

**Hanukkah's Other Miracles**  
**Shabbat VaYeshev 5780 - 12/21/19**  
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2100 years ago, *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*. A great Hanukkah miracle happened in Jerusalem. There was only enough oil to light the Menorah for one day, but the oil lasted for eight.

In the 21st century, *Nes Gadol Haya Po*. A great miracle happened *here*. In the middle of a busy day I realized my phone battery was down to one hour. But somehow the charge lasted for eight!

OK, the phone piece didn't happen. But the account of the oil lasting for eight days is the Talmud's story of why we celebrate Hanukkah for eight nights, beginning tomorrow night. We learn this as kids. But it was only as an adult that I heard someone ask an important question: if we light the Hanukiah to commemorate the miracle, why do we light it for eight days when the *miracle* of the oil actually lasted for seven?

Remember, the oil was *supposed* to last for one day. So the *miracle* light was really for seven. One day ordinary, only seven days extraordinary. So why do we light for *eight* nights?

There are literally dozens of answers to this question. I want to share three from the past and then give my own reason.

The first is historical. The Maccabees were grossly outnumbered by the more powerful Syrian-Greeks, who banned Jewish practices and Hellenized Israel. Nevertheless, led by Judah Maccabee, the Jews fought back, won, and rededicated the Temple. Scholars believe that since the Jews were unable to celebrate the eight days of the Sukkot holiday at its proper time in the fall, the victorious Maccabees observed this festival *after* they rededicated the Temple in the winter. As Sukkot lasts for eight days - including Shmini Atzeret - Hanukkah lasts for eight days.

The second reason is theological, offered by the 18th century Hasidic teacher *Kedushat Levi*. The other miracle was the fact that the Maccabees won the battle nobody expected them to. Thus, G-d produced *two* miracles, the battle victory and that of the oil. So one day for the victory, seven for the oil.

The third reason is symbolic, shared by the 11th century book *Sefer Halitim*. It recalls that the Syrian-Greeks sought to eliminate Judaism in part by banning ritual circumcision, *Brit Milah*, which occurs on the 8th day of a boy's life. Hanukkah is precisely eight days long because it recalls the failed attempt to rupture the *Brit*, covenant, between the Jews and G-d.

Here is my take, influenced by Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles. There were actually two more miracles: first, someone had the courage to look for oil in the first place. The holy Temple was plundered with dirt, filth, and pigs. Holy objects were defiled, shattered, looted. The sight was one to make one cry and despair. And yet, somebody had faith that maybe, just maybe there was some oil with which to rekindle the Temple Menorah with light for G-d. That courage to search when others had despaired, was a miracle.

Here's the other Hanukkah miracle: someone had the courage to light the Menorah anyway. I imagine others there making a case not to light. Don't light it yet, as the Temple is not yet clean and fit for holiness. Don't kindle it now, as the oil will only last for one night, and we'll be

without oil again for days. Let's wait. That courage to go ahead when others said "Wait" was a miracle too.

Those two miracles add to the Menorah's seven unexpected nights of light. I know, I know. These two plus seven equals nine, not eight. But consider this: how many candles shine bright on the last night, the eight candles plus the Shammash helper candle? Nine!

I was talking about Hanukkah with my son and explaining the *Brachot*, blessings. The second blessing is *SheAsah Nisim LaAvoteinu BaYamim HaHem BaZman HaZeh*. Blessed are You G-d Who made miracles for our ancestors in those days and at this time. I said we thank G-d for the Hanukkah miracles then and miracles around us today. My son then asked me what miracles G-d makes for us today. Great question. Let me go find a rabbi to answer!

I believe the State of Israel is such a miracle. The fact that it was born amidst the ashes of the Holocaust was on the level of a biblical miracle. And the fact that Israel endures today in a world where most nations today would vote against its establishment, is a wonder too.

And when I think about the anonymous heroes of the Hanukkah story who discovered the oil and lit the Menorah anyway, I think about the unknown heroes of similar courage who found the Burma Road, traversed it, and paved it.

Let me now share with you this important story from Israel's history. The best account I've read is from a terrific book called [O Jerusalem!](#) by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. (It's available in the Beth El library).

The year was 1948, and just before the State of Israel was born, it was about to lose Jerusalem. There was exactly one road that led from the Mediterranean Sea to Jerusalem, Highway 1. Arab forces held the hills overlooking this road, and they continually fired bullets on the Jewish convoys carrying supplies to Jerusalem. In effect, Jewish Jerusalem was under siege, and it was in grave danger of running out of food, water, fuel, medicine, and ammunition.

Desperate for a miracle, some Israeli Palmach officers attempted to find a new path to link Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, which would be an umbilical cord to provide constant necessary supplies to the holy city. One night a few officers traveled by jeep from Tel Aviv along an almost impassable, old, desolate shepherd trail. Halfway to Jerusalem, one officer spoke longingly: "If only we could find a way through there, we'd have another way of getting to Jerusalem." Officer David Marcus reassured them, "Why not? We got across the Red Sea, didn't we?"

That night they bumped into unexpected company: Israeli Palmach officers driving from Jerusalem! They had found a continuous passage! This path became known as the Burma Road.

I share one scene from the book. Before anybody knew of the path's existence, Officer David Levi made the trip by jeep from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, then Rehovot.

The book recounts,

"The exhausted officer stopped in a cafe in Rehovot for a cup of coffee.

'Where did you come from?' its proprietor asked.

‘Jerusalem,’ said Levi.

‘Jerusalem!’ screamed the cafe owner. At his words everyone in the cafe swarmed over him as though he had ‘conquered Mt. Everest.’ As the crowd parted, the famished Levi saw the owner bearing down on him with an extraordinary welcoming gift, a huge plate of strawberries and cream.”

The Jews put all their efforts into paving a road over which a British brigadier said was impossible to pave. The ascents were too steep, the clearings too narrow.

Before the road could be paved, supplies still needed to get through. 200 men and their mules did this backbreaking work. Each man, usually a Home Guard conscript in his 50’s carried a 45 pound load and made the three mile trip twice each night. These arduous journeys literally prevented Jerusalem from starving and infused hope in the besieged city. Weeks later the road was paved and convoys replenished the city. *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*. That was a great miracle that happened there.

We know who the five officers were who discovered that skinny path - against odds as slim as finding a cruse of oil in the ransacked Temple. The fact that they courageously ventured out and, I believe with G-d’s help, found something unanticipated, was a miracle. We don’t know who were those men who literally at times crawled over rocks at night while carrying 45 pounds on their backs. But that they courageously risked their lives and limbs to bring light - actual fuel along with food - makes them heroes. That they succeeded in this do-or-die mission was a miracle too.

*Baruch Atah SheAsah Nisim LaAvoteinu BaYamim HaHem BaZman HaZeh*. Blessed are You G-d Who made miracles for our ancestors in those days and at this time. The Hanukkah miracles of old, and the miracles of the State of Israel of late. Thank you, G-d.

And thank you, to the anonymous heroes who searched for that oil, who lit that Menorah, who searched for a different road to Jerusalem, who carried those supplies over treacherous peaks.

Sometimes the biggest impact on history and on our own individual lives is made by people who remain unknown. Each of us can be that person.

As we light the Hanukkah candles tomorrow night, let’s keep in mind *all* of Hanukkah’s miracles.

When the road ahead of us appears dim; when despair sets in like a midnight sky on a moonless night; let’s each take up the torch of hope and possibility and drive away the darkness.

Shabbat Shalom!