



# The War or the Oil?

**T**he Chanukah story seems to be predicated on two miracles – the overt miracle of the oil that burnt for eight days instead of one and the less obvious miracle of the military victory by a small group of priestly irregulars defeating the professional army of the Seleucid Greeks. Which are we celebrating on Chanukah – the oil, the war, or both?

On the one hand, the liturgical texts instituted by *Chazal* mention only the military victory. Thus, in *Al HaNissim* it says, “You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, etc.” It concludes with “Your children came to the Holy of Holies of Your house, cleansed Your Temple... and kindled lights in the Courtyard...” It mentions lighting the *Menorah* and yet omits the miracle of the oil. On the other hand, the primary *mitzvah* established by *Chazal* is lighting a *menorah*, with certain aspects modeled on the lighting in the Mikdash. And when the Gemara (Shabbat 21b) famously asks *מאי חנוכה*, “What is Chanukah?” it answers about the miracle of the oil. So what are we celebrating?

The Maharal explained that a miracle that ‘merely’ enabled the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* does not warrant the establishment of a holiday. Only a miracle which provides salvation justifies or even necessitates annual praise and thanks to G-d. If that is the case, what was the purpose of the miracle of the oil? The Maharal suggests it was not obvious to all that the war was a miraculous victory. By causing the oil to burn for eight nights, G-d was providing a huge billboard that essentially said, “Take note – do you see

this manifest miracle of the oil? Good. Now take notice of the huge miracle that I just did for you in winning the war.”

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Hilchot Shlomo* 16:9) similarly says that the primary rabbinic enactment is to light candles to acknowledge the great miracles G-d performed for our ancestors in the military victory. He continues by explaining that the primary aspect of the *mitzvah* is that during the lighting, one should have in mind to praise and thank G-d for the military miracles.



In a surprising application of this, the Sha’ar HaTziyun (676:3) quotes the Meiri’s suggestion that a person who will not be able to light nor see another person’s lights should make the *bracha* of *שְׁעֵשֶׂה לְנוּסִים* and think about the miracles! Similarly, a person for whom his family lights on his behalf should still think about the miraculous military victory.

Thus, our lighting of the candles is a means of publicizing, to others and to ourselves, the miracle of the military victory. It is a *הַקְשֵׁר מִצְוָה* for the main

*mitzvah* of thanking G-d, just as the original miracle of the oil was a means of drawing attention to the possibly overlooked Hand of G-d in the battles.

Common wisdom contrasts Purim with Chanukah in that the latter celebrates an open miracle and the former a hidden miracle. It seems that in reality, Chanukah is also about a miracle that was not obvious to all and G-d needed to direct our attention for all to see.

This point takes on added significance when one notes the oil miracle occurred on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, thereby confirming that a military victory had already taken place by that point, sufficient for the Jews to declare independence and establish an annual holiday. This is remarkable considering that the war was far from over and continued for several more years. That is similar to the US Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, with the war to rage on for several more years.

The miracle of the oil should be a beacon telling the Jewish people to be on the lookout for other such occurrences. Other wars whose victories only make sense if we see the Hand of G-d in them. And even if those wars have not concluded with an everlasting peace, and the state of war persists, the holiday of Chanukah established by our holy ancestors alerts us to the obligation to thank G-d for those victories even as we are still fighting on.

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