



## Fw: [Karaites Korner Newsletter] #489: The Fires of Carmel and Hannukah

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Karaites Korner Newsletter #489

The Fires of Carmel and Hannukah

As Jews around the world celebrate Hannukah, remembering fires that burned thousands of years ago, a fire is raging in northern Israel, consuming the forests of Mount Carmel. In the time of Elijah, a fire descended on these mountains consuming the prophet's sacrifice that he offered in his challenge to the prophets of Baal. The false prophets spent all day calling upon their god to consume their sacrifices to no avail. When Elijah's sacrifice was consumed by a fire from heaven the people knew that Baal was a false deity and they proclaimed:

Yehovah hu ha-elohim! Yehovah hu ha-elohim!

"Yehovah, he is God! Yehovah, he is God!" 1Ki 18:39

A few days ago the worst fire in Israel's history began to sweep through the mountains of Carmel. A tragedy happened last Thursday (Dec 2) when a bus full of prison guards and police were caught in the flames on their way to evacuate prisoners at the Damon prison. One of the miracles of the day took place when Israeli cameraman Roni Sofer saved three of the trapped prison guards by driving through a wall of fire. The rest, forty in total, perished in the flames.

The miracle of Hannukah was born in the flames of the Seleucid Greek persecution of the Jews. This began three years before the first Hannukah when the Seleucid Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes issued a series of decrees designed to eradicate the Jewish faith. The first round of anti-Jewish decrees went into force on the 3rd day of Tishrei in the year 168 BCE. These decrees are recorded in a 1st century CE document called "The Scroll of Fasting" (Megillat Ta'anit) which says:

"on the third of Tishrei... the evil Greek kingdom decreed eradication of Israel saying to them, 'deny the Kingdom of heaven' and say 'we have no portion with the God of Israel' and do not mention the name of the God of heaven on your mouths." Megillat Ta'anit, Tishrei

These initial decrees were followed up with a prohibition against practicing circumcision and observing the Sabbath. Three months later, on the 25th day of Kislev, the Greeks re-dedicated the Jerusalem Temple as a

sanctuary to the sun-god Apollo, sacrificing pigs on the altar. This was the straw that broke the camel's back and it led to a Jewish uprising. After three years of fighting, the Maccabees liberated the Temple, tore down the defiled altar, and on the third anniversary of its defilement dedicated a new one. To this day, the full name of the holiday is Hannukat Ha-Mizbeach, Dedication of the Altar, in memory of this event. The real miracle of Hannukah is the victory of a band of ill-equipped and untrained farmers and priests defeating a world super-power that tried to force them to eat pig, give up circumcision and the Sabbath, and forbade them to utter the name of our heavenly Father Yehovah.

Three hundred years after that first Hannukah, the Roman emperor Hadrian re-instituted the anti-Jewish decrees. One Jewish leader, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, was burned in the Roman fires for violating these decrees. According to the Talmud, he was wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive "because he used to pronounce the name the way it is written" (Sabbath 17b-18a). This rabbi was only one of thousands martyred by the Romans for publicly proclaiming the name of our heavenly Father "Yehovah"!

Recently I was privileged to spend two hours on television proclaiming the holy name of our heavenly Father as part of the launch of Keith Johnson's new book: "His Hallowed Name Revealed Again". This two-hour interview was one of the most exciting things I've ever done. As my Methodist friend Keith later put it: "After ten minutes, the holy spirit just took over." Karaite interpretation: "God wanted his name to be heard!" The television station told us they never had such a powerful response and in only a few days they sold out of Keith's new book and our earlier joint book "A Prayer to Our Father". For me, it wasn't about selling books. It was about all those Jews and others who were burned in the flames of persecution because they defied man-made decrees forbidding them to speak God's holy name. As I look around Jerusalem at the Hannukah lamps peaking out of windows and decorating doorways I remember all those who died in centuries past in the fires of persecution in order to proclaim the name of our heavenly Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. I am thankful that today, despite social pressures and traditions, I am allowed to proclaim his name without fear of death.

The two-hour television interview is available online at:  
<http://hishallowedname.com/2010/11/television-interview/>

Hint: You can download the two-part interview by following the links below each part and then clicking on "download this video" on the right-hand side. You'll need to login to Vimeo (free registration) in order to do this. You can watch it streaming without logging in or registering.

Now for a little more on Hannukah and its history. The festival of Hannukah is not commanded in the Tanach but there is nothing inherently wrong with it as long as you can separate fact from fiction. In Biblical terms, Hannukah would be classified as a Yom Simchah, a day of joy. Numbers chapter 10 verse 10 talks about blowing the silver trumpets "on your days of joy, on your appointed times, and on your new moons". In modern times, the Jewish People observe a number of days of joy such as Jerusalem Day in commemoration of the liberation of Jerusalem in 1967 and Independence Day in memory of Israel surviving an invasion by several Arab armies in 1948-1949. I celebrate these days of joy every year to give honor to the miracles that our Creator bestowed upon us in these two historic events.

Up until the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE the Jewish People observed dozens of days of joy in honor of great events that took place in that period. These days of joy are listed in the aforementioned 1st century document Megillat Ta'anit, the Scroll of Fasting. The scroll consists of a list of dates and associated events that were observed as national days of joy. The purpose of the scroll was to instruct people when not to fast. Fasting is associated with mourning and sadness and it would not be appropriate to fast on a day of joy. The most important day of joy listed in Megillat Ta'anit was Nicanor Day which commemorated the decisive battle between Judah the Maccabee and the Seleucid Greek general Nicanor on the 13th of Adar in 161 BCE. When the Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE all of the days of joy were abolished with the sole exception of the 8 days of Hannukah.

Today Hannukah is best known as a festival commemorating a miracle that supposedly happened in 165

BCE when the Maccabees liberated the Temple from the Seleucid Greeks. According to the well-known story, the victorious Maccabees searched the Temple looking for olive oil to use in the Menorah, the candelabrum that according to Exodus 27:20-21 must be lit every day. People had been killed in the liberation of the Temple and therefore all its contents were deemed ritually impure. The Maccabees desperately searched for a vial of oil with its seal intact because the seal would shield it from ritual impurity of the dead. This is in accordance with Numbers 19:15,

"And every open vessel, which hath no covering bound upon it, is unclean."

According to the story, the Maccabees only found a single vial of oil with the seal intact and immediately lit the Menorah with this single dose of oil. Ritual purification from the dead is a seven-day process (Numbers 19) so they could not work on producing a new batch of pure oil until the eighth day. The miracle, we are told, was that the single vial of oil burned for eight days instead of one, giving the Maccabees time to prepare a new batch of pure oil.

The problem with this wonderful miracle is that it never happened. It is a pure work of fiction invented after the Temple was destroyed. It is not mentioned in a single source that pre-dates the Destruction of the Temple. To this day, the full name of the holiday of Hannukah (Dedication) is Hannukat Ha-Mizbeach, which means "Dedication of the Altar". After the Romans destroyed the altar in 70 CE, the rabbis invented the miracle of the oil to give new significance to this festival. As its name implies, the original significance of Hannukah was the dedication of the altar in the year 165 BCE. The Seleucid Greeks had desecrated the altar in the Temple by sacrificing a pig on it to the sun-god Apollo. They did this on the 25th of Kislev in the year 168 BCE. After liberating the Temple in 165 BCE, the Maccabees tore down the defiled altar and built a new one. They dedicated this new altar on the 25th of Kislev, three years to the day after it was desecrated by the Greeks.

The historical events surrounding Hannukah are described in two historical works called 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees, written shortly after the events took place. Both of these books describe the events in excruciating detail. Both books tell the story of the liberation of the Temple but neither says a single word about the alleged miracle of the oil. Instead they give three reasons for celebrating Hannukah for eight days. The first reason was a miracle that repeated itself in the days of Moses and Solomon, both times associated with eight days of dedication. When Moses dedicated Aaron and his sons as priests in the desert the ceremony lasted eight days. On the eighth and final day of the dedication, a fire came out of heaven and consumed the sacrifices that Aaron and his sons offered on the altar (Lev 9:1, 24). This miracle happened again when Solomon dedicated his altar for eight days (2Chr 7:1, 9). The book of 2 Maccabees explicitly mentions this as the reason for eight days of Hannukah.

The second reason for eight days was as a sort of "Second Sukkot". In Numbers 9 it says that if someone fails to partake of the Passover sacrifice in the First Month they can observe a Second Passover in the Second Month. The Maccabees had failed to observe Sukkot while they were fighting the Greeks. As soon as they liberated the Temple, they followed the example of Numbers 9 and made up for this with a Second Sukkot, as 2 Maccabees explains:

"And they celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. " (10:6)

Of course, Sukkot is seven days with the Eighth of Assembly (Shemini Atzeret) tacked on to the end, hence the eight days of Hannukah.

The book of 2 Maccabees gives a third, and rather bizarre reason, for the festival of Hannukah. Apparently this festival existed in some form or another going back to the time of Nehemiah when it was known as "The Feast of Fire". 2 Maccabees explains that when Nehemiah first offered sacrifices on his altar he expected a fire to come down from heaven just as it had in the time of Moses and Solomon. The same

miracle also happened when David first offered sacrifices on his altar (1Chr 21:26) and when Elijah rebuilt the altar on Mount Carmel in his challenge to the priests of Baal (1Ki 18:38). Naturally when no fire materialized, Nehemiah was extremely disappointed. There was a legend that the priests of the 1st Temple hid the last burning embers of Solomon's altar in a cave. Nehemiah sent priests to retrieve it but all they found after seventy years was "thick liquid". They collected this thick oil and poured it on the altar but nothing happened. Then suddenly it ignited as 2 Maccabees explains:

"When this was done and some time had passed and the sun, which had been clouded over, shone out, a great fire blazed up, so that all marveled." (1:22).

What was the oil that spontaneously ignited when exposed to sun light? 2Maccabees explains:

'Nehemiah and his associates called this "nephtar," which means purification, but by most people it is called naphtha.' (1:36).

Naphtha was a well-known naturally occurring petroleum product but it did not normally ignite when exposed to light. The combination of this oil spontaneously igniting when exposed to sun light gave birth to the "The Feast of Fire".

Here's the really important thing. The two books of Maccabees give these three reasons for Hannukah: 1) Moses and Solomon's eight-day dedications, 2) Second Sukkot, and 3) Nehemiah's "Festival of Fire". Not a single word about the miracle of oil burning for eight days! Josephus also talks about Hannukah and refers to it as the "Festival of Lights" but says nothing about the miracle of the oil burning for eight days. Instead he says:

"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." (Josephus, Antiquities 12:325)

If the Festival of Lights really had something to do with eight days of miraculous oil, wouldn't Josephus say this? He obviously was unaware of this reason for the festival. The story of the eight days of miraculous oil is also missing from the Scroll of Fasting, that 1st century CE document that lists all the days of joy of the Jews of that time. The first time this miracle is ever mentioned is in the Babylonian Talmud (Sabbath 21b) in a section written over three hundred years after the events.

If you choose to celebrate Hannukah, avoid the part that adds to God's Torah. Specifically the blessing over the candles which thanks God for commanding us to light the candles, something he never commanded. This is a violation of Deuteronomy 4:2 which says:

"Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Yehovah your God which I command you."

The same commandment is reiterated in Deuteronomy 12:32 (Hebrew 13:1) and a third time in Proverbs 30:6,

"Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar."

Also separate fact from fiction. Hannukah means "dedication". The full name of the holiday is Channukat Hamizbeach, Dedication of the Altar. The Maccabees had to rededicate the Temple altar that had been desecrated by the Seleucid Greeks. They celebrated this dedication for 8 days in memory of the 8 days that both Moses and Solomon celebrated. The alleged miracle of 8 days of oil was not originally part of Hannukah. It is not mentioned in the two books of Maccabees written shortly after the events. It was only made up after the altar was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, to give the holiday new purpose. The real miracle of Hannukah is the victory of a band of ill-equipped and untrained farmers and priests defeating a world super-power that had tried to force them to eat pig and give up circumcision and the Sabbath. Don't

forget all those who were burned in the fires of persecution for living by the word of God and proclaiming his holy name.

For something a little lighter, check out this classic Tom Lehrer ode to Hannukah:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSCmZU0eFJg>

View this newsletter on Facebook for some bonus material:

<http://www.facebook.com/notes/nehemia-gordon/the-fires-of-carmel-and-hannukah/174444135913844>

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