



From the Rabbi's Study

Chanukah is the last of the festivals to be established. The event it commemorates is not even recorded in a biblical book, as the story of Purim is, and it is mentioned only once, and then tangentially, in the Mishnah, although the history it recalls occurred centuries before that. When Chanukah is finally discussed in the Talmud the section begins by asking, "What is Chanukah?"

What kind of a question is that? Today, almost all Jewish children, and many non-Jews, know what Chanukah is about, so why did the rabbis ask this question in the Gemara and why is it barely mentioned in the Mishnah (edited around 180 C.E.)? All this suggests that Chanukah (whose events occurred around 165 B.C.E) was not widely observed until well after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Hence the rabbis had to explain what the festival was about.

The historian, Solomon Grayzel, suggests that Chanukah became more popular only after the loss of Jewish independence in Judea because it came to represent a vision of what Jewish life could be like again in the future. In the dark centuries of exile, in the longest and darkest nights of winter, the light of this festival inspired Jewish hopes for a better day ahead. In the far-flung and seemingly eternal Diaspora, the Chanukah candles and the miracles they recalled kept hope alive.

The Midrash tells us that Adam was terrified when the sun set at the end of his first day and the earth grew dark and rejoiced when the sun rose again the next morning. Scientists tell us that people get depressed in the middle of the winter when there is little daylight, and actually recommend light therapy.

For us, the Chanukah lights similarly indicate a brighter future to which to look forward. That we can only look at the Chanukah candles and cannot use them for a utilitarian purpose suggests that they symbolize and hold up a vision for us.

Chanukah is about rededication for the future and there can be no greater example of this than our stunning new shule. Local residents have commented to me how they are affected by the light shining forth through its stained-glass windows to the world outside.

As we celebrate this year, let us rejoice in the ultimate vision of a bright and vibrant future ahead for our Kehillah, our people and our beloved Eretz Yisrael.

Wishing you a Happy and Light-filled Chanukah!

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