

Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story  
Dr. Malka Simkovich  
DRISHA Winter Week of Learning  
December 25, 2016

**Timeline of Maccabean History:**

**BCE**

Antiochus IV Epiphanes: 175-164

Maccabean Revolt: 167-164

Hasmonean Rule: 165-37

Judea becomes a Roman Province: 63

Herod rules Judea: 37-4

**Outline of Ancient Sources on Chanukah:**

1 Maccabees

2 Maccabees

Josephus

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b

**1. 1 Maccabees: A Straightforward (albeit biased) History**

**1:41-53:** Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs. All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath. And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt-offerings and sacrifices and drink-offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, to defile the sanctuary and the priests, to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they would forget the law and change all the ordinances. He added, ‘And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.’ In such words he wrote to his whole kingdom. He appointed inspectors over all the people and commanded the towns of Judah to offer sacrifice, town by town. Many of the people, everyone who forsook the law, joined them, and they did evil in the land; they drove Israel into hiding in every place of refuge they had. ...

**Study Question:**

According to this passage, does primary blame for the crisis in Judea lie with the Jews who “gladly adopted [Antiochus’s] religion,” or with the Greeks? Support your answer with prooftexts.

---

---

**2:27-48:** Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: ‘Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!’ Then he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the town. At that time many who were seeking righteousness and justice went down to the wilderness to live there, they, their sons, their wives, and their livestock, because troubles pressed heavily upon them. And it was reported to the king’s officers, and to the troops in Jerusalem the city of David, that those who had rejected the king’s command had gone down to the hiding-places in the wilderness. Many pursued them, and overtook them; they encamped opposite them and prepared for battle against them on the sabbath day. They said to them, ‘Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands,

Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

and you will live.’ But they said, ‘We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the sabbath day.’ Then the enemy quickly attacked them. But they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding-places, for they said, ‘Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly.’ So they attacked them on the Sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and livestock, to the number of a thousand people.

When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply. And all said to their neighbours: ‘If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth.’ So they made this decision that day: ‘Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding-places.’

Then there united with them a company of Hasideans, mighty warriors of Israel, all who offered themselves willingly for the law. And all who became fugitives to escape their troubles joined them and reinforced them. They organized an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and renegades in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety. And Mattathias and his friends went around and tore down the altars; They forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel. They hunted down the arrogant, and the work prospered in their hands. They rescued the law out of the hands of the Gentiles and kings, and they never let the sinner gain the upper hand.

**Study Questions:**

1. By citing Mattathias as saying “Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!” to whom is the author comparing Mattathias? (Hint: It’s in Exodus 32:26). How is this parallel significant? What do Mattathias and his followers have to do with the people to whom they are being compared?

---

---

---

2. What is this passage’s approach to martyrdom?

---

---

3. What do you think about the reference to forced circumcision in this passage? Does the writer view this practice favorably or unfavorably?

---

---

**4:36–59:** Then Judas and his brothers said, ‘See, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it.’ So all 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 when the signal was given with the trumpets, they cried out to Heaven.

Then Judas 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 Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar, and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them. Then they took unhewn 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 Chislev, in the one hundred and 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 Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshipped 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 Gentiles was removed.

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 joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev. [Translation: NRSV]

**Study Question:**

After reading this passage carefully, do you see any reference to the miracle of the oil here? What is the reason stated for the establishment of a celebration on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev?

---

---

## Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

### 2. 2 Maccabees: A Hellenized History

3:13: But Heliodorus, because of the orders he had from the king, said that this money must in any case be confiscated for the king's treasury. So he set a day and went in to direct the inspection of these funds.

There was no little distress throughout the whole city. The priests prostrated themselves before the altar in their priestly vestments and called towards heaven upon him who had given the law about deposits, that he should keep them safe for those who had deposited them. To see the appearance of the high priest was to be wounded at heart, for his face and the change in his color disclosed the anguish of his soul. For terror and bodily trembling had come over the man, which plainly showed to those who looked at him the pain lodged in his heart. People also hurried out of their houses in crowds to make a general supplication because the holy place was about to be brought into dishonor. Women, girded with sackcloth under their breasts, thronged the streets. Some of the young women who were kept indoors ran together to the gates, and some to the walls, while others peered out of the windows. And holding up their hands to heaven, they all made supplication. There was something pitiable in the prostration of the whole populace and the anxiety of the high priest in his great anguish.

While they were calling upon the Almighty Lord that he would keep what had been entrusted safe and secure for those who had entrusted it, Heliodorus went on with what had been decided. But when he arrived at the treasury with his bodyguard, then and there the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority caused so great a manifestation that all who had been so bold as to accompany him were astounded by the power of God, and became faint with terror. For there appeared to them a magnificently caparisoned horse, with a rider of frightening mien; it rushed furiously at Heliodorus and struck at him with its front hoofs. Its rider was seen to have armor and weapons of gold. Two young men also appeared to him, remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed, who stood on either side of him and flogged him continuously, inflicting many blows on him. When he suddenly fell to the ground and deep darkness came over him, his men took him up, put him on a stretcher, and carried him away—this man who had just entered the aforesaid treasury with a great retinue and all his bodyguard but was now unable to help himself. They recognized clearly the sovereign power of God.

#### Study Questions:

1. How does the writer of this book describe the High Priest's reaction to the edicts prohibiting the observance of Jewish ancestral law? What does this kind of description suggest to the reader?

---

---

2. When Heliodorus tries to raid the Temple treasury, what happens to him? Compare the description of the two angelic men who beat Heliodorus up with the description of the High Priest above.

---

---

**7:1–42:** It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, 'What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For

Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors.’

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and cauldrons heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, ‘The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, “And he will have compassion on his servants.”’

After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, ‘Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?’ He replied in the language of his ancestors and said to them, ‘No.’ Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. And when he was at his last breath, he said, ‘You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.’

**Study Question:**

1. 2 Maccabees 7 is known as the story of The Mother of Seven Sons. What is this story’s approach to martyrdom? Compare with the approach to martyrdom in 1 Maccabees. What does this contradiction tell you about Jewish approaches to martyrdom in the second century BCE?

---

---

---

---

**10:1–9** Now Maccabeus and his followers, the Lord leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; they tore down the altars that had been built in the public square by the foreigners, and also destroyed the sacred precincts. They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices, after a lapse of two years, and they offered incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence. When they had done this, they fell prostrate and implored the Lord that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by him with forbearance and not be handed over to blasphemous and barbarous nations. It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Chislev. They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the festival of booths, remembering how not long before, during the festival of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year. Such then was the end of Antiochus, who was called Epiphanes.

[Translation: NRSV]

1. Is there a reference to the miracle of the oil in this passage?

---

---

2. What do you make of the Jews carrying “ivy-wreathed wands” and “beautiful branches” – is this a result of incorporating Greek practices, or perhaps the incorporation of Jewish practices (remember that the Chanukah, according to this passage, is a reenactment of Sukkot)?

---

---

**3. Josephus Flavius, 1st century CE  
The Jewish War, I.1.3–6**

[38] Now Judas, supposing that Antiochus would not lie still, gathered an army out of his own countrymen, and was the first that made a league of friendship with the Romans, and drove Epiphanes out of the country when he had made a second expedition into it, and this by giving him a great defeat there; and when he was warmed by this great success, he made an assault upon the garrison that was in the city, for it had not been cut off hitherto; so he ejected them out of the upper city, and drove the soldiers into the lower, which part of the city was called the Citadel. He then got the temple under his power, and cleansed the whole place, and walled it round about, and made new vessels for sacred ministrations, and brought them into the temple, because the former vessels had been profaned. He also built another altar, and began to offer the sacrifices; and when the city had already received its sacred constitution again, Antiochus died; whose son Antiochus succeeded him in the kingdom, and in his hatred to the Jews also.

[41] So this Antiochus got together fifty thousand footmen, and five thousand horsemen, and fourscore elephants, and marched through Judea into the mountainous parts. He then took Bethsura, which was a small city; but at a place called Bethzacharis, where the passage was narrow, Judas met him with his army. However, before the forces joined battle, Judas's brother Eleazar, seeing the very highest of the elephants adorned with a large tower, and with military trappings of gold to guard him, and supposing that Antiochus himself was upon him, he ran a great way before his own army, and cutting his way through the enemy's troops, he got up to the elephant; yet could he not reach him who seemed to be the king, by reason of his being so high; but still he ran his weapon into the belly of the beast, and brought him down upon himself, and was crushed to death, having done no more than attempted great things, and showed that he preferred glory before life. Now he that governed the elephant was but a private man; and had he proved to be Antiochus, Eleazar had performed nothing more by this bold stroke than that it might appear he chose to die, when he had the bare hope of thereby doing a glorious action; nay, this disappointment proved an omen to his brother [Judas] how the entire battle would end. It is true that the Jews fought it out bravely for a long time, but the king's forces, being superior in number, and having fortune on their side, obtained the victory. And when a great many of his men were slain, Judas took the rest with him, and fled to the toparchy of Gophna. So Antiochus went to Jerusalem, and staid there but a few days, for he wanted provisions, and so he went his way. He left indeed a garrison behind him, such as he thought sufficient to keep the place, but drew the rest of his army off, to take their winter-quarters in Syria.

[47] Now, after the king was departed, Judas was not idle; for as many of his own nation came to him, so did he gather those that had escaped out of the battle together, and gave battle again to Antiochus's generals at a village called Adasa; and being too hard for his enemies in the battle, and killing a great

Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

number of them, he was at last himself slain also. Nor was it many days afterward that his brother John had a plot laid against him by Antiochus's party, and was slain by them.

**Study Question:**

1. According to Josephus's account, does the story of the Maccabees' conflict with Antiochus end with the restoration of the Temple? What does your answer suggest about how the Jews at this time viewed the conflict? Was it simply about the Temple and nothing more?

---

---

**Antiquities of the Jews, 12.7.7:**

Now Judas 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 by 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. Judas also rebuilt the walls round about the city, and reared towers of great height against the incursions of enemies, and set guards therein. He also fortified the city Bethsura, that it might serve as a citadel against any distresses that might come from our enemies. [From <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0146>]

**Study Questions:**

1. According to Josephus, what is the holiday of Chanukah called, and why?

---

---

2. What does Josephus's lack of certainty about why Chanukah is called Lights suggest to you?

---

---

**4. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 15: In Praise of the Maccabees**

The festival today is indeed in their [the Maccabees'] honor, though not many recognize them because their martyrdom antedates Christ. Yet they deserve universal recognition for their unswerving devotion to the ways of their fathers. Consider what they, whose martyrdom preceded Christ's passion, would have achieved if they had been persecuted after the time of Christ and were able to emulate his death on our behalf...Not one of those who attained perfection before the coming of Christ accomplished his goal without faith in Christ. While this statement is both arcane and even to a certain extent mystic, I

Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

For one consider it very persuasive, as do all who love Christ. For although the Logos was later openly proclaimed in his own era, he was made known even before to the pure of mind, as is evident from the large number of persons who achieved honor before his day. Such noble figures, then, are not to be overlooked because they lived before the time of the cross, but should rather be acclaimed for having lived in accordance with the cross...

Here is an act to be held in no less esteem than the trials of Daniel, who was consigned as prey to lions and who vanquished the beasts by spreading his hands. Here is an act in now way second to that of the young men in Assyria whom an angel refreshed in the midst of the fire when they refused to violate the law of their fathers by eating profane and desecrated food. Here is an act not less generous than that of those who later sacrificed themselves for Christ. They...imitated Christ's shedding of his blood, and it was God who blazed the trail for such prizes with his own so great and so marvelous offering on our behalf. The Maccabees, on the other hand, could not point to many, or such, demonstrations of virtue.

[From St. Gregory of Nazianus: Select Orations. Trans. Martha Vinson. Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994.]

**Study Question:**

Try to explain how Gregory of Nazianus uses rhetorical techniques to turn the Hasmoneans into proto-Christians.

---

---

---

---

**5. John Chrysostom (347-407 CE), Bishop of Antioch, gave Homilies on the Maccabean Martyrs Homily: On Eleazar and the Seven Boys, section 5**

For I don't hesitate to count them [the mother and her seven sons] with the other martyrs, to the extent that I declare that they are even more brilliant. For they competed at a time when the bronze gates had not yet been shattered, nor the iron bar removed, when sin still ruled and the curse flourished and the Devil's citadel stood and the path of this kind of virtue was as yet untrodden.

**Study Question:**

How does Chrysostom take Gregory's argument about the Hasmoneans further? What does he say about the Jews who lived at this time?

---

---



## Ancient Sources of the Chanukah Story

Dr. Malka Simkovich

DRISHA Winter Week of Learning

December 25, 2016

### 6. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sabbath 21b

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 געשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאו ימים טובים בהלל והודאה

What is [the reason of] Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. 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, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

[Translation from Soncino translation of Bab. Talmud at [http://www.come-andhear.com/shabbath/shabbath\\_21.html](http://www.come-andhear.com/shabbath/shabbath_21.html)]

#### Study Question:

In light of the sources above, especially 1 and 2 Maccabees, what is very surprising about the Talmud's explanation for the Jews' celebration of Chanukah? How would you explain this?

### 7. Liturgy of Shemoneh Esrei (9th century)

בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול חשמונאי וכו'. קשעמדה מלכות יון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחקי רצונך: ואתה ברחמיך הרבים עמדת להם בעת צרתם. רבת את ריבם. דנת את דינם. נקמת את נקמתם. מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים. נרבים ביד מעטים. וטמאים ביד טהורים. ורשעים ביד צדיקים. ונזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך. וליך עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך. וליעמך ישראל עשית תשובה גדולה ופרקו כהיום הזה: ואחר כן באו בגיה לךביר ביתך. ופנו את היכלך. וטהרו את מקדשך. והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך. וקבעו שמונת ימי חגכה אלו. להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול

In the days of Mattathias the son of Jochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons, when the wicked kingdom of Greece stood against your nation Israel, to force them to abandon your Torah and to remove them from the statutes of Your will, and you in Your great mercy stood in their defense at the time of their troubles, you fought their battle, you judged their judgment, you avenged their avengement, you placed the strong into the hand of the weak, and the many into the hand of the few, and the impure into the hand of the sanctified, and the wicked into the hand of the righteous, and the sinners into the hand of those who busy themselves with Your Torah, and You made for yourself a great and holy name in Your world, and You made a great victory and salvation for your nation Israel on this day. And afterwards your sons came to the holy part of Your house, and they cleansed Your dwelling-place, and they purified Your sanctuary, and they lit candles in the courtyards of Your holy [place], and they established these eight days of Hannukah, to give thanks and praise before Your great Name.

**Study Question:**

Does this liturgical reference to the Chanukah story emphasize the miracle of the oil or the military victory? What does your answer suggest about how the author(s) of this text approached the holiday of Chanukah?

---

---

**8. Pesikta Rabbati 2:**

למה מדליק גרות בחנוכה אלא בשעה שנצחו בניו של חשמונאי הכהן הגדול למלכות יון שנאמר ועוררת בניך ציון על בניך יון (זכריה ט' י"ג) נכנסו לבית המקדש מצאו שם שמונה שפודין של ברזל וקבעו אותם והדליקו בתוכם גרות

Why do we kindle lights on Hanukah? Because when the sons of the Hasmoneans, the High Priest, defeated the Hellenists, they entered the Temple and found there eight iron spears. They stuck candles on them and lit them.

Cf. Megillat Taanit:

לפי שנכנסו יונים בהיכל וטמאו כל הכלים, ולא היה במה להדליק. וכשגברה יד בית חשמונאי הביאו שבעה שפודי ברזל, וחיפום בבעץ, והתחילו להדליק.

[We celebrate Chanukah] because the Greeks entered the Temple and contaminated the vessels, and there was nothing with which to light [the Menorah]. When the hand of the Hasmonean dynasty was victorious, they brought seven iron spears, covered them in tin, and began to light.

**Study Questions:**

1. How do Pesikta Rabbati and Megillat Taanit explain why Jews celebrate Chanukah? According to these texts, was there a miracle?

---

---

---

2. How might these texts be the transitional key between early sources (1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, and Josephus) and the story of the Talmud?

---

---

---

3. Do you think it's possible that the writer of the passage preserved in Shemoneh Esrei was aware of Pesikta Rabbati and/or Megillat Taanit? Why or why not?