypt and Bavel on Chanukah as well, because the return from those exiles, like the rededication of the Temple in the time of the Hasmoneans, resulted in a strengthening of mitzvah observance and Jewish living. The redemption from both of those exiles culminated in the return to the land of Israel and the building of the first and second Temples, respectively. We include a stanza about the Purim stanza along with the other major challenges to the Jewish nation, but the poem primarily focuses on the nations that challenged the Jews' ability to serve G-d in the ideal way.

We pray for the dedication of the third Temple because although we resumed the Temple service in the Chanukah story, we have not been able to serve G-d in the ideal way since the destruction of the second Temple approximately two thousand years ago. While we praise Hashem for the salvation of Chanukah, we realize our current spiritual void and wish for another salvation.

Based on this analysis, we can understand why Zecharia 14 is the haftarah for Shabbat Chanukah. The prophet Zechariah describes how Zerubavel will lead the Jewish people in the construction of the second Temple. An angel shows him an image of a menorah and two olive trees providing it with a steady flow of oil. Rashi explains the angel meant this image as a sign of assurance that G-d would help Zerubavel build the Temple and would not allow the Gentiles to hinder him in any way. Although this prophecy predated the story of Chanukah by a couple hundred years, it contains a message similar to the Chanukah message.

Like the Jews in the times of Zecharia, we too yearn for the dedication of the Temple. Just as the menorah served as a source of hope for Zerubavel, the Chanukah lights provide us with renewed confidence in our mission to bring about the building of the third Temple. As one great man once said, "Do not complain about the dark; light a candle." Just as one candle provides a lot of light in a room full of darkness, so too every mitzvah we do provides more spiritual energy in a world sorely lacking spiritual power. Just as the menorah of Zecharia provided the Jews with renewed confidence in their dark times, our lighting of candles inspires us that our small actions can yield great results. Every small mitzvah we do brings us one step closer to the ultimate salvation.

***Happy Chanukah!***

