

# A Short Explanation of Chanukah

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Today is the third day of *Chanukah*, an eight day minor festival on the Jewish calendar. The Bible doesn't command us to celebrate *Chanukah*, but Jews the world over have done so even before Yeshua. It is to commemorate an historic event that is recorded in 1 and 2 Maccabees, in treatises such as those written by Josephus, and in the *Talmud*. In brief, here is what happened:

In 334 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered Judea and introduced the Jews to Greek culture. After Alexander's death, his central kingdom separated into an east and west component that warred against each other, and Judea was caught in the middle. The eastern component that included Jerusalem was ruled by King Antiochus IV. He mistakenly believed that the Jews were fomenting a rebellion, so he retaliated by slaughtering many Jews, and prohibiting many Jewish practices upon pain of death. For example, he prohibited the keeping of Shabbat, and the practice of circumcision, and he profaned the Jerusalem Temple by using it for heathen worship.

Some Jews had become Hellenized and supported King Antiochus, but there was a group of Jews called *Chasidim* (no relation to the later *Chasidim* of Eastern Europe). They were led in opposing Antiochus by a family of priests called Hasmoneans, and Mattathias the priest was their head. When an agent of King Antiochus commanded him and others to worship Antiochus' god, Mattathias refused, and when a fellow Jew stepped forward to obey Antiochus' command, Mattathias killed him along with a Greek official. Mattathias and his fellow Hasmoneans then fled to the mountains, regrouped, mustered a small army, and began a military revolt against Antiochus, under Mattathias' leadership.

Mattathias appointed his son Judah (nick-named "Maccabee") to lead his Jewish army. Judah (the Maccabee) used guerrilla tactics to overcome a first attack launched by King Antiochus, and when Antiochus sent a larger more powerful army, it too was defeated by Judah's much smaller band. Judah's victory was unquestionably due to God's divine intervention, and so, one of the themes of *Chanukah* that is relevant even today, is God's protection and miraculous preservation of His people Israel.

When Judah entered Jerusalem, he found God's Temple desecrated and in shambles. The Hasmoneans, being priests, undertook to clean the Temple and restore it to its former function. They labored for almost a year and, when the Temple was finally clean, on the 25th day of *Kislev*, Judah rededicated the Temple to God, accompanied by an eight-day celebration. It is thought to have been a belated celebration of *Sukkot* – something the Maccabees had not been able to do for the three years that they were fighting Antiochus. Supporting this view is an event in earlier history that also connects the Temple's dedication with *Sukkot*. In 2 Chronicles 7:8-9, we read that Solomon took eight days to dedicate the Temple – seven days of dedication, and an eighth day for a sacred assembly – a clear reference to *Sukkot* and *Sh'mini Atzeret*; We read in 2 Chronicles 7:

*“At that time Solomon kept the feast seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great assembly from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt. And on the eighth day they held a sacred assembly, for they observed the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days.”*

Another term used to describe *Chanukah* is “Festival of Lights.” This term is found in Josephus’ Book of Antiquities, suggesting a *Talmudic* legend that explains the eight-day celebration being due to a miracle of God. As part of the Temple’s re-dedication, it was necessary to light the seven-branch *menorah* but, because of the Temple’s desecration, only one jar of consecrated oil with the High Priest’s seal had been found, and it would have taken eight days to produce more.. The *Talmud* states that, instead of delaying the dedication, the Hasmonean priests decided to light the *menorah* using the one jar of oil they had and, because God blessed it miraculously, the oil lasted eight days instead of the one day that they expected.

With or without the story of the miracle of the oil, it is historically confirmed that the rededication of the Temple lasted for eight days. That is the reason we celebrate Chanukah using an eight branch *chanukiyah* and not a *menorah* that has seven branches such as the one that was lit in the Temple, and like the one we display here at Ohev Yisrael.

I started by telling you that *Chanukah* is not commanded in Scripture and that is true. However, *Chanukah* is mentioned in Scripture in the Book of John by its name “Feast of Dedication.” In John 10:22-30 we read:

*“Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Yeshua walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Yeshua answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.”*

So, not only was Yeshua present in the Temple during *Chanukah*, but it was during this very feast – the Feast of Dedication – that Yeshua chose to reveal His divine identity and His oneness with The Father.

What I have thus far spoken about were physical temples, but God also speaks of our bodies as being temples. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 we read:

*“Or don't you know that your body is a temple for the Ruach HaKodesh who lives inside you, whom you received from God? The fact is, you don't belong to yourselves; for you were bought at a price. So use your bodies to glorify God.”*

So for me, *Chanukah* is not only an historic commemoration, it is a personal one of contemplating the condition of my own Temple – my body, soul, and spirit – and rededicating them to God. I recommend that to you as well.