

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HANNUKKAH

Dear Friends,

As this web page comes out on the first night of Hannukkah, I thought we'd take a look at what the Talmud has to say about Hannukkah.

What is [the reason for observing] Hannukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev the days of Hannukkah begin, which are eight on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden (Megillat Taanit 9). For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest [and was therefore assuredly pure] but which contained sufficient [oil] for only one day's lighting. Yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the menorah] therewith for eighth days . The following year these [days] were appointed a festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving. (B. Shabbat 21b)

First, we have to ask ourselves what is Megillat Taanit? This is a work detailing 36 happy days throughout the year celebrating anniversaries of triumphs and so forth on which fasting is forbidden. It reached its final form, at the latest, during the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt (c. 135 C.E.). Of all the holidays is in Megillat Taanit, Hannukkah is the only one that is still observed.

This story is not repeated in all the rest of rabbinic literature. It is found only here, in the Bavli, attached to a mitsvah about how to correctly light the Shabbat candles.

This brings up the question of which texts made the cut and which did not. If you are interested in those texts that were not included in the canon, i.e., Scripture, I suggest you peruse *The Old Testament Pseudepigraphah: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, edited by James H. Charleworth, Doubleday Press. These two books, though bitterly expensive will open your eyes to the world of creativity that didn't "make the cut" into Scriptures. Angelologies, midrashim, and other texts are there to delight you. Look outside the canon to find a broader view of creative Jewish thought.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think they waited a year to set the holiday? In other words, is this the criterion for relevance, that it is still an occasion for remembrance in a year's time?
2. Connecting this story with the Sabbath candles and the whole idea of light puts an entirely different slant on what was essentially a military victory. Why do you think we had this "revisionist" history?
3. The holiday of Sukkot lasts for eight days (including Shemini Atseret) and ends with a great display of lights. How is Hannukkah like Sukkot and Shemini Atseret?

4. What do you think about the holidays that were lost to Jewish observance in Megillat Taanit? What does this say about creativity, memory and memorial in the process of Jewish thought?

May you enjoy your Hannukkah!