

Talmud Passage of the Week

Originally posted 11/19/96

Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 12/04/96).

BH

Lights, Lulav, Action!

Dear Friends,

Much continues to happen in our corner of the Jewish internet! Our Jewish-Christian dialogue has gotten off to a great start. Thank you, Michael Lotker, for running that program! Starting in January or February, HUC-JIR's Kollel will sponsor a class on spiritual development, using text study, on the internet which should be open to all and which will be moderated by me. I will keep you posted! As always, your participation and enthusiasm is a gift for which I am deeply grateful!

Since Hannukkah falls so early this year, and the Thanksgiving weekend may interrupt our study a bit, I thought I'd offer our yearly Hannukkah passage now. And instead of looking exactly at the passages about Hannukkah, I thought we might look at the contexts in which those passages arise for they are strikingly different. We'll close with a look at a wonderful midrashic interpretation of Hannukkah.

Enjoy and happy Hannukkah!

Judy Abrams

In the **Yerushalmi**, the information about Hannukkah arises as a commentary to this mishnah:

Rabbi Yishmael says, "Three myrtle branches, two willow branches, one palm branch and one citron [are required] even if two [of the myrtle branches] have their tips broken off and only one does not have its tip broken off.

Rabbi Tarfon says, "Even if all three of them have their tips broken off, [they are valid]."

Rabbi Akiba says, "Just one palm branch and one citron [are required], so one myrtle branch and one willow branch [are required]. (Yerushalmi Sukkah 3:4, 53c)

In the **Bavli**, the long passage about Hannukkah comes in the commentary to this mishnah:

Wherewith may we kindle [the Sabbath lights], and wherewith may we not kindle [them]?

We may not kindle [them, i.e., use for the wick]

cedar fiber,
uncarded flax or
with floss silk or
with willow-bast or
with nettle fibre or
with duck-weed

[nor may the fuel for the flame be] pitch or
with wax
or with cotton-seed oil
or with defiled heave-offering oil condemned to be burnt
or with fat from sheep's tails or with tallow.

Nahum the Mede said: they may kindle with boiled tallow but the sages say, Whether it has been boiled or not they may not light with it. (Mishnah Shabbat 2:1, Bavli 20b)

The midrash collection organized according to the holidays, **Pesikta Rabbati**, focuses on the light of Hannukkah in the following way:

"Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. (Psalm 119:105)" If lamp, why light? And if light, why lamp? David said: When I begin in matters of Torah, I begin them in a small way; but as I enter further, many gates open for my enlightenment. Hence the text first speaks of a lamp and then of a light: "A lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." (Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 8:5)

Background

Yerushalmi

The discussion of Hannukkah is related to the holiday of Sukkot in the Yerushalmi. This is logical on any number of grounds. There is reason to believe that the original rededication of the Temple lasted eight days and that it also constituted the celebration of Sukkot which had been delayed due to the hostile occupation of the site. Thus, the linkage of Sukkot and Hannukkah is natural, particularly since light and the Temple were so crucial to the celebration of both holidays.

Bavli

The Bavli situates its discussion of the Hannukkah lights under the rubric of Shabbat lights. Hence, it ties Hannukkah more to the lighting of candles everywhere as opposed to associating it with the cult and Sukkot as does the Yerushalmi. This is a logical step for an exilic community to take.

The prohibitions against various materials for wicks and fuel listed in the Bavli are explained mainly as the inferior quality of the materials listed and that the light they generate is weak and inconsistent.

Pesikta Rabbati

The midrash collection is preoccupied with the metaphorical extension of Hannukkah's meaning. Here, it takes the meaning of the Hannukkah light to be the light of Torah, not the light of the Sukkot celebration in the Temple, nor the light of Shabbat. And it is not merely the light of Torah but the way it spreads from the actual lamp to facilitate a course of righteous action which is emphasized.

Discussion Questions

1. In what way is Hannukkah like Sukkot? Like Shabbat? Like Torah study? What else in the Jewish world does Hannukkah resemble?
2. Why do you think the two Talmuds located these passages in such different places? Do you think it was deliberate? What do you think it means?
3. Part of the mitzvah of Hannukkah is publicizing the miracle that happened for us. Is the miracle you are celebrating the rededication of the Temple, the miracle of sustained Jewish observance for 2000 years and/or the miracle of Torah study?

