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## Vayigash

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### ***From Burning Candles to 'Burning' People***

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**A**ccording to ancient Jewish law, Hanukkah candles are displayed to the outside world. Originally, they were even lit at the “*tefah ha-samukh la-petah*” (handbreadth next to the entrance)<sup>1</sup>—meaning literally outside the house—but, over the years, especially in exile, their lighting was moved inside in many communities and became increasingly understood as an internal matter rather than an external declaration.<sup>2</sup>

I will now take one more step inward, with the candle in my hand, as it were, to examine traditions where the holy person themselves

becomes a kind of burning candle, literally an “illuminated person.”

I will begin with a personal story about an unforgettable conversation I had several decades ago with one of the leading professors in the field of logical thinking. Well, this professor wanted to tell me a secret he had kept in his heart, for fear that it would undermine his academic standing. Here is the entire anecdote briefly: In the 1980s, a group of students used to invite Jean Klein to Israel annually to discuss spiritual matters. Klein (who has since passed away) was a man difficult to describe, but briefly I will say that he was a French doctor who underwent a personal transformation in the 1950s that took him to India. There he met a mysterious teacher, after several meetings with whom he went through internal processes that

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<sup>1</sup> [\*Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim 671:7\*](#).

<sup>2</sup> See R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, [\*Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Orach Hayyim 671:24\*](#).

brought him to what is usually called (in an uncritical way) “enlightenment.”

Klein returned to the West and became a humble spiritual teacher, recognized only in some esoteric circles worldwide. Such a circle existed then in Israel, and that same respected, mysterious professor somehow found himself at one of their conversations. On one occasion, he dared to intervene in the conversation bluntly and asked Klein a question that (by his later feeling) was impudent and irrelevant.

Klein remained completely quiet and didn’t answer the question, but slowly raised his eyes (he was an elderly man then) and from his eyes came out—as that professor told me in shock—lines or perhaps strong “streams” of light (or fire) that crossed the room from side to side and struck him. His story reminded me, of course, of the talmudic traditions about sages who “cast their gaze upon” others and brought about their death, but this is not the place to explain this legendary phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

If we go back from this account through the “time tunnel,” and listen to the documentation found in ancient sources, we can see that descriptions of holy people as burning candles, as pillars wrapped in fire, or as those from whose heads emerge

halos of light, are common descriptions in the ancient world. One very brief documentation, in [y. Hagigah 2:1](#), states that R. Eliezer and R. Joshua were engaged in Torah study and suddenly “fire descended from heaven and surrounded them.”<sup>4</sup> This can be understood as a kind of spiritual light that surrounded them, like a halo—except that this halo, according to this account, enveloped their entire bodies.

This “light” burning from a person’s head (or his entire body) can be found in our sources in descriptions of the fetus, which, according to tradition (not just Jewish), knows everything while floating in the mother’s womb and “looks from one end of the world to the other.” It is therefore described as having “a candle lit above its head” ([Niddah 30b](#)).

We find these halos above the heads of saints in ancient art across cultures throughout the world: in Shamanism in Central America, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—and in Jewish sources, too, we find saints adorned with halos. A prominent example is the figure of Moses, about whom it is said, “the skin of his face shone” ([Exodus 34:29](#)). Although some Christian interpreters thought Moses grew horns (and this is how Michelangelo famously sculpted his “[Moses!](#)”), it was mostly understood that the

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<sup>3</sup> See at length Turan (Tamas) Sinai, “‘Wherever the Sages Set Their Eyes, There is Either Death or Poverty’—On the History, Terminology and Imagery of the Talmudic Traditions

about the Devastating Gaze of the Sages” [Heb.], *Sidra* 23 (2008): 137-205.

<sup>4</sup> On this text in its context see Nurit Be’eri, *Yatza Le-Tarbut Ra’ah* [Heb.] (*Yediot Sefarim*, 2007), 36.

verse describes him as having a radiant halo.<sup>5</sup> I will bring just one more example among many from another period, namely medieval Ashkenazi Judaism. In [Sefer Hasidim](#), an anonymous *hasid* is described bathing when, suddenly, “a radiance struck upon the head of the righteous man in the water.”<sup>6</sup>

The mysticism researcher Evelyn Underhill argues that a penetrating look at mystics’ perceptions across religions will identify three stages in the mystic’s development: the first is dedicated to self-purification, the second is the stage of enlightenment, and in the third appears the mystical union with God and the world.<sup>7</sup> However, according to Martin Buber (as interpreted by Hasidism researcher Israel Koren),<sup>8</sup> Judaism focuses particularly on the second stage, and is less concerned with the third (*unio mystica*) stage that brings a person to complete detachment from the world and its events. The Jewish mystic

achieves the third stage of union not through isolated union with God while detached like a monk from the concrete reality around him (as in Christian mysticism, for example), but precisely through activity and doing good in the world, in the most practical way.

According to Buber, the “light” of the holy person is a description of a different kind of vision than usual: the sensory vision of the dialogical person, one who opens their heart to the Other amid the tumult of daily distresses—this is the Jewish “vision” of the “enlightened person.” Their dedication to the Other allows them to see their conversation partner in a special and unusual “light”—as whole, and not as fragments of scattered and random pieces of a puzzle.

Buber says:

If I face a human being as my Thou,  
and say the primary word I–Thou to

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 34:29 is translated in all Jewish translations, for example by [JPS](#), as: “And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him.” See also, for example, [Shabbat 10b](#): “With regard to the *halakhah* itself, the Gemara asks: Is that so? Didn’t Rav Hama bar Hanina say: One who gives a gift to his friend need not inform him, as **God made Moses’ face glow**, and nevertheless it is stated with regard to Moses: ‘And Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke with him’ (Exodus 34:29)? The Gemara answers: This is not difficult. When Rav Hama bar Hanina said that he need not inform him, he was referring to a matter that is likely to be revealed...” And see Menahem Haran, “The Shining of Moses’ Face: A Case Study in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography,” in W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer (eds.), [In the Shelter of Elyon](#) (JSOT Press, 1984), 159-173.

<sup>6</sup> *Sefer Hasidim*, R. Reuven Margolis ed. (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1993), *siman* 370, p. 272. See also Avidov Lipsker, “‘Light is Sown for the Righteous’ – Shifts in the Iconic Fashioning of the Zaddik’s Halo” [Heb.], in Yoav Elstein et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Story*, vol. 1, (Bar Ilan University Press, 2004), 105-134, at 117. And see the entire article, which includes an extensive discussion on halos all over the world.

<sup>7</sup> See Evelyn Underhill, “The Essentials of Mysticism,” in Richard Woods (ed.), [Understanding Mysticism](#), (Image Books, 1980), 26-41, at 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> See Israel Koren, [The Mystery of the Earth: Mysticism and Hasidism in Buber’s Thought](#) (Brill, 2010), 179-183.

him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things. This human being is not He or She, bounded from every other He and She, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is Thou and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. **But all else lives in his light.**<sup>9</sup>

The true miracle, the miracle of the soul, Buber would say, is the miracle of the Other's revelation before me suddenly in dialogue, as a kind of illuminated vision—as a complete person in all his or her parts. This revelation itself is a divine vision, to which nothing needs to be added.

The sign that this is a genuine moment of Divine Presence revelation is—according to what another mysticism researcher, Robert Zaehner, wrote—that the person experiencing this “light” “experienced something of enormous significance—compared to which the ordinary world, of senses and rushing thoughts—is a shadow of a shadow.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Buber, [\*I and Thou\*](#), trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Scribner, 2000), 8. My emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Charles Zaehner, [\*Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience\*](#)

I do not know to what extent this profound insight of Buber can be applied to all of the ancient Jewish sources that tell us about “enlightened” people, and cannot definitively say that this enlightenment is an expression of contact with the divine “Thou” that Buber speaks of, which causes these holy people to see others in their entirety. However, perhaps we are allowed to consider this, and to reread at least some of these sources, in light of Buber's insight.

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I began this article with the hesitation of halakhic teachers (at least regarding many diaspora communities) as to whether the original talmudic requirement to illuminate the outside world with Hanukkah candles should still be applied today, or whether the light that is lit should be directed inward, into the home. But it seems that at the end of the article—and in light of Buber's words—we may suggest that enlightening oneself means seeing the light in others. Therefore, the lighting inward goes hand-in-hand with illuminating the outside world. This same light accompanies members of the family who fulfill the commandment of hospitality, inviting guests into the home from the outside, recognizing in every person who enters a “divine illuminating candle” of the divine “Thou.”<sup>11</sup>

(Oxford University Press, 1957), 199. See also Koren, *The Mystery of the Earth*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> This is probably the ancient meaning of the use of the blessing *Shalom* in meeting others: I see you (as one created by God) in a holistic way. In this regard it is also worth

## Nine Crazy Nights?

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That Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday is something we all take for granted.<sup>1</sup> The truth is, however, it is not so obvious that Hanukkah outside of Israel should be eight days long. On most other holidays, we in the Diaspora add an extra day of *yom tov*, initially due to uncertainty about the correct day and now as a continuation of the old custom.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud (*Arakhin* 10a) says as much when it lists the days of the calendar year on which we recite a complete Hallel: “R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Shimon son of Yehozadak: [there are] 18 days on which an individual recites a complete Hallel ... and in the Diaspora 21 [days]: nine days for Sukkot, eight days of Hanukkah, the [first] two days of Pesah, and the two days of Shavuot.” In Israel, there are 18 days, and outside of Israel there are 21 days, due to the extra days of *yom tov*. Unlike Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot, Hanukkah does not have an extra day added and is listed as eight days even in the Diaspora.

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mentioning that *Shalom* is considered by the Rabbis to be the name of God. See [Leviticus Rabbah 9:9](#) (my translation): “R. Yodan ben R. Yosei [said], *Shalom* is great [as we know that] God is called *Shalom*, as it is said [Judges 6:24] ‘Gideon built there an altar to the LORD and called it Adonai-shalom.’” On *Shalom* as semantically related to “Whole” (*shalem*), see G. Gerleman, “ŠLM,” *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1337-1348.

Why is Hanukkah an exception? Scholars have wondered about this question for centuries, beginning with Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> who writes: “And there is reason to wonder, why do we not have the practice nowadays to light [the Hanukkah candles] for nine days, like on [other] holidays?”

In this essay, I will outline the various answers to this question and suggest an approach that teaches us something of fundamental importance about the concerted rabbinic effort to shift our focus from Hanukkah’s military victory to the miracle of the long-lasting oil.

### Technical Answers

Several *aharonim* offered technical answers to explain why Hanukkah does not have a ninth day.

1. Hanukkah occurs later in the calendar month than any other Jewish holiday (on the 25th of the month). *Pnei Yehoshua*<sup>4</sup> cites a Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 41b) that even before the calendar was set, by the midway point through any given month, knowledge of the correct date of *Rosh Hodesh* had spread even to the most

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Sarah Rudolph for her help in editing the draft of the article.

<sup>2</sup> *Beitzah* 4b.

<sup>3</sup> *Hiddushei ha-Re’em* on *Semag*, laws of Hanukkah.

<sup>4</sup> *Rosh Hashanah* 18a.

distant Diaspora communities – if not directly by the messengers, then by word of mouth. It just so happens that Hanukkah is the only holiday that begins after the 15th of the month. Based on this idea, *Etz Hayyim* suggests that Hanukkah never required an additional day for uncertainty. The extra day is only necessary for holidays that begin by the middle of their respective months.<sup>5</sup> While this explanation is compelling, it is important to note that it goes against some other *aharonim* such as *Minhat Hinukh* (cited below) who believed that nine days of Hanukkah were celebrated when *Rosh Hodesh* was determined by sighting of the new moon. Furthermore, the Gemara made its statement in the context of evaluating testimony regarding the date of a crime and may not be applicable to our discussion of observing an extra day of a holiday.

2. Netziv notes that adding an extra day to Hanukkah would not just affect the ninth day:

And it seems to me that [a ninth day was not added] because on Hanukkah it would not be possible, because if we lit [the candles] on the second day [for example, we would be

required to light] one candle and two candles, due to the uncertainty about the [correct] day – that would make three [candles], and it would appear as if it were the 3rd day [of Hanukkah]. Therefore, they were forced to only rely on the majority [and not add an extra day].<sup>6</sup>

Netziv's answer is a practical one. Adding a ninth day to Hanukkah would mean that each day along the way is also in doubt. For most holidays this makes little practical difference, but for Hanukkah, where the day determines how many candles are lit, this would lead to a logistical nightmare. We would need to each have two separate menorahs, each with a different number of candles, and even then people may think the real day is the sum of the number of candles in the two menorahs. According to the Netziv, in theory we really should celebrate nine days of Hanukkah, and only this technical issue prevented the sages from establishing this practice.

However, one difficulty with Netziv's answer is that lighting an additional candle for each day of Hanukkah is *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*—a stringency beyond what the basic Halakhah requires, which is only

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in *Birkhei Yosef Orah Hayyim* 670.

<sup>6</sup> *Meromei Sadeh* to *Rosh Hashanah* 18a.

*ner ish u-baito*—one candle per household on each night. It seems strange that in deference to the stringency to light an additional candle corresponding to each day, the Sages would be lenient by not adding a ninth day to the holiday, potentially allowing one “true” day of Hanukkah to be missed entirely.

3. *Kol Yehudah* (cited in *Beit Levi* 1:4) took advantage of another well-known question related to Hanukkah candles to attempt to answer ours. Many have asked why Hanukkah is eight days rather than seven; since there was enough oil to last one day, only the final seven days were miraculous and thus the holiday should have been seven days. While numerous answers have been suggested, *Kol Yehudah* suggests that perhaps the holiday really is only seven days, and the 8th day we currently celebrate was added for the uncertainty of the date. *Beit Levi* of course rejected this solution by noting that even in Israel, Hanukkah is, and always has been, eight days.

### The Rabbinic Nature of Hanukkah

Some of the technical answers are better than others, but of more fundamental importance, many suggest the reason we do not have a ninth day of Hanukkah relates to its rabbinic nature.

Perhaps only holidays of biblical origin were given an extra day of *yom tov*. This answer is offered by multiple scholars, including *Birkhei Yosef*,<sup>7</sup> *Kehillat Yaakov*,<sup>8</sup> and *Ateret Zekeinim*.<sup>9</sup> *Pri Hadash*,<sup>10</sup> for example, writes, “And the reason that the sages did not establish nine days [of Hanukkah] due to the uncertainty of the date is that since it [Hanukkah] is a rabbinic matter, they [the Rabbis] did not trouble the people [with the extra day].”

### Challenges to this Answer

Although straightforward and in some ways compelling, the notion that the Sages did not establish a ninth day of Hanukkah because it is a rabbinic holiday can be challenged in several ways.

1. There seems to be little to no downside to lighting candles and reciting Hallel for one extra day, without reciting the blessings. One has to wonder what is gained by applying leniency to the (potential) ninth day of Hanukkah.
2. Purim is a powerful counterexample of another rabbinic holiday that some write would have been made two days in the Diaspora were it not for an explicit verse in the Book of Esther forbidding it. Based on the commentary of Mordekhai to *Masekhet Megillah*, R. Mizrachi writes, “Regarding *Megillah* [reading], even though it is rabbinic, they [the Sages]

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<sup>7</sup> *Orah Hayyim* 670:2.

<sup>8</sup> *Tosafot Derabanan* 60:221.

<sup>9</sup> *Orah Hayyim* 670:1.

<sup>10</sup> *Orah Hayyim* 670.

would have obligated one to read it on the 14th and 15th [of Adar]... if not for the possibility that the 14th was established specifically for its time, in which case [reading it again] on the 15th would be a violation of 've-lo ya'avov' ('and it should not be allowed to pass further.' Esther 9:27)."

If not for the phrase "ve-lo ya'avov" in Esther, which is understood as prohibiting extension of the celebration of Purim an additional day, we would have kept two days of Purim. Since Hanukkah does not have such a prohibition, R. Mizrachi notes, Hanukkah should in fact be observed for nine days. R. Mizrachi clearly found this a compelling proof, as he ultimately leaves his question of why there is no ninth day of Hanukkah unanswered.

3. When the Mishnah in *Rosh Hashanah* (18a) lists the months when messengers were sent out to inform communities living outside of Jerusalem when the new month began, Kislev is included; messengers were sent so Diaspora communities would know when Hanukkah would be. However, if it is true that for rabbinic holidays the sages would not add an extra day, there should not have been a need for messengers either. The Diaspora communities should

have been allowed to presume the date of Hanukkah based on when the beginning of Kislev would be in the majority of years. The fact that messengers were sent implies we are still required to be meticulous about celebrating Hanukkah on the correct date, even though it is a rabbinic holiday. If that is the case, perhaps a ninth day should have been added by the same logic.<sup>11</sup>

4. Assuming that the basis of the rabbinic leniency for omitting a ninth day is the principle *safek derabanan lekula* (in cases of doubt pertaining to a rabbinic matter, we are lenient), it is unclear whether *safek derabanan lekula* applies to situations of uncertainty regarding fulfillment of one of the rabbinic *mitzvot*. Regarding Hanukkah candles specifically, *Mishnah Berurah* (673:25) writes that if one attempted to light candles but there is doubt as to whether he fulfilled the mitzvah properly (because they predictably blew out in less than 30 minutes), he should light candles again without saying the blessing.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as *Minhat Hinukh* (301:2) points out, understanding this as a case of doubt would raise a practical challenge. There would be no reason to treat the first day of Hanukkah any differently from the theoretical ninth day, as in both cases we are uncertain as to whether it is truly one

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<sup>11</sup> This point is made by Netziv in his *Meromei Sadeh* commentary to *Rosh Hashanah* 18a, and was the impetus for him to offer an alternative explanation (above) as to why Hanukkah does not have a 9th day.

<sup>12</sup> See *Sha'ar Hatziyun* (30) there, who explains this is a situation of doubt because perhaps it was not certain that the candles would blow out.



of the days Hanukkah. That being the case, we would need to be either lenient or stringent with both days, and we would wind up observing either seven or nine days of Hanukkah. Based on this, he is of the unique opinion that nine days of Hanukkah were actually celebrated in ancient times before the calendar was set, and that in Messianic times, when we return to deciding each month by the sighting of the moon, we will again celebrate nine days of Hanukkah.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps for these reasons, several *Aharonim* were unsatisfied with the explanation that the Sages were lenient for rabbinic holidays, and offered alternative explanations.

### **An Intentional Rabbinic Decision**

Instead of the notion that the Sages were simply lenient and did not want to trouble the nation with an additional day for rabbinic holidays, some understood the decision to limit Hanukkah to eight days as an intentional one.

*Abudraham* (cited in the *Ateret Zekeinim to Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 670) writes, “[On Sukkot we celebrate nine days because of the uncertainty of the date for this biblical holiday.] But Hanukkah, which is rabbinic, they [the Sages] said to make eight days of Hanukkah, and they [the Sages] devised the calculations of the lunar cycle.” Rather than simply saying that the Sages

were lenient, *Abudraham* invokes the principle of *heim amru ve-heim amru* (literally, “they said and they said”), which means that since the Sages were the ones who created rabbinic enactments, they have the right to issue certain exceptions or exemptions to these enactments. This may suggest that there is some intentionality to the Sages’ decision to keep Hanukkah eight days long even in the Diaspora.

But why might the Sages have wanted to keep Hanukkah at eight days, even outside of Israel? *Pri Hadash (Orach Chaim* 670) takes *Abudraham*’s idea one step further, invoking the symbolic importance of keeping Hanukkah eight days long. He writes, “Alternatively, this [to have only eight days of Hanukkah] is better [than nine] so that [people] will know exactly the duration of the miracle [of the oil], no less and no more [than eight days].”

*Pri Hadash* suggests that the Sages might have deliberately wanted to keep Hanukkah eight days long in the Diaspora rather than add an extra day as is done for other holidays, even if adding an extra day would have been appropriate standard procedure. The reason is the symbolic importance of eight days to Hanukkah. In this way, the days of the holiday itself can serve as a precise reminder of the miracle for which they were established.

This suggestion of *Pri Hadash* is a prime example of the uniqueness of Hanukkah in Jewish law. Even

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<sup>13</sup> See *Mishneh La-Melekh (Hilkhos Megillah* 1:11) who argues against this logic.

though other holidays commemorate miraculous events, in no other holiday is there specific concern that the duration of the holiday should line up with the duration of the miracle. Indeed, Hanukkah has a surprising focus on the miracle of oil; the concept of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle) deeply pervades and underlies so many of the laws and practices of Hanukkah.

The focus on the miracle of the oil is even more unique when we consider the fact that the miracle of the oil, while important, was not a matter of life and death and did not save the Jewish people from physical destruction. Miracles commemorated on other holidays are miracles that led to the salvation of the Jewish people from destruction.

The truth is, there is no obvious basis in Jewish law to establish a holiday in recognition of a miracle that does not directly involve the salvation of the Jewish people. The Gemara in *Megillah* 14a outlines when the establishment of a holiday to celebrate a miracle is appropriate: “Rabbi Hiyya son of Avin said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karha, if from slavery to freedom (on Pesah) we sing praises [to God], [if we are saved] from death to life, [like on Purim,] how much more so!?”

This Gemara explains why the creation of Purim

was appropriate: since we have a holiday commemorating our salvation from slavery, we should certainly celebrate salvation from annihilation as well. Ibn Ezra (Numbers 10:10) extends this idea to Hanukkah.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Gemara (*Pesachim* 117a) notes that Hallel is appropriate for any occasion in which the Jewish people faced a great danger and were saved from it. Rashi there explicitly cites Hanukkah as the prime example of this concept.

Based on this, it seems the legal basis for the establishment of Hanukkah as a holiday was primarily the military victory over the Greeks, which resolved the danger to the Jewish people. I would argue that the miracle of oil alone would not have been sufficient reason for establishing the holiday.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that when looking at the oldest sources we have that describe the establishment of Hanukkah, the miracle of oil plays a much less prominent role. After describing the military victory and the return to the Temple and its service, the first book of Maccabees (4:56-59) records: “And they made the dedication of the altar eight days, and they brought offerings with joy, and offered sacrifices. ... And so Yehudah and his brothers and all the congregation of Israel established that they should celebrate the days of the dedication of the altar in

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<sup>14</sup> *Hatam Sofer* (*Yoreh Deah* 233:14) extended this explicitly to Hanukkah as well, and based on this logic, wrote that Hanukkah and Purim have biblical status because there is a

biblical obligation to praise God on the day a miracle happened to you. Only the specific practices of Hanukkah and Purim are rabbinic in nature.

their time, year after year, for eight days.”

As is often noted, the miracle of oil is not mentioned in the book of Maccabees. The eight days of Hanukkah were established to commemorate the rededication of the altar. Most likely, the decision to celebrate for eight days was patterned after the dedication of the Tabernacle described in the Torah and the dedication King Solomon made after building the Temple, which both lasted eight days.<sup>15</sup>

This makes it all the more surprising that when the Sages ask (*Shabbat* 21a), “What is the essence of Hanukkah?” the immediate answer given is the miracle of the oil, not the military victory.<sup>16</sup> All of this begs the question: Why did the earlier sources ignore the miracle of oil, and why did the Sages focus on the oil miracle while minimizing the military victory?

Although we can’t be sure of the reason the miracle of oil was not mentioned in the earlier literature, it is possible it was omitted because it was felt to be insignificant in comparison with the miraculous military victory, and perhaps it was not enough to warrant the establishment of Hanukkah. At the same time, it is widely accepted among scholars that our Sages made a deliberate

shift in focus, away from the military victory and towards the miracle of oil. Scholars have suggested several reasons for this shift, including the Sages’ dislike of the Hasmonean dynasty because they ultimately became corrupt and rejected the teachings of the Pharisees, or a desire to discourage military confrontation after failed revolts against Rome.<sup>17</sup> Some have suggested that with the end of prophecy and Jewish political autonomy, the path to Jewish survival would be through spiritual achievement and Torah study rather than physical strength or political machination.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the reason, it is clear that the Sages were interested in downplaying the military victory and emphasizing the miracle of the oil. Thus, they took a miracle which on its own might not be enough to justify the establishment of Hanukkah and turned it into the focal point of that holiday.

I would like to suggest that the approach of *Pri Hadash*, with its emphasis on the rabbinic decision to keep Hanukkah at eight days specifically, even outside of Israel, is part of this deliberate approach to shift the focus of Hanukkah from the military to the spiritual. This also may be the reason for the focus on *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing

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<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, the second book of Maccabees (10:6) explains that the Jews celebrated eight days in commemoration of Sukkot because they were not allowed to celebrate Sukkot under the reign of the Greeks.

<sup>16</sup> The focus on the miracle of oil is even more surprising when considering that pure oil may not have actually been required.

<sup>17</sup> Based on the introduction to *Sefer Makkabim 1* by Uriel Rappaport, as well as pp. 76-77.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see Tzvi Sinensky’s *Lehrhaus* [article](#), “Masculinity and the Hanukkah Hero: Toward a New Interpretation of Biblical Gevurah.”

the miracle (of oil) that pervades so many of the laws of Hanukkah. The unusual decision to match the length of the holiday to the duration of the eight-day miracle it commemorates is part of the Sages' strategy to orchestrate a shift in the focus of celebration away from the Hasmonean victory and towards the apolitical, non-military miracle that facilitated spiritual worship and in which the Maccabees did not play a major role.

### **Conclusion**

We've explored a number of reasons why there is no ninth day of Hanukkah. Yet, nowadays, few people even wonder why we do not have a ninth day. Perhaps this is a testament to the Sages' unequivocal success in orchestrating a dramatic shift in the focus of our Hanukkah celebration away from the original theme of military victory and achieving functional control over the Temple. To the modern Jew, Hanukkah is nearly synonymous with eight days and the miracle of oil.

And yet, with the advent of the modern State of Israel, some of the original themes of the military victory that were downplayed by the Sages have become more relevant again. The Jewish people have rediscovered political autonomy and the need for military might. However, unlike the Hasmoneans, we come to this position as products of Rabbinic Judaism, of the world that prioritizes the values of Torah study, mitzvah observance, inner strength, and spiritual growth. It is our responsibility to synthesize these two worldviews, even if we don't advocate for one more night of Hanukkah.

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