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A Summarization of Chanukah Traditions

Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee

The holiday of *Chanukah* (חֲנֻכָּה), or the Festival of Dedication, is full of many customs and traditions that give our celebration great life and depth. During this time of year, we have the awesome opportunity to commemorate the work of God from some 2,200 years ago during the time of the Maccabees. If they had not fought against the Seleucid invaders of Israel, the Jewish people would have either been destroyed through war, or would have disappeared via cultural assimilation. *Chanukah*, as attested in the historical record, was mandated as a national celebration so that the community could remember the sacrifice of the Maccabees, and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem:

“Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev” (1 Maccabees 4:59).

We have the wonderful opportunity to join with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and celebrate in the historical triumphs that are given for us in the story of the Maccabees. There is much for us to celebrate during this time, as we remember how God inspired a rag-tag army to fight a vastly superior force, and never give up until the goal of victory was achieved. We are to remember how the Maccabees fought off the cultural assimilation that they faced, which required them to deny the Torah and its commandments. We are to remember how the Maccabees rededicated the Temple to the God of Israel, restoring the vessels of worship and sacrifices to their rightful places. And, we are also to remember how Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who thought he was a god, was ultimately judged by the One True God he was trying to destroy.

As you can imagine, many customs and traditions have developed in the centuries past when the Jewish community has remembered *Chanukah*. We have compiled the following list of elements that are included in traditional observance, followed by some things that we have adapted in our own family observance as Messianic Believers, which we believe will be helpful for you.

Lighting the Menorah

Lighting the *menorah* is probably the most common custom associated with *Chanukah*. The Temple *menorah* (מְנוֹרָה) or lampstand was one of the most awesome and valuable pieces of worship, as well as one of the most difficult to replace. It is not agreed among Biblical historians whether or not the candelabra that the Maccabees originally lit was the actual Temple *menorah*, or something makeshift. One ancient source “states that the Hasmoneans could not use the candelabrum in the Temple since the Greeks had defiled it. They, therefore, took seven iron spits, covered them with zinc, and used them as a candelabrum (Scholium to *Megillat Ta’anit*)” (*EJ*).¹ Later traditions indicate that “upon entering the Temple, the Hasmoneans discovered that the Greeks had defiled all the oil, except for one cruse, which contained enough oil to keep the candelabrum burning for only one day. A miracle, however, happened and they kindled it for eight days” (*EJ*).² The reason this was a miracle is that the oil that was used to light the *menorah* took eight days to be properly consecrated. The Torah says that the oil used was to be “clear oil of beaten olives for the light, to make a lamp burn continually” (Exodus 27:20; cf. Leviticus 24:2), and the prevailing *halachah* of the day required that it took eight days for this oil to be produced. While some people today brand the miracle of the oil remaining lit for eight days only a “legend,” the fact of the matter remains that Orthodox Jews, many Conservative Jews, and the vast majority of the Messianic Jewish community today, believe with great faith that it actually happened.

While today the *chanukia*, or nine-branched *menorah* for *Chanukah*, is often decorated elaborately, and there are various styles among different Jewish communities over the world, First Century *chanukias* would not have been as elaborate. “There was in use in talmudic times the Greco-Roman *polymixos*, a many mouthed lamp which was made of clay, stone, or bronze with eight apertures for wicks fed by a central reservoir on whose surface geometrical or symbolic designs often appear” (*EJ*).³ This may have been the model for the first *chanukias*. There is no uniform design that appears in archaeological or traditional evidence, but it is safe to assume that some kind of miniature candelabrum, either made of metal or clay, was used by Jewish families to commemorate this holiday.

We do know, based on Talmudic evidence, that the practice of kindling lights for *Chanukah* was present in the First Century world of Yeshua. In the First Century B.C.E., prior to the First Coming of Yeshua, there were *halachic* differences between the Pharisaical schools of Hillel and Shammai over when and how the *menorah* for *Chanukah* should be lit.⁴ These *halachic* differences are primarily given to us in the tractates *b.Shabbat* 21b and *b.Shabbat* 23a of the Babylonian Talmud. Ronald L. Eisenberg notes in *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, “Beit Shammai declared that eight candles should be lit on the first night, and thereafter they should be reduced by one on each successive day. The *halakah*, as usual, follows Beit Hillel, which argued for lighting one candle on the

¹ Moshe David Herr, “Hanukkah,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows ox. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

² *Ibid.*

³ Yitzhak Einhorn, “Hannukah Lamp,” in *EJ*.

⁴ Some of the other theological differences and similarities between the schools of Hillel and Shammai are examined the article “You Want to be a Pharisee” by J.K. McKee.

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first night, two on the second night, and so forth. This view was based on the principle that in matters of holiness, one should increase rather than diminish.”⁵

As Messianic Believers today, who are striving to return to the First Century practices of the early Believers, we should likewise be following the rulings of Beit Hillel here, and light the *chanukia* one candle for the first night, two candles for the second night, etc. The Apostle Paul was a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), who was the grandson of Hillel, and would have most probably adhered to Beit Hillel’s rulings.

Throughout Jewish history, there have been various ways members of the community have lit the *chanukia*. While in earlier times, olive oil was preferred to be used to light the *chanukia*, almost any oil can be used, and today the vast majority of people use candles. Eisenberg notes, “Lighting only one menorah is sufficient to fulfill the mitzvah, but it has become customary among Ashkenazim for each person in a household to light his or her own menorah. Women are equally obliged to light the Hanukkah lamps, since they also were included in the miracle (Shab. 23a).”⁶ The first candle to be lit is the *shamash* (שַׁמָּשׁ) candle, or “servant” candle in the center, which is then used to light the first, second, third, and whatever other candles need to be lit on the respective day(s) of *Chanukah*.

Today, the custom of lighting the *chanukia* is usually performed in the early evening. Biblically, as the day begins in the evening (cf. Genesis 1:5), the first night of *Chanukah* begins at sundown. It is notable that *Chanukah* is not a high holiday, and thus work is permitted during the eight days, except on the Sabbath. On *Shabbat* the lighting of the *chanukia* applies as though one were lighting the *Shabbat* candles, which is often performed a minimum of eighteen minutes before sundown. Furthermore, as Eisenberg remarks, “The Hanukkah candles should burn for a minimum of a half hour. However, the general halakic opinion is that merely kindling the light fulfills the commandment.”⁷

We offer this information to give you a broad perspective regarding the lighting of the *Chanukah* lights in the modern Jewish community. Some of you, as you light your *chanukia*, may only be able to leave it lit for a short time. Likewise, some of you might have several *chanukias*, and have each member of your family—or even added guests for that matter—light their own. (Some may not want to do this because of small children and the added fire hazard!) Some of you may have more traditional *chanukias*, which are somehow modeled after the Temple *menorah*, or various other classical designs. Likewise, some of you may prefer the more neo-modern looking *chanukias*, or the various other non-traditional ones available today. However you choose to kindle the *Chanukah* lights during the eight days, have fun when doing it! Remember the rededication of the Temple, and that the Maccabees may have only been using iron bars for a makeshift *menorah*, especially if your *chanukia* is not as “fancy” as those of others.

⁵ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

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Eating Fried Foods

Feasting is a very important part of celebrating any of the holidays, be they Biblical, extra-Biblical, national Israeli holidays, or otherwise, in the Jewish community. **Eating fried foods**, in particular, is one of the great traditions surrounding *Chanukah*. More than anything else, eating fried foods has become a part of *Chanukah* so that celebrants might remember the miracle of the oil. In more Biblical times, eating foods cooked in olive oil was customary, but in more modern times, with various and diverse cooking oils, we see a wider variance of fried foods. The Ashkenazic communities in Germany and Central Europe frequently celebrated *Chanukah* by eating *latkes*, or potato pancakes fried in oil. *Latkes* are often garnished with applesauce, although modern condiments like ketchup, or even barbeque sauce, are becoming more commonplace when eating them. *Sufganiot* (sing. *sufgania*) are special doughnuts fried in oil that are quite popular in the Sephardic community, and in Israel today.

Of course, concerning anyone's celebration of *Chanukah*, there are many more popular fried foods, from all over the world, that can be eaten at this time. These may also be eaten in the Jewish community during *Chanukah*, but are often more localized or regionalized. Some of our personal family "fried favorites" to eat during this time include funnel cakes, beer-battered onion rings, Southern fried chicken (not fried in lard!), and a good British fish-n-chips. Deep fried turkey is also quickly becoming a popular dish in America today. As you commemorate *Chanukah* with the more customary *latkes* and *sufganiot*, you may wish to pull out some of your favorite "fried recipes" that can be enjoyed during this wonderful time.

Eating Cheese and Dairy Foods

An interesting custom that has grown in some segments of the Jewish community includes **eating cheese and dairy foods** during *Chanukah*. Eisenberg remarks that "The tradition of eating cheese and other dairy foods is based on late midrashim that associate Hanukkah with the story of Judith...Although the Book of Judith...is set in the Babylonian period (sixth century B.C.E.) and thus seems to have no apparent connection with Hanukkah, medieval versions of the story relate it to the Hasmonean revolt."⁸ Relating the story of Judith to the events of the Maccabees may have been done to help include women in the celebration of *Chanukah*, and incorporate a story where a woman, Judith, was used in warfare. According to the story, Judith prepared a great feast for the general Holofernes, including cheese. When he was in a drunken stupor, Judith beheaded him and was able to help the Jews he captured escape. Some women in the Jewish community choose not to work during *Chanukah* in deference to the example of Judith.

Cheese blintzes are a very popular food at almost any holiday time in the Jewish community. These are crepes filled with a sweetened cream cheese or cottage cheese, sometimes also with fruit, and are often deep fried. In modern Israel today, eating pizza is also popular during the *Chanukah* season. Whether this is specifically because of the custom of eating cheese and dairy products during *Chanukah*, or simply because of the popularity of pizza, may never be entirely known!

⁸ Ibid., 247.

Spinning the Dreidel

Spinning the *dreidel* became a popular game to play in the Jewish communities of the late Middle Ages, to deter people from playing cards and gambling, which had become the norm in some sectors. The word *dreidel* is derived from the German verb *drehen*, meaning “to turn.”⁹ Some believe that a form of the *dreidel* game was played by Jews during the Maccabean era when the Seleucids would inspect them to see if they were studying the Torah. The *dreidel* was played to make the Seleucids think that the Jews were gambling, instead of talking about the Scriptures among themselves.

A *dreidel* is a spinning top, based on dice that originally had the letters N, G, H, and S on its four sides, representing the German words *nichts* (nothing), *ganz* (all), *halb* (half), and *shtell arein* (put in). Jewish communities adapted the *dreidel* employing the Hebrew letter equivalents *nun* (נ), *gimel* (ג), *hey* (ה), and *shin* (ש). These four Hebrew letters also make up the acronym *nes gadol hayah sham* or “a great miracle happened there.” In Israel today the *shin* is replaced by the letter *peh* (פ) for *po*, changing the meaning to “a great miracle happened here.” The *dreidel* game is often played using *Chanukah Gelt*, candy, or nuts as prizes.

Chanukah Gelt and Giving Presents

It has become customary for Jewish parents to give their children *Chanukah Gelt* during this time of year. *Gelt* is the Yiddish word for “money” (Ger. *Geld*). Eisenberg remarks that “Some have suggested that this practice relates to the minting of coins for currency by the Maccabees after restoring political autonomy to the Jewish people.”¹⁰ In Eastern Europe *Gelt* was often given to children on the fifth night of *Chanukah*, as an incentive for them to continue in Torah study, which was robbed from the Jews by the decree of Antiochus Epiphanes. In successive generations the custom of giving *Gelt* to all children was replaced by giving chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil, and by **giving presents**, one per each night of *Chanukah*, to members of one’s household.

Singing the Maoz Tzur Hymn

One important *Chanukah* custom followed in the Jewish community is **singing the hymn *Maoz Tzur***, meaning “Rock of Ages.” It is to be a song of thanksgiving to God, as He is thanked for delivering the people of Israel from the Egyptian bondage, through the Babylonian exile, Haman’s plot to exterminate the Jews, and ultimately the victory of the Maccabees. An English form of *Maoz Tzur* was composed by the American Rabbis Marcus Jastrow and Gustav Gottheil in the Nineteenth Century,¹¹ and is the form that you will often hear on television and radio broadcasts focusing on *Chanukah*.

Reading the Books of the Maccabees

We believe that perhaps the most important *Chanukah* custom, aside from lighting the *chanukia*, is actually sitting down and familiarizing oneself with the story of the Maccabees. First of all, it is important that we in the Messianic

⁹ Ibid., 251.

¹⁰ Ibid., 247.

¹¹ Ibid., pp 251-252.

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community have a firm foundation in Biblical Studies, and that we know the history of the “elongated First Century” from the time of the Maccabees to the end of the First Century C.E. with the composition of the Book of Revelation. We have to understand that the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom was the last time that Israel was an independent nation until the State of Israel was founded in 1948. Furthermore, the events of the Maccabees can help us understand the position of Judea in the larger world of the First Century B.C.E., as the Roman Republic was expanding in influence and consolidating the Mediterranean basin under its grasp.

The Books of 1-4 Maccabees, found in the Apocrypha, are historical, yet are filled with important Biblical themes. We see the lives of Jewish men and women who are not afraid to die for their faith in the God of Israel. They have the confidence of knowing that they will be rewarded in the hereafter, and that those tormenting them will be punished severely and eternally by the Almighty. One group of Jews, captured and tortured by the Seleucids, had the following to say in a united voice as they faced certain death:

“Therefore, tyrant, put us to the test; and if you take our lives because of our religion, do not suppose that you can injure us by torturing us. For we, through this severe suffering and endurance, shall have the prize of virtue and shall be with God, for whom we suffer; but you, because of your bloodthirstiness toward us, will deservedly undergo from the divine justice eternal torment by fire” (4 Maccabees 9:7-9).

These are the kinds of stories that should inspire us as Messianic Believers today to not give into the peer pressures of our worldly society. We should be thankful that we do not presently face the threat of death for worshipping the God of Israel as He requires of us. **Those who lived in the period of the Maccabees did.** We have to be inspired and deeply moved by the story of the Maccabees, as we should be by any martyrs of the faith, and commit ourselves to standing for the truth of the Lord in whatever situations we may face. As you read the accounts of the Maccabees, never forget their courage and sacrifice for us, as we are all the spiritual recipients of their actions. Never forget that if they had not stood for the truth against an overwhelming force, that there would have been no remnant of Israel for our Messiah Yeshua to have been born into, who is the Light of the whole world.