

On the Nature of Hanukkah - A Dialogue

by Jeremy Benstein



- You’re writing about Hanukkah? But don’t you usually write about nature and the environment?
- Nu? So?
- So, what’s the environmental side of Hanukkah? I always thought it was either about miracles, like the oil lasting eight days, or about bravery and fighting for independence.
- True – that’s the Sunday school version, which always triggers its own debates about whether the holiday’s message is more religious-theological, or more secular-political. But it’s more complex than that. – How so?
- Well, did you ever realize that Hanukkah represents the first oil crisis? And that the crisis was solved with renewable energy?
- Get serious! Besides, some would interpret that to mean that we should wait for God to solve our current energy problems miraculously.
- You’re right. But it’s no coincidence that Hanukkah comes towards the end of the mesik, the olive harvest in Israel, when oil becomes plentiful. Remember the nerot we light originally referred to oil lamps, not candles.
- That’s interesting. You know, most of those candles are petroleum-based – it would

certainly add meaning to switch to olive oil.

– I agree. There is indeed a whole agricultural side: The Mishnah, in Tractate Bikkurim, even mentions Hanukkah as the last time that people could bring their first-fruit offerings to the Temple, probably because the olive crop is the last of the seven species to ripen.

– Just as winter is setting in – which means that we renew our stock of oil just as the days shorten and we need it most.

– Nicely put – and that is another “environmental” side. The theme of light and its return is doubly represented on Hanukkah: not only the light of the sun, at the winter solstice, but the moon as well. The holiday straddles the new moon of Tevet, and the moon disappears and then reappears during the course of the festival.

– One thing I really like about the natural sides of our holidays is the universal connection it gives us: both to these cosmic cycles of light, darkness, and seasonal changes, but also to other peoples and their cultures. You know, many traditions have candle-lighting festivals in winter!

– That’s sounds really New-Agey, but it’s actually an ancient realization. The Talmud even hints that the origin of the eight days of Hanukkah is as a solstice festival.

– I thought the Talmud barely mentions Hanukkah.

– The Tractate of Avodah Zarah, dealing with idolatrous practices, relates that the Roman festivals of Calendria and Saturnalia take place eight days after and eight days before the solstice. Then a teaching of the rabbis is quoted: “When the first Adam saw the day getting progressively shorter, he said: “Woe is me, for because I have sinned, the entire world is being cast into darkness and returning to chaos! This must be the death that was decreed by Heaven!’ He then sat for eight days in prayer and fasting. But as he observed the winter solstice and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said: ‘This must be the way of the world, ’and he celebrated an eight day festival...” The point being that Hanukkah and those other festivals go back to that same universal experience of joy and relief at the return of the light in darkest winter.

– When you think about it, those natural cycles that we’re so used to are no less miraculous than a story about a jar of oil.

– It’s hard for us to believe in miracles these days – but maybe it’s just about not taking

things for granted.

– That’s goes for the political dimension of the holiday as well.

– What do you mean?

– I’m talking about Israel’s national independence. It’s easy to forget the great significance that has for Jewish existence.

– Fulfilling that dream has been miraculous. But we need to remember that nobody’s struggle for freedom from oppression should lead to subjugation of others. Unfortunately, precisely the olive and its harvest, whose oil gives the light we’ve spoken about and whose branches symbolize peace, has become an excuse for harassment and persecution of Palestinian farmers in Judea and Samaria.

– OK, so especially in this season, we should rededicate ourselves to the message of freedom, both particular and universal, and pray that renewed connections in both the natural and the national realms will give us reason to celebrate.

– You know, when it comes to how we celebrate, and those connections with other holidays, I’ve been troubled recently with the increasing commercialization of Hanukkah, much like its seasonal cousin, Christmas.

– I agree. And it’s doubly ironic on Hanukkah, which represents the triumph of spiritual values over the materialistic culture of Hellenism. That’s also another environmental aspect of the holiday: the emphasis on quantity in gift-giving, and the destructive effects of runaway consumer culture.

– Oy! That’s a lot of guilt with the gelt!

– Well, we do build and preserve the world both with our presence, and our presents. The candles should represent for both, a ner tamid, a perpetual, sustainable source of light and not an esh okhelet, a destructive fire.

– Amen. Hag urim sameah, may it be a joyous festival of light for all.

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