



The True Story of Hanukkah

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Growing up as the only Jew in my class in Iowa, I got lots of practice telling the story of Hanukkah. The story of the oil that was only enough for one night but which, miraculously, lasted for eight, as I learned it and retold it every December in a classroom full of Christmas decorations, is the most familiar in all of American Judaism.

In recent years, this telling of the tale is often criticized. The earliest depictions we have of Hanukkah, in 1 and 2 Maccabees (composed within a century of the Maccabean revolt), focus on a military victory. A miracle on the battlefield is also the focus of our liturgical texts about Hanukkah; both the Al ha-Nissim insertion for the Amidah, and the ha-Neirot Hallalu recitation after candlelighting are fundamentally about “the wars that you performed for our ancestors in those days at this time.”

By contrast, the talmudic story mostly (though, to be sure, not entirely) ignores the military context to focus on a miracle taking place in the ritual realm. This story appears for the first time in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 21b), composed hundreds of miles and an empire



away.¹ The miracle of the oil, then, appears to be a classic case of clerical authors taking a historical event and reframing it to serve their religious ends. What had once been about war is now entirely transformed to be about spiritual and ritual life. Warriors have been replaced by priests.

This understanding, however, confuses historicity for truth because, irrespective of whether the story of the cruse of oil conveys the “original” reason for Hanukkah, it turns out to be a faithful representation of the holiday’s core message. Rather than being made up out of whole cloth, the story received by so many Jewish children for so many generations is one manifestation of a theme found in both the earliest stories of the military victory as well as a much earlier Rabbinic story about the significance of ritual dedication. Compare the well-known Hanukkah story to this more obscure *midrash* about the construction of the biblical *mishkan* (tabernacle) in the wilderness:

ספרא, מכילתא דמילואים א:ט	Sifra, Mekhilta de-Milu'im 1:9
"ויקח משה את שמן המשחה" (ויקרא ח, י).	"Then Moshe took the anointing oil" (Leviticus 8:10).
רבי יהודה אומר שמן המשחה שעשה משה	R. Yehudah says: The anointing oil that Moshe made in the
במדבר... לא היה אלא שנים עשר לוג	wilderness.... There was only twelve <i>log</i> worth, as it says, "a
שמן זית הין שנאמר "ושמן זית הין" (שמות	<i>hin</i> of olive oil" (Exodus 30:24).
ל, כד).	If [it were only] to anoint the planks, it would not be
לסוך בו עצים לא היה מסתפק,	enough!
עד כמה האור שורף, עד כמה העצים	Some the fire consumes, some the planks absorb, some the
בולעים,	pot absorbs.
עד כמה יורה בולעת,	[And yet] Aharon and his sons were anointed from it all

¹ On this story and its placement in the Talmud, see the classic Vered Noam, "The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil: The Metamorphosis of a Legend," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 73 (2002); and more recently Geoffrey Herman, "Religious Transformation Between East and West: Hanukkah in the Babylonian Talmud and Zoroastrianism," in Peter Wick and Volker Rabens (eds.), *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange Between East and West* (2014).



ממנו נמשחו אהרן ובניו כל שבעת ימי המילואים, ממנו נמשחו כהנים גדולים ומלכים, ואפילו כהן גדול בן כהן גדול טעון משיחה... וכלו קיים לעתיד לבא שנאמר "שמן משחת קודש יהיה זה לי לדורותיכם" (שמות ל, לא).	seven days of the dedication; high priests and kings were anointed with it. And even a high priest who is son of a high priest requires anointing... and all of it remains for the future to come, as it says, "This shall be for me holy anointing oil for all of your generations" (Exodus 30:31).
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This early *midrash* shares three important elements with the origin-story of Hanukkah in the Bavli. At the most basic level, it is a miraculous story told of oil. And like the story of Hanukkah in the Bavli, here too the miracle that this *midrash* depicts occurs in response to the dedication of a sacred space. Most importantly, as is the case in the Talmud's Hanukkah tale, here too we have a miracle specifically about a small amount of oil that over-performs. As the Talmud puts it: "a miracle was wrought with it and they lit from it for eight days."

Both the talmudic etiology for Hanukkah and the *midrash* about the *mishkan* tell stories about containers of oil that refuse to run out. In the Sifra the oil, despite its absorption into the various vessels to which it must be applied, continues to serve to anoint the high priest and his sons, and in fact remains to be used for the "future to come," while in the Babylonian Hanukkah story, despite its burning on the first night, sufficient oil remains to light the candelabrum on the second night, and then again on the third, and so on.

Although a "new" story in late antique Babylonia, the miracle of the oil has ancient roots, sharing with the much earlier *midrash* a focus on the miracles that inhere when we build sacred space together. In so doing, it ties the Hasmonean rededication of the Temple to earlier dedications. It thereby extols the Maccabees, equating their actions with those of biblical heroes such as Aharon and Moshe.



Both of these dedication stories are, in turn, perfect complements to the earliest versions of the Hanukkah story, including those told in sources such as 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Fundamentally, the Talmud's story, and the *midrash* on which it is based, is a tale of over-performing, of oil that was supposed to be sufficient to last for only one night's lighting, but which miraculously met the needs of the time. The military tale preserved in 1 and 2 Maccabees tells a similar story—the historicity of which is, of course, absolutely irrelevant here: A small, overmatched band of rebels over-performs to meet the needs of their time, standing up to a military force of far superior ability and means. In this sense, the story of Hanukkah truly remains constant across the generations. Whether manifest through oil that miraculously refuses to run out or overmatched rebels resisting imperial authority, Hanukkah commemorates and inspires both the ability and the desire to do more than is expected.

Perhaps that is why, though the Talmud and later codes say that the core obligation of Hanukkah candle-lighting is to light only one candle per night, and that only the exceptionally pious light one candle on the first night and increase by another each consecutive evening, the latter has become standard practice.² How many people who would not normally call themselves “exceptionally pious” nonetheless undertake the Hanukkah lighting in accordance with the strictest standard? But that is the whole point of the holiday. Whether your preferred telling of the story focuses on overmatched troops miraculously bringing down a world power or oil lasting seven more nights than it should have, the story is the same. You can do more than you think you can.

² See the *baraita* on Bavli Shabbat 21b and how it is codified in Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim 671:2.

