

What miracle of the Chanukah oil?

As children we all knew about the miracle of the oil that was the basis of the festival of Chanukah. When the Maccabees conquered the Temple, they found only one cruse of oil with the unbroken seal of the high priest. It was enough to fuel the holy menorah for one day but by miracle it lasted eight days, and thus the Festival of Lights, the festival of Chanukah, is celebrated for eight days. This is the story in the Talmud.

It has been pointed out by scholars that this account is full of difficulties. There is no other record that the oil for the menorah was ever sealed by the high priest, nor that he even had such a seal. The oil was said to burn for eight days, but it would have been impossible to produce fresh pure olive oil in that time. As the temple had been polluted by the Seleucids, the menorah would not have been usable and, although the claim is made that the Hasmoneans made a temporary one out of their weapons, the books of Maccabees I and II make no mention of the oil or the miracle. Above all, who was the high priest whose seal was so important to the Hasmoneans? The story assumes that the high priest was a person of impeccable respectability, who would have upheld the laws of purity in a meticulous manner. He was the spiritual head of the Jewish people and most reliable in keeping the holy laws. That is the assumption made by the writers of the Talmud and the two other sources mentioned.

To examine the matter further we have to consult the two Books of Maccabees. They both tell the same story but in a different way and with different details. Maccabees I is more down-to-earth in its account, while the Maccabees II takes a more religious tone seeing the hand of God behind the events. The First was written in the land of Israel perhaps 40 or 50 years after the events and the Second, written in Greek, at about the same time in Alexandria, in Egypt. Today both exist only in Greek. Maccabees I was probably written in Jerusalem in Hebrew, as it is in the style of the Biblical books of Samuel and Kings, and ascribes the Maccabean Revolt to the aged Mattiyahu, who resisted the Greek officer who came to Modi'in ordering him to offer improper sacrifice, but Mattiyahu killed the officer and the Jew that sprung forward to do the officer's bidding. That started the revolt, and the old man and his sons fled into hiding. Though that is the story we've been told, it is not mentioned at all in the Maccabees II.

The Second Book tells a more complicated story, focusing on the office of the High Priests Jason and then Menelaus who colluded with Antiochus to abrogate Jewish laws, forbid circumcision, annul the Sabbath and to force Jews to eat the pagan sacrifices as a demonstration of their loyalty to the emperor. It was these harsh measures that forced Mattiyahu and his sons to go into hiding and start the Revolt.

There is no reason to doubt the First or the Second version of the Hasmonean Revolt. One is written from the point of view of the countryside, from Modi'in, and one from the capital, from Jerusalem. One mentions Mattiyahu defying the Seleucid officer, and one the machinations of the high priests Jason and Menelaus. Neither version mentions the miracle of the oil. According to Maccabees I the eight days of Chanukah, consecrating the new altar, was an eight day celebration as done by Moses and Solomon. According to Maccabees II, the eight days were in commemoration of the Festival of Sukkot. And what about the miracle story of the oil? It's not there.

What there is a reminder to us that Mattiyahu and his sons, Antiochus, Jason and Menelaus were real people, that our ancestors really fought for religious freedom, and against all odds preserved Judaism for those who followed them—even us. Over 2000 years ago there was indeed a miracle in the Land of Israel, in Jerusalem. And we are still here to celebrate it.

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