

Hanukkah and Yeshua (Jesus)

By Moshe Schwab

Josephus was a first century Jewish historian. He refers to Hanukkah (which means “dedication”) as being commonly called The Light Feast (Chag Ha’or in Hebrew). Perhaps we get the name of Feast of Lights because of the miracle of the menorah oil lasting for 8 days when they only had enough oil for one day. Or it could have been that the shekinah glory (light) of God returned to the Temple at the rededication of the Temple. What the rabbis call the shekinah glory is that presence of God seen at the Mishkan (Tent of Meeting in the desert) in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Hanukkah is now called both the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) and The Feast of Lights. It is recorded that the Jews observed it since the Temple was rededicated in 165 BCE so Yeshua (Jesus) would have observed it. The dedication ceremony for the Mishkan in the Torah lasted for 7 days plus the final day for a total of 8 days in Leviticus 8-9; the miracle of the oil also lasted for 8 days some say. Some have speculated that Chanukkah was a late celebration of Sukkot, but they have speculated wrongly since it is clearly related to the rededication of the Temple and perhaps also to a miracle of oil. The miracle of the oil is possibly substantiated by archaeologists having found ancient Hanukkah lamps dated to the first century; see the picture below. We find more detailed information about the miracle of the oil in what scholars think is a first or second century document¹ called the Megillat Antiochus (It should be remembered during our celebrations that ritual is not necessarily a commandment of God unless the Bible tells us to do it. Ceremonies celebrating Chanukkah are fine as long as we understand they are only ritual.)



Chanukkah from First Century – see Hanukkah in Wikipedia

First, from the Megillat Antiochus we see the story of the miracle of the oil: “After this, the sons of Israel went up to the Temple and rebuilt its gates and purified the Temple from the dead bodies and from the defilement. And they sought after pure olive oil to light the lamps therewith, but could not find any, except one bowl that was sealed with the signet ring of the High Priest from the days of Samuel the prophet and they knew that it was pure. There was in it [enough oil] to light [the lamps therewith] for one day, but the God of heaven whose name dwells there put therein his blessing and they were able to light from it eight days. Therefore, the sons of Hashmonai made this covenant and took upon themselves a solemn vow, they and the sons of Israel, all of them, to publish amongst the sons of Israel, [to the end] that they might observe these eight days of joy and honour, as the days of the feasts written in [the book of] the Law; [even] to light in them so as to make known to those who come after them that their God wrought for them salvation from heaven. In them, it is not permitted to mourn, neither to decree a fast [on those days], and anyone who has a vow perform it.”²

Another possible explanation for the secondary name, The Feast of Lights, is that when the Temple was rededicated, God’s light (shekinah) again returned to Israel and the Temple. The second reason is of particular interest in that Yeshua according to Yochanan (John) is the light that came into the world (John, Chapter 1). Yeshua then being that light, brought light to the Jewish people and subsequently to the whole world. Yochanan says that Yeshua heals a man that was born blind (John 9:1ff) and declares he is the light of the world in John 9:5. He then goes to Jerusalem in John Chapter 10 on the feast of Hanukkah. We know it is also called the Feast of Lights according to the first century Jewish historian Josephus. The Light (Yeshua) who came into the world to give light to the world comes to Jerusalem on the Feast of Lights some 2,000 years ago, how appropriate.

Now let’s look at Josephus. From Josephus, Antiquities. 12. 7. 7, he seems to say that the common name for Hanukkah is The Light Feast. He says “this liberty,” light, appeared to us referring to the restoration of the Temple

¹ From https://wiki2.org/en/Scroll_of_Antiochus. Also, some argue that the scroll of Antiochus actually was written in the first century BC. This could explain the chanukkah lamp that is dated to the 1st century. A Chanukkah lamp has 9 places to light instead of the traditional menorah (lamp) which has 7 places to light.

² From the article Megillat Antiochus on Wikipedia.

worship. I can't help, but to think of Yochanan introducing us to Yeshua in the book of John when I read this in Josephus. According to Yochanan in the book of John, that light, Yeshua, appeared in the flesh (John:1:14).

Also, freedom is a common theme in Judaism. Israel was set free from Egypt to serve God; likewise, we are set free by the Messiah Yeshua to serve God. Like I just said, Yeshua is the light that appeared according to Yochanan. He just happened to come to them at the site of the first Temple in Jerusalem and on the Feast of Hanukkah. Hanukkah is also a freedom festival; Antiochus Epiphanes was trying to wipe out Judaism.³ Josephus the first century Jewish historian says:

(323) Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days; and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon: but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them, by hymns and psalms. (324) Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that **they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days.** (325) And from that time to this we celebrate this **festival, and call it Lights.** I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.⁴

The first century source says that they made it a law that Hanukkah should be celebrated. Perhaps Hanukkah had to do with the miracle of the oil that the Megillat Antiochus talks about or perhaps it only had to do with the shekinah glory returning to Israel and a celebration of rededication. Some say that the only reference to the miracle of oil is in the oral Torah from perhaps around the year 500 AD. We have written evidence and archaeological evidence for a Feast of Lights. That means the Feast of Lights is also the true name for this feast no matter what people contrive.

Also, of interest, in 1 Maccabees 4:44-47 it talks about the stones that were replaced for the rededication of the Temple because they were desecrated by Antiochus. They were set aside until a prophet comes and tells them what to do with them. **They expected a prophet like Moshe (Moses) to come, namely the messiah.** Here is the record about the stones from 1 Maccabees 4:44-47 KJV:

And when as they consulted what to do with the altar of burnt offerings, which was profaned; They thought it best to pull it down, lest it should be a reproach to them, because the heathen had defiled it: wherefore they pulled it down, And laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place, **until there should come a prophet to shew what should be done with them.** Then they took whole stones according to the law, and built a new altar according to the former.

Yeshua was that prophet like Moshe to come and He was standing at the place where the first Temple stood on Hanukkah; and the stones from the defiled altar were there. So, they ask Yeshua in John 10 to tell them if He is the Messiah and He says, 'He already told them.' John 10:24-25. His works should have testified to them that He is the Messiah. He had just healed a man that was born blind and said He was the light of the world in John 9! In fact, He also claims that He and the Father are one in John 10:30. They try to stone Him because they clearly understood that He was claiming to be God and ironically on Hanukkah, a feast of liberation from the lunatic Antiochus Epiphanes who thought he was god, but of course wasn't. They try to stone the Messiah with the stones that were left there even though He demonstrated who He was and said he was the light of the world. It was apparent that Yeshua is the Messiah and Yeshua will give those who believe in Him the Holy Spirit to help us live right (see Acts 2:38-39).

It says in the book of Hebrews 4:2 CJB "For Good News (talking about Yeshua) has also been proclaimed to us, just as it was to them (talking about the Israelites in the desert). But the message they heard didn't do them any good, because those who heard it did not combine it with trust." Ephesian 5:5-8 NKJV says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." Let us be people who believe and trust in the Messiah Yeshua; He is the light of the world and may we also be lights to the world.

³ **Without the Jewish people being faithful and God delivering the Jews we would have no Messiah.**

⁴ The Works of Josephus: New Updated Version, Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1987.