

Primary Sources - Chanukah, Historically

1. *Sefer Maccabim I*

Historical Background and Context

The *Book of the Maccabees I* (also known as *Sefer HaMaccabim* or *Sefer HaChashmonaim*) is part of the Hebrew Apocrypha (also known as *Sifrei Hitzonim*), a series of texts that were not included in the canonization of the Tanakh. It is, however, included in the Septuagint (also known as *Targum HaShiv'im*), the translation of the Tanakh into Greek that occurred between 200 BCE and 50 CE. Historians assert that *Maccabees I* was written in Hebrew, in Israel, and likely by someone alive during the events described. It was written shortly after the restoration of the Second *Beit HaMikdash*, somewhere between 145-125 BCE. *Maccabees I* was written by a member (or members) of the Hasmonean court either during the reign of Simon the High Priest or his son John (Yochanan) Hyrkanos. It is the version written closest in time to the events themselves and considered the most authoritative by both the Rabbis and Flavius Josephus.

There are actually 4 versions of the *Book of the Maccabees*; each is written by a different author at a different time and in a different historical context. The other 3 versions were written in Greek and in the diaspora, most likely in Egypt; *Maccabees II* is included in the Septuagint and the Apocrypha, while III and IV are not. They are included in Catholic, Orthodox, and Coptic versions of the Old Testament, but not in the Protestant Bible, which is closest to the Tanakh.

ספר מקבים א, ד:לה-ו

וידבר יהודה ואחיו אל העם לאמור.
הן האויב ניגף לפנינו, ועתה עלה נעלה וטיהרנו את מקדש ה'.
ויקהלו כל אנשי הצבא ויעלו יחדו על הר ציון.
ויהי בראותם את המקדש כי שמם, ואת המזבח כי חולל, והדלתות שרופות באש והלשכות נהרסות, ועשב השדה צמח בכל גבולו מסביב.
ויקרעו את בגדיהם ויזרקו עפר על ראשם ויתאבלו מאוד.
ויריעו בחצוצרות תרועה, ויפלו על פניהם ותעל שוועתם השמימה.
ויצווה יהודה את גדוד אחד מאנשיו לצור על המצודה עד טהרם את המקדש.
ויבחר מן הכוהנים אשר לא נטמאו ואשר לא עזבו את ברית אלוהיהם, ויצוום לטהר את המקדש ולהשליך את האבנים אשר נטמאו אל מקום טמא.
ויראו את מזבח העולה כי חולל, ויועצו לב יחדו כדת מה לעשות.
ותיה העצה היעוצה לנתוך את המזבח עד רדתו, לבלתי היות להם למכשול, יען כי חיללוהו זרים. וייתצו אתו.
ויניחו את האבנים על הר הבית אל מקום פלוני אלמוני, עד אשר יקום נביא בישראל להורותם את אשר יעשון.
ויקחו אבנים שלמות אשר לא עלה עליהן ברזל, ככתוב בתורת ה' ויבנו מזבח חדש כתבנית הראשון.
וישובו לבנות את פרצי המקדש ואת כל אשר מבית להיכל, ויחטאו את החצר ואת כל אשר בו.
ויחדשו את כל כלי הקודש, וישימו את המנורה אל ההיכל ואת מזבח הקטורת ואת שולחן הפנים.

וישימו את הקטורת על המזבח, ועל המנורה העלו את נרותיה להאיר במקדש.
ויתנו את לחם הפנים על השולחן, ואת הפרוכת המסך על הארון, ותכל כל העבודה כאשר בתחילה.
ויהי ביום החמישי ועשרים לחדש התשיעי הוא כסלו, בשנת שמונה וארבעים ומאה, וישכימו בבוקר ויעלו עולות על
המזבח החדש כמשפט.
ויחנכו את המזבח בעצם היום אשר טמאו אותו הגויים, ויהללו לה' בשירים ובכינורות בחלילים ובמצללים.
ויפלו על פניהם וישתחוו לה' על אשר נתן להם עוז ותשועה.
ויחוגו את חנוכת המזבח שמונת ימים, ויעלו עולות ותודות בשמחת לבבם.
ויפארו את פני ההיכל בעטרות ובמגיני זהב ויחטאו את השערים ואת לשכות הכוהנים, וישימו את הדלתות.
ותהי שמחה גדולה בכל העם, כי גלל ה' את חרפת הגויים מעליהם.
ויצוו יהודה ואחיו וכל קהל ישראל לחוג את חנוכת המזבח ביום החמישה ועשרים לחדש כסלו שמונת ימים מדי
שנה בשנה בהלל ובתודה לה'.
ויבנו גם בעת ההיא חומות בצרות ומגדלים גבוהים מסביב למקדש על הר ציון למען לא יוסיפו הגויים עוד לשחתו
כבראשונה.
ויתן יהודה מצב בתוכם, לשמור את המקדש, ויבצר גם את בית צור למען היות להם למבצר מנגד לאדום.

[Sefer Maccabim I - Cleansing and Dedication of the Temple](#)

Then Judah and his brothers said, "See, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it." So the army assembled and went up to Mount Zion. There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts, they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins. Then they tore their clothes and mourned with great lamentation; they sprinkled themselves with ashes and fell face down on the ground. And they blew the signal trumpets, and they cried out to heaven.

Then Judah detailed men to fight against those in the citadel until he had cleansed the sanctuary. He chose blameless priests devoted to the law, and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place. They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down so that it would not be a lasting shame to them that the nations had defiled it. So they tore down the altar and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet came to tell them what to do with them. Then they took unhewn[e] stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple and consecrated the courts. They made new holy vessels and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. Then they offered incense on the altar and lit the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple. They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken.

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of *Kis/ev*, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the nations had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell

on their faces and worshiped and blessed heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering. They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests and fitted them with doors. There was very great joy among the people, and the disgrace brought by the nations was removed.

Then Judah 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 joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of *Kislev*.

At that time they fortified Mount Zion with high walls and strong towers all around, to keep the nations from coming and trampling them down as they had done before. Judah] stationed a garrison there to guard it; he also fortified Beth-zur to guard it, so that the people might have a stronghold that faced Idumea.

2. Antiquities of the Jews

Historical Context and Background for Josephus and *Antiquities of the Jews*

(Flavius) Josephus, also known as Yosef ben Matityahu, was a first-century CE Jewish scholar and historian who lived both before and after the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*. He was born into an elite priestly family, and his mother was an aristocratic woman who was descended from the royal and formerly ruling Hasmonean dynasty. He served as a *kohen* in the *Beit HaMikdash*, was very highly educated, and became an influential scholar and historian. Initially, Josephus was a general who fought against the Romans, mostly in the Galilee. But he ultimately surrendered and defected to the Roman side, becoming an advisor to both Vespasian and Titus and eventually, a Roman citizen and Titus' official translator. The name "Flavius" was in honor of his Roman patrons; he himself only went by Josephus.

Josephus wrote *The Jewish Wars*, which begins with the wars between Antiochus IV and the Jews (168 BCE and onwards) and about the wars between Rome and the Jews until the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*. Josephus' works are an important source of information on Jewish history during the first century and the wars that took place in that period.

Antiquities of the Jews recounts the history of the world from a Jewish perspective and was intended to bring honor to the Jews. It is debated whether he wrote for a Greek and Roman audience or a Jewish one. Depending on one's perspective, Josephus was either a traitor or a pragmatist who stayed true to his Judaism even though he was a loyal and important Roman citizen.

[Flavius Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book Xii, Chapter 7, sections 6-7](#)

When therefore the generals of Antiochus's armies had been beaten so often, Judah assembled the people together, and told them, that after these many victories that God had given them, they ought to go up to Jerusalem, and purify the temple, and offer the appointed sacrifices. But as soon as he, with the whole multitude, came to Jerusalem, and found the temple deserted, and its gates burnt down, and plants growing in the temple of their own accord, on account of its desertion, he and those that were with him began to lament, and were quite confounded at the sight of the temple; so he chose out some of his soldiers and gave them order to fight against those guards that were in the citadel, until he should have purified the temple. When therefore he had carefully purged it and had brought in new vessels, the candlestick, the table [of shew-bread], and the altar [of incense], which were made of gold, he hung up the veils at the gates and added doors to them. He also took down the altar [of burnt-offering], and built a new one of stones that he gathered together, and not of such as were hewn with iron tools. So on the fifth and twentieth day of the month Casleu(Kislev), which the Macedonians call Apeliens, they lighted the lamps that were on the candlestick, and offered incense upon the altar [of incense], and laid the loaves upon the table [of shew-bread], and offered burnt-offerings upon the new altar [of burnt-offering]. Now it so fell out, that these things were done on the very same day on which their Divine worship had fallen off, and was reduced to a profane and common use, after three years' time; for so it was, that the temple was made desolate by Antiochus, and so continued for three years. This desolation happened to the temple in the hundred forty and fifth year, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Apeliens, and on the hundred fifty and third olympiad: but it was dedicated anew, on the same day, the twenty-fifth of the month Apeliens, on the hundred and forty-eighth year, and on the hundred and fifty-fourth olympiad. And this desolation came to pass according to the prophecy of Daniel, which was given four hundred and eight years before; for he declared that the Macedonians would dissolve that worship [for some time].

Now Judah celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon, but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices, and he honored God and delighted them with hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this 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. Judah also rebuilt the walls round about the city, reared towers of great height against the incursions of enemies, and set guards therein. He also fortified the city Bethsura, so that it might serve as a citadel against any distress that might come from our enemies.

3. *Al HaNissim* for Chanukah

Historical Context

Al HaNissim (“Regarding the miracles”) is a special prayer that is inserted in *Shemoneh Esrei* and in *Birkat HaMazon* during Chanukah. A version of it appears in *Masekhet Sofrim*, as well as in the earliest siddurim from the 8th century CE. Its authorship is unknown, although it seems to be early Tanaitic in origin, perhaps very close to the events of Chanukah. Some scholars and older siddurim ascribe *Al HaNissim* to a certain Yochanan the High Priest, who was famously righteous and authored numerous prayers. He was part of the Hasmonean dynasty and lived not long after the events of Chanukah. Rashi, in *Talmud Bavili Shabbat* 21b comments on the phrase “the year after, they established...days of...praising” as “saying *Al HaNissim*”; this is further indication that both the practice of saying *Al HaNissim* and the prayer itself is very old, and were sanctioned by the same Sages who made Chanukah a permanent annual celebration.

[תפילת "על הניסים" לחנוכה](#)

על הנסים ועל הפרקן ועל הגבורות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה. לחנוכה—בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול חשמונאי ובניו כשעמדה מלכות יון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשכיחם מתורתך ולהעבירם מחקי רצונך ואתה ברחמיך הרבים עמדת להם בעת צרתם רבת את ריבם דנת את דינם נקמת את נקמתם מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים וטמאים ביד טהורים ורשעים ביד צדיקים וזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך ויה עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך ולעמך ישראל עשית תשועה גדולה ופרקן כהיום הזה ואחר כך באו בניך לדביר ביתך ופנו את היכלך וטהרו את מקדשך והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך וקבעו שמונת ימי חנכה אלו להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול.

["Al HaNissim" Prayer for Chanukah](#)

We thank you also for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and saving acts, wrought by you, as well as for the wars which you waged for our fathers in days of old, at this season.

On Chanukah—In the days of the Hasmonean, Mattathias son of Yochanan, the High Priest, and his sons, when the iniquitous power of Greece rose up against your people Israel to make them forgetful of your Law, and to force them to transgress the statutes of your will, then did you in your abundant mercy rise up for them in the time of their trouble; you plead their cause, you judged their suit, you avenged their wrong; you delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the arrogant into the hands of them that occupied themselves with your Law: for yourself you made a great and holy name in your world, and for your people Israel you worked a great deliverance and redemption as at this day. And thereupon your children came into the oracle of your house, cleansed your temple, purified your sanctuary, kindled lights

in your holy courts, and appointed these eight days of Chanukah in order to give thanks and praises to your great name.

4. *Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b – “Mai Chanukah”*

Historical Context

The Talmudic discussions concerning the laws of Chanukah observance, particularly regarding the lighting of the Chanukah lights, are first found in the Mishnah and the *Beraita*. Both the Mishnah and the *Beraita* were Tannaitic works, written by the *Tannaim* (Rabbinic sages) who lived predominantly in Israel between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi edited and “closed” the Mishnah around 200 CE. Further discussions about Chanukah are found in the Talmud Bavli, or the Gemara, which was written by *Amoraim* (also Rabbinic sages) who lived predominantly in Babylonia (now Iraq) between 200-500 CE. The *Amoraim* in the Gemara discuss, debate, expand upon, and elucidate the Mishnah, and they bring down case law and verdicts as well as more theoretical discussions.

It is in the tractate *Shabbat* in the Talmud Bavli where we find the discussion around the focus of the Chanukah celebration, specifically, kindling lights and displaying them. The word “menorah” is not associated with Chanukah; rather, when the Talmud uses the term “menorah,” it refers to the 7-branched candelabrum that was used in the *Beit HaMikdash*. The main focus of the conversation in the Gemara is *halakha*—what materials may be used for wicks, how long the light has to burn, whether or not one can benefit from the Chanukah lights, where to place the lights, and how to light them. The source below is actually from *Megillat Taanit*, a Tannaitic text written just before the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash*, that delineates all the fast and feast days month by month. Chanukah and Purim are two of the only ones that are still part of our observances. As we see in the source below, there is only a short discussion around “*Mai Chanukah?*”, i.e., what is Chanukah actually celebrating?

שבת כא:

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל. וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד. נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

Shabbat 21b

The Gemara asks: What is Hanukkah, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: The Sages taught in *Megillat Ta'anit*: On the twenty-fifth of *Kislev*, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. What is the reason? When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and



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emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it for eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *Hallel* and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.