



DERECH B'YAM HATALMUD



EIGHT QUESTIONS ON CHANUKAH

**A GUIDED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
THE ACCOUNT OF THE CHANUKAH STORY IN
GEMARA SHABBOS 21B**

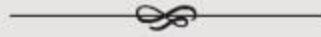
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**L'ilui Nishmas
Malka bas Fischel**

*Adapted from
36 Sparks of Light: Questions & Answers on Chanukah
by the author*

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SECTION ONE



The Battle for the Purity of the Beis HaMikdash

OVERVIEW

The Chanukah story is the epic struggle between the physical power of the Greek empire and the spiritual might of the Jews. The name Chanukah itself alludes to some of the deeper messages of the holiday.

מראה מקומות

- גמרא מס' שבת דף כא: מ-"מאי חנוכה" עד "שבהיכל"
- ר"ן (דף ט: בדפי הרי"ף ד"ה "עשאוים ימים טובים...")
- מהרש"א (ד"ה "מאי חנוכה")
- גליון הש"ס (ד"ה "כל השמנים שבהיכל")

Summary of the גמרא

The Gemara at the beginning of the second chapter of Mesechtas Shabbos discusses various wicks and fuels which can be used for the lighting of the Shabbos candles.

On the bottom of דף כא: it analyzes whether the same rules apply to the lighting of the Chanukah Menorah. In the middle of דף כא: it discusses the contemporary Mitzvah of lighting the Menorah.

Towards the bottom of דף כא: the Gemara discusses the events of the discovery of the single flask of pure oil and the lighting of the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash.

מאי חנוכה – *The Gemara asks: What is Chanukah?*

רש"י (ד"ה "מאי חנוכה") - says that the Gemara is asking: for which miracle was the holiday of Chanukah established?

דתנו רבנן בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון – The Gemara says (based on a Baraisa from Megillas Taanis¹) that the eight days beginning from the 25th of Kislev are the days of Chanukah. דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהן. – On these days, eulogies are not recited and fasting is not permitted.

שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל – For when the Greeks entered the Heichal (the main building of the Beis HaMikdash), they contaminated all of the oil they found in it.

Numerous questions need to be resolved to understand the events of the Chanukah miracle.

QUESTION ONE: What is the meaning of the term חנוכה and how does it provide an understanding of the events which occurred?

Among the explanations suggested by the commentators to explain the term Chanukah are several which elucidate the details of the events.

First, the **Ra'n** in ("שבת דף ט: בדפי הרי"ף ד"ה "עשאוים ימי טובים...") and others explain that the term Chanukah is a combination of the words חנו-כה, meaning, "they rested (from the war) on the 25th (day of Kislev)."

Second, the **Chasam Sofer** in (זי) **דרשות התם סופר לחנוכה** says that the name חנוכה derives from the word "to encamp," based on the Torah verse "הנו לדגליהם" – "the Jews (in the desert) encamped according to their flags" (Bamidbar 2:34).

He says that during the war against the Greeks, many Jews fled from Yerushalayim and hid in nearby forests and caves. They emerged to battle the Greeks, but returned to their hideouts after each battle, out of fear that the Greeks would regroup and return. However when the miracle of the Menorah occurred, the Jews took this as a sign that the Beis HaMikdash and Yerushalayim would remain in their hands and the Greeks would be unable to retake control of them. At that moment all of the Jews emerged from hiding and returned to live securely in their homes once again.

Third, the **Maharsha** in ("ד"ה "מאי חנוכה") **אגדות מהרש"א** notes that when the Greeks seized the Beis HaMikdash, they placed an altar on top of the Mizbeyach and offered sacrifices to their deities on it. This caused the Mizbeyach to become tamei. When the Jews returned to the Beis HaMikdash three years later on the 25th of Kislev, they disassembled the Mizbeyach and hid its stones in one of the rooms. They began to build a new Mizbeyach, which took several days.

¹ A text from the time of the Mishnah which discusses days on which particular practices are prohibited, in remembrance of events which occurred on them.

The Maharsha says that the term Chanukah refers to the Chanukas HaMizbeyach, the dedication of the new Mizbeyach by the Chashmonaim at the time of the Chanukah victory.

He also quotes a Midrash² which says that many years prior to the Chanukah story, the Jews in the desert completed the construction of the Mishkan on the 25th of Kislev. However, Hashem told them to wait until the 1st of Nisan to dedicate it.

Since the month of Kislev lost the merit of having the Mishkan dedicated during it, Hashem compensated it by having the rededication of the Beis HaMikdash and its Mizbeyach occur on the 25th of that month during the days of the Chashmonaim.

Fourth, the **Chasam Sofer** says that the term חנוכה alludes to the Jews' victory in the war. He says the word is a Roshei Teivos of the phrase **חשמונאים נלחמו ונצחו כל היונים** – the Chashmonaim fought and vanquished all of the Greeks (brought in **סידור חתם סופר**).

Fifth, the **Chasam Sofer** suggests an additional understanding of the name. He says that the term חנוכה is also a Roshei Teivos for the words **חתום נמצא ובטבעת כהן גדול** – (the flask of oil) was found sealed and with the sign of the Kohen Gadol (brought in **סידור חתם סופר**).

QUESTION TWO: Why did the Greeks contaminate all of the oil in the Beis HaMikdash?

Rabbi Asher Weiss in **מנהת אשר**³ explains that the Greeks' overall goal was to introduce their pagan and immoral ideals to the nations of the world. As part of this objective, they forbade the Jews to perform certain Mitzvos, but allowed others, as long as they were performed according to the Greeks demands. They permitted the Jews to continue the service of the Beis HaMikdash, but only if it was done on their terms.

By contaminating the oil, it was as if the Greeks were saying to the Jews, “it is acceptable if you want to light the Menorah, but we will only let you do so with impure oil.”

Many commentators ask why the miracle of the oil was necessary. The rule Tumah Hutra B'Tzibbur teaches that it is permitted to light the Menorah with impure oil in an emergency situation, so why did the Chashmonaim need to search for pure oil?

Rabbi Weiss suggests that the Kohanim specifically refused to light with contaminated oil because this would fulfill the Greeks' goal for them to perform the service in a state of impurity. Therefore it was necessary for the Chashmonaim to find a flask of pure oil to

² He cites Bereishis Rabbah, but apparently he refers to the Midrash in Pesikta Rabbasi 6:3.

³ שיחות על המועדים חלק ב' מאמר ב:יא

show that they were beginning the service anew with proper intentions and in a completely correct fashion.

QUESTION THREE: Why does the Gemara state that the Greeks contaminated all of the oil of the Menorah which they found in the Heichal? The oil of the Menorah was not stored there!

Rabbi Akiva Eiger in the ("ד"ה "כל השמנים שבהיכל") cites the statement of the **Rambam** in the (הלכות בית הבחירה ה:ח) **משנה תורה** that the oil and wine needed for the operation of the Beis HaMikdash were stored in the Lishkas Beis Shamnayah – the Room of the Oil. It was located in the Ezras Nashim, not in the Heichal. (This is based on the Mishnah in (משנה ב:ה).)

According to this, why does the גמרא say that the Greeks contaminated the oil which was in the Heichal?

Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky in **שיה הנוכה ופורים** suggests that the Kohanim had been concerned that the Greeks would enter the Beis HaMikdash and contaminate all of the utensils and oil they found there. Therefore, they intentionally hid oil inside the Heichal in the hope that it would not be discovered.

SECTION TWO



Understanding the Miracle of the Oil

OVERVIEW

The גמרא continues and describes how the Chashmonaim found the single flask of oil and used it to light the Menorah. It is necessary to determine how they knew that the oil was still pure. In addition, why was it necessary for it to burn for eight days?

מראה מקומות

- גמרא מס' שבת דף כא: מ-"וכשגברה" עד "בהלל והודאה"
- פירוש הר"ן (דף ט: בדפי הר"ף ד"ה "ולא מצאו...")
- תוס' (ד"ה "שהיה מונח בחותמו של כ"ג")
- חידושי המאירי (ד"ה "ונחזור לענין הנס")

Summary of the גמרא

The גמרא on כא: שבת continues and describes the finding of the single flask of pure olive oil in the Beis HaMikdash:

וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד, שהיה מונח – they checked and found only a single flask of oil, בחותמו של כהן גדול – which had been sealed with the signet of the Kohen Gadol. ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד. – However, there was only enough oil in it to light the Menorah for a single day.

נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים – A miracle occurred and they lit (the Menorah) from it for eight days.

לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאים ימים טובים בהלל והודאה – In the following year, the Rabbis established and made these into days of celebration for the recitation of Hallel and for giving thanks.

**QUESTION FOUR: Where did the Chashmonaim find the single jar of oil?
How did they know that it was still pure?**

The **Ra"n** in ("ולא מצאו...") (דף ט: בדפי הרי"ף ד"ה "ולא מצאו...") says that the Yevanim were searching for gold and pearls which they thought were hidden in the Beis HaMikdash. They intentionally broke or opened all of the containers of oil to search inside them. When the Chashmonaim found the single jar intact, they immediately knew that the Yevanim had not found it.

Tosefos in ("שהיה מונה בהותמו של כ"ג") (ד"ה "שהיה מונה בהותמו של כ"ג") suggests that the Chashmonaim found the jar of oil lying on the floor, with its seal in the dirt. Since the jar was still sealed, it was clear from this that the Greeks had not touched it. If the Greeks had been tamei, they would have contaminated the oil in the flask by moving it.

The **Ba"ch** on the (תרע) - אורה היים (תרע) says that the intact seal on the jar indicated that the Greeks had not opened it. If it had been opened, its oil would have become tamei due to the presents of dead bodies in the building. (He says it functioned as a tzamid pesil). Alternatively, if the Greeks had removed some of the oil and then returned it to the jar, all of the oil inside would have become tamei.

The **Mordechai** brought by the (שבת פ"ב סימן ג') and the **Rokeach on Al HaNissim** suggest that the jar was found inside a cabinet in a wall which had been sealed with the signet of the Kohen Gadol. The Chashmonaim could see from the intact seal on the cabinet that the Yevanim had not broken into it and opened the jar.

QUESTION FIVE: Why did the jar of oil only contain enough oil to light the Menorah for a single day?

The **Chidah** in (דרוש ל"ה לחנוכה) (דרוש ל"ה לחנוכה) says that that the Kohanim were accustomed to fill a single jar with enough oil for only one night, and to pour oil from it into the Menorah each afternoon for the next lighting.

QUESTION SIX: The Gemara in several places teaches that items used for mitzvos must be mutar b'picha – able to be eaten. An item which came into existence through a mirale cannot be eaten and therefore cannot be used for a mitzvah. The oil for the lighting of the Menorah must come from olives which grew naturally on olive trees, not which appeared miraculously. If so, how could the Chashmonaim have lit the Menorah with the miraculous oil from the jar?

Rabbi Chaim M'Brisk teaches an important element of the Chanukah story. He says that the oil in the flask was completely natural, normal oil, and therefore it was permitted

for the Chashmonaim to use it to light the Menorah. A miracle occurred subsequently once it was poured into the Menorah, when the small quantity continued to stay lit for eight days (אסופות ר"ח הלוי מבריסק שבת ס' ה').

QUESTION SEVEN: Why was it necessary for the oil poured from the flask into the Menorah to burn for exactly eight days?

QUESTION EIGHT: From where did the Chashmonaim obtain the new oil to light the Menorah?

The Chashmonaim wished to light the Menorah with olive oil which was completely pure and fit for lighting. They were unable to find any in the Beis HaMikdash or Yerushalayim which was untouched by the Yevanim and fit for this purpose.

The **Meiri** in ("ונחזור לענין הנס") ד"ה "ה" cites the Mishnah in מגות ה:ג which says that oil for the lighting of the Menorah was typically procured from the area of Tekoa, due to the high quality of its oil. Travel between Yerushalayim and Tekoa (which was located in the territory of Asher) took four days. The oil still needed to be prepared, so the Chashmonaim sent a messenger (who was pure) to travel four days to the press in Tekoa, prepare the oil that day and then travel four days to bring it back.

The **Ra"n** in ("פירוש הר"ן (דף ט: בדפי הר"ף ד"ה "עשאים ימי טובים...") says similarly.

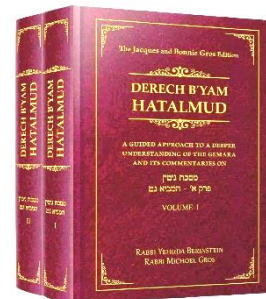
The **Beis Yosef** in (תרע) אורח חיים suggests a different reason, that all of the Jews were impure from having been in contact with dead bodies. It took seven days to purify them from their tumah, and then one day to prepare the oil.

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