

Parsha Ponders

Chanukah 5780 | December 20, 2019 | 22 Kislev 5780

The festival of Chanukkos¹

והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך, וקבעו שמונת ימי חנכה אלו, להודות לשמך הגדול

They lit [the Menorah] lights in Your holy courtyards, and established these eight days of Chanukah, to give thanks to Your great name²

The eight-day festival of Chanukah is commonly understood to be in commemoration of the miracle of the Menorah. The Greeks contaminated all the ritual oil which was to be used to fuel the Menorah in the Holy Temple. After their defeat, only one small jar of oil was found. It was enough to light the Menorah for one night. After lighting the Menorah, it miraculously stayed lit for eight days, enough time to finish making more oil. Thus, we celebrate eight days of Chanukah³. However, what isn't commonly known is another version of what inspired this eight-day festival.

The Book of Maccabees, although not included in the Jewish canon, is a historical record of the Chanukah story. When the Maccabees first celebrated their victory, it's described⁴ that they celebrated for eight days **like the eight-day festival of Sukkos**. Due to the Greek persecution and their decrees, the Jews couldn't celebrate Sukkos. Now that the Greeks were defeated, they decided to take the four species as a remembrance for the festival they missed. After seeing that the Menorah stayed lit for eight days, they took this as a sign from Heaven that their celebrations were warranted. Therefore, they established Chanukah as a yearly eight-day festival⁵.

What's hard to understand is why they only focused on the festival of Sukkos. The Greek's decrees against Judaism lasted approximately for fifty-two years⁶. The Jews weren't able to celebrate any festival during most of this time. Why, after defeating the Greeks, did they specifically choose to commemorate the missed festival of Sukkos⁷? Why didn't they blow the Shofar? Why didn't they eat Matzah?

Furthermore, there's another major connection between Chanukah and Sukkos. The accepted scrupulous⁸ way to light Chanukah candles is to increase every day the number of candles, thereby lighting an amount corresponding to the current day of Chanukah. However, there's a dissenting opinion in the *gemarra*⁹, which says that we should light in the opposite way. The first day should have eight candles, and each day one less should be lit. One explanation given is this is analogous to how the offerings on Sukkos are brought. On each day of Sukkos, one less bull is brought¹⁰. What's more, the

¹ Based on a *chabura* developed by my *chashuve* friend [Rabbi Zolly Claman](#), now of Edmonton

² From the *Al HaNisim* prayer during Chanukah in the *Shemoneh Esrei*

³ See the [Beis Yosef](#) to [Tur Orach Chaim](#) § 670, who famously asked that there were only seven days of miracle, as the first day it lit normally. Why then would Chanukah be eight days long? This question has literally thousands of answers offered over the centuries. However, he was preceded by [Tosafos HaRosh](#) to [Shabbos](#) 21b s.v. וינעשה נס, who is the only *Rishon* who asked this question. What's fascinating is he gives the exact same three answers the [Beis Yosef](#) gives. It's almost as if the [Beis Yosef](#) was simply paraphrasing the [Tosafos HaRosh](#), although no attribution is given. As far as I'm aware, the [Beis Yosef](#) didn't have access to the [Tosafos HaRosh](#)

⁴ [II Maccabees](#) Chapter 10, brought by [Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chaim](#) 670:5 (calling it *sefer Chashmonai*)

⁵ This is the [Aruch HaShulchan](#)'s answer to the [Beis Yosef](#)'s question

⁶ [Rambam's Iggeres Teiman](#)

⁷ It's not enough to say that Sukkos was the most recent festival they missed. Especially due to the other connections to Sukkos, as we shall see

⁸ מהדרין מן המהדרין

⁹ [Shabbos loc. cit.](#)

¹⁰ [Numbers](#) 29:12-34

accepted opinion agrees in principle that we should do something analogous to Sukkos. It's just that there's an overriding rule of always increasing in holiness, rather than diminishing it. Therefore, we increase the candles instead of decreasing them¹¹.

With a better understanding of Sukkos, perhaps we can get a better understanding of its connection to Chanukah. The eight days of Sukkos consist of the seven days of the festival of Sukkos and conclude with the festival of Shemini Atzeres. During the first seven days, there are a total of seventy bulls that are brought as offerings. These seventy bulls represent all the nations of the world¹², commonly categorized into seventy nations¹³. The eighth day, Shemini Atzeres, requires only one bull offering. This lone bull represents the nation of Israel.

The idea of these offerings is that after all is said and done, the Jewish people are Hashem's unique nation. After all the nations in the world partake of the party of Sukkos, Hashem specifically asks us to stick around for one extra day¹⁴. Sukkos culminates in a single offering, showing the intimate relationship G-d has with the Jews^{15 16}. We are described as Hashem's unique portion¹⁷, and the eight-day festival of Sukkos makes that clear.

Until the Greek subjugation, all nations of the world knew the Jewish people's uniqueness. Indeed, this was often the cause for antisemitism. The Greeks were the first to have the audacity to question this unique relationship with Hashem. They were bold enough¹⁸ to claim that we had no portion in Hashem¹⁹. They felt that the Torah was just another intellectual pursuit, and was just as much theirs to learn. It belonged with their study of math and science and philosophy. There was nothing unique to the Jewish people. The Greek's many decrees against Judaism were to emphasize this belief.

When the Maccabees defeated the Greek army, there was no better way to celebrate than to celebrate similar to the festival of Sukkos. The Greek's denied the uniqueness of the Jewish people, and Sukkos epitomizes that uniqueness. Although Chanukah became its own distinct holiday, it still shares aspects with Sukkos. This is because it reestablished the Jewish people's unique role in history, and confirmed their intimate relationship with Hashem.

Good Shabbos and Happy Chanukah

¹¹ Other connections between Chanukah and Sukkos include: Bikkurim 1:6 brings a dispute regarding the latest time to bring *Bikkurim*; one opinion says Sukkos and one say Chanukah. Haggai Chapter 2 describes the prophecy he received on Hoshanah Rabbah regarding the Greek exile. As well, both a Sukkah (Sukkah 2a) and Menorah (Shabbos 22a) need to be under twenty *amos*

¹² Sukkah 55b

¹³ For example, see Midrash Tanchuma Noach § 3, Bamidbar Rabbah 2:3, Rashi to Exodus 2:14

¹⁴ Sukkah *loc. cit.*; Rashi to Leviticus 23:36 and Numbers 29:36

¹⁵ See Ma'aseh Rav § 233 for a deeper insight into this differentiation

¹⁶ See Meshech Chochmah *parshas VeZos HaBeracha* (end) who uses this to explain why we read *parshas VeZos HaBeracha* on Shemini Atezeres, and it's not because that's when we finish the Torah. Even those that completed the Torah every three years would read every Shemini Atezeres *VeZos HaBeracha*. It's also why we read I Kings Chapter 8 for the *haftarah* (Megillah 29b).

¹⁷ Maharsha to Sukkah *loc. cit.* s.v. הני ע' פרים

¹⁸ The Greek empire is symbolized by a leopard (Daniel 7:6, see Rashi *ad. loc.*), which is associated with boldness (Avos 5:20)

¹⁹ Bereishis Rabbah 2:4. This is to directly combat the idea expressed by the Maharsha *loc. cit.*