

Chanuka's Biblical Roots

Is it simply by chance that Chanuka falls out on the 25th of Kislev? Most students would answer a definite "Yes." After all, isn't the reason for the date of Chanuka based on the popular acronym - **chanu b'chaf heh** - they rested [from battle] on the 25th (of Kislev)? Hence, had the battle ended (and/or had the miracle of the Menorah taken place) on a different day, Chanuka would have been celebrated on that day instead. Correct?

Not really! A closer examination of various traditional sources relating to Chanuka indicates quite the opposite:

- ◆ The [book of Macabees](#) informs us that the decision to rededicate the Temple on the 25th of Kislev was intentional!
- ◆ Furthermore, the date of the 25th of Kislev had already carried prophetic significance from the time of the prophets **Chagai and Zecharya**, some two hundred years earlier! ([See Timeline.](#))

So why do we celebrate **Chanuka** on "Chanuka?" In the following shiur, we attempt to explain why.

Introduction

Unfortunately, the study of **Neviim Acharonim** (the later prophets), and especially **Trei Asar**, has taken a 'back seat' in Jewish education. Hence, even though most of us have heard of the book of **Chagai**, rarely is it actually studied (even though it is only two chapters and written in very simple Hebrew).

However, anyone who has studied **Chagai** immediately sees its connection to the story of Chanuka. Take for example the pasuk:

"Take note from this day forward, from the 24th day of the ninth month (Kislev), from the day that the foundation was laid for the Lord's House - take note..." ([Chagai 2:18](#))

From this pasuk we see that the original construction of the second Temple began on the 24th (or 25th - see "Further Iyun") day of Kislev. Now if Chanuka marks the rededication of that very same Temple (after its defilement by the Greeks several hundred years later), then one can safely assume a thematic relationship between these two events.

Therefore, to uncover that relationship, we must begin our shiur with a quick overview of the time period of Chagai and Zecharya and their respective prophecies.

[This time period is commonly referred to as "shivat Tzion" - the return to Zion - when the Jews living within the Persian Empire had been given the right (by Cyrus) to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. ([See Ezra 1:1-8](#) and [Timeline.](#))]

[For the reader unfamiliar with these sources, it is recommended that you first read [Sefer Chagai](#), [Sefer Zecharya chapters 1-6](#), [Ezra chapters 1, 3, and 4](#), and [Yirmiyahu chapters 25 and 29.](#)]

Big Hopes for Bayit Sheni

The primary prophecies of both Chagai and Zecharya, especially those relating to Chanuka, were delivered during the second year of the reign of Darius (see 1:1 in both [Chagai](#) and [Zecharya](#)), some twenty years after the return to Jerusalem under Cyrus. ([See Timeline.](#)) To better appreciate these prophecies, we must (as usual) consider their historical setting.

The destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent exile to Bavel left Am Yisrael in an unprecedented condition. Since the time of the Exodus from Egypt, Israel had been living in its own land, and the Mishkan (Tabernacle), and later the Bet Ha-mikdash (Temple), had served as their spiritual and national center. In addition, Israel had always enjoyed sovereignty; although there had been times of relative weakness, Israel was never subjugated to foreign rule. After the Temple's destruction, Israel was left without its land, without its Temple, and without its sovereignty.

Near the close of the First Temple period, Yirmiyahu had already forewarned the people about this exile and destruction, proclaiming the rule of Bavel over Israel for the next 70 years ([see Yirmiyahu 25:1-12](#)). As Benei Yisrael had abused their own sovereignty, God punishes them by subjecting them to the "yoke of the **Melech Bavel**" ([see Yirmiyahu 27:12](#)). At the conclusion of these seventy years, Yirmiyahu foresees Israel's return to its land and sovereignty, ideally in a fashion even grander than their original redemption from Egypt:

"Assuredly, a time is coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no more be said, 'As the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,' but rather, 'As the Lord lives, who brought out and led the offspring of the House of Israel from the northland and from all the lands to which I have banished them...' " ([23:7-8](#))

However, this ultimate redemption was not unconditional. Instead, as Yirmiyahu claims, it was to be preceded by Israel's seeking of God:

"When seventy years of Bavel are over, I will take note of you; I will fulfill to you My promise to bring you back to this place ... **when you call out to Me** and come and pray to Me, I will give heed to you. You will search for Me, and then you will find Me..." ([29:10-14](#))

As we would expect, God hoped that the returning exile would establish a better and more just society, thus correcting the ills of the First Temple period.

The Realities of Shivat Tzion

At the end of these seventy years, Bavel's great empire indeed fell to the Persians (as Yirmiyahu had predicted - [see Ezra 1:1](#)). Koresh [Cyrus the Great], the first king of

this newly founded Persian empire, issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple ([Ezra 1:1-6](#)). ([See Timeline.](#))

Despite this generous decree, the Jews were only granted religious autonomy, not political sovereignty. For example, Zerubavel - the political leader of the returning Jews - is consistently referred to as "pechat Yehuda," the **governor** of Judah ([Chagai 1:1, 2:2](#)). His contemporary Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak served as the Kohen Gadol (high priest).

Unfortunately, only a small portion of the exiles returned and this small population succeeded only in building the mizbayach [altar] ([see Ezra 3:2-6](#)). Attempts to begin construction of the new Temple were thwarted by the local non-Jewish population ([see Ezra 4:4-5](#)). The general situation was quite pathetic ([see Ezra 3:12, Zecharya 4:8-10, Chagai 2:1-6](#)).

Clearly, Yirmiyahu's prophecies of a grand redemption remained only partially fulfilled. Now, it became the challenge of the prophets of shivat Tzion - Chagai and Zecharya - to revive this redemption process.

Some 18 years later, as Daryavesh [Darius the Great] takes over the throne of the Persian Empire ([see Timeline](#)), a new opportunity emerges to begin construction of the Second Temple.

Chagai - It's Time to Build

It is in this setting, on Rosh Chodesh Elul during the second year of Darius, that Sefer Chagai opens:

"In the second year of King Darius ... the word of the Lord came through the prophet Chagai to Zerubavel ben She'altiel, the governor of Judah, and to Yehoshua ben Yehozadak, the high priest. Thus said the Lord of Hosts: "These people say, "The time has not yet come for the rebuilding of the House of the Lord.'" And the word of the Lord continued: 'Is it the time for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while this House is lying in ruins?' " ([Chagai 1:1-4](#))

As the redemption process had not yet materialized, the people lacked the necessary enthusiasm to pursue the construction of the Mikdash. After all, the first Bet Ha-mikdash had been built only after a monarchy had been firmly established and Israel had reached economic prosperity ([see Shmuel II 7:12-13, Melachim I 5:5, 5:16-19](#)). Due to the lack of sovereignty and prosperity during these early years of "shivat Tzion," a general feeling of apathy prevailed ([see Chagai 1:2, 2:3, and Zecharya 4:10](#)).

It is exactly this attitude that Chagai counters. Chagai calls for a national soul searching and a united effort to rebuild the Mikdash. Furthermore, Chagai promises

that by building the Temple, economic prosperity and political sovereignty will return ([see 1:8-9, 2:7, 2:15-19](#)). Chagai's challenge is quite straightforward: **first** build the Mikdash, an act directing the nation's devotion to God, and then Am Yisrael will be worthy of attaining their sovereignty and economic prosperity.

The people accept Chagai's challenge and prepare the materials for rebuilding the Temple ([see chapter 1](#)). Then, on the 24th of Kislev, the day before construction was to begin, Chagai delivers his concluding message. In the two prophecies given on this momentous day, Chagai emphasizes the same central points he had made earlier: as the Mikdash is being rebuilt, economic prosperity ([see 2:15-19](#), cited above) and political sovereignty shall return:

"And the word came to Chagai a second time on the 24th day of the month. 'Speak to Zerubavel the governor of Judah: I am going to shake heaven and earth. And I will overturn the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the might of the kingdoms of the nations. I will overturn chariots and their drivers, horses and their riders shall fall...' " ([2:21-23](#))

Unfortunately, during that time period (even though the Temple was built) this vision was never fulfilled. [In our study of the prophecies of Chagai's contemporary, Zecharya, we will explain why.] Nonetheless, it would be safe to assume that these closing words of Chagai were echoing in the ears of the Hasmoneans some two hundred years later, as they triumphed over the great Greek armies, thus returning sovereignty to Israel. [[See Rashi on Chagai 2:5-7!](#)]

Now, to understand what went wrong during Chagai's time period (and how it relates to Chanuka), we must undertake a quick study of Sefer Zecharya.

Zecharya - It's Time to Repent

Sefer Zecharya also commences in the second year of Darius. However, in contrast to Chagai who emphasized primarily the nationalistic aspects of the redemption process, Zecharya delivers a more 'spiritual' message. His opening prophecy implores the people to perform proper repentance; only then will God return to his people:

"**Shuvu Elai** - return to me, says the Lord ... and I will return back to you." ([1:3](#))

The next six chapters continue with the various visions that Zecharya sees describing the return of God's Divine Presence to Jerusalem. [It is recommended that you scan these chapters to verify this point.]

Chagai and Zecharya strike a critical balance between two conflicting ideals in the redemption process. Economic and political growth, although essential to national revival, are only vehicles to attain the higher goal of creating a nation devoted to God.

Zecharya must balance the nationalistic aspirations of Chagai by emphasizing the need for repentance, necessary in order to be worthy of the Shechina in their midst.

[In modern day terms, one could say that Chagai would have been wearing a "kippah serugah," while Zecharya would have been wearing a "kippah shechorah."]

This balance is underscored in one of Zecharya's most well known prophecies, [not coincidentally] the Haftara reading for Shabbat Chanuka ([2:14 - 4:7](#)). Note how this Haftara begins:

"Shout for joy, fair Zion! For lo, I come; and I will dwell in your midst,' declares the Lord ... The Lord will take Judah to Himself as his portion ... and he will choose Jerusalem once more." ([2:14-16](#))

Zecharya begins by telling the people to rejoice, as the **Shechina** is returning. These words of hope are followed by a charge to Yehoshua, the High Priest, to remind him that he must follow God's commandments and work in harmony with Zerubavel. The prophecy climaxes with the vision of the **menorah** surrounded by two olive branches. The meaning of this image is explained as a charge to Zerubavel:

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubavel: Not by might ('chayil'), nor by power ('koach'), but with my spirit ('ruchi') says the Lord." ([4:6](#))

This emphasis of "ruach" over "chayil & koach" emerges as God's primary message to Zerubavel for he is the political leader to whom the sovereignty is destined to return! He, specifically, must be reminded of the need to strike this proper balance.

Despite the optimism of Zecharya's prophecies, their fulfillment was conditional. In his concluding prophecy in the second year of Daryavesh, Zecharya states this condition clearly:

"Men from far away shall come and take part in the building of the Temple of the Lord, and you shall know that I have been sent to you by the Lord, **if only you will obey** the Lord your God!" ([6:15](#))

The Dark Ages of Bayit Sheni

Unfortunately, the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya - of prosperity, sovereignty and the Shechina's return - were not fulfilled during that generation, nor in the following generations. Sefer Ezra is silent in regard to what happened after the Temple's construction was completed in the sixth year of Daryavesh ([see Timeline](#)), but the situation must have been quite pathetic. When Ezra and Nechemya arrive from Bavel several years later, the city is in ruins. There is mass inter-marriage, chillul shabbat, etc. Clearly, Am Yisrael remained under Persian sovereignty, as we see from the fact that both Ezra and Nechemya received their authority from the Persian king.

Israel remained under Persian rule, and later under Greek rule, for several hundred years. The condition set by Zecharya and earlier by Yirmiyahu, that Israel must repent in order to be worthy of a full redemption, seems not to have been met.

[[Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi in Sefer Ha-Kuzari II.24](#) explains the unfulfillment of these prophecies in a similar fashion. He mentions inadequate teshuva as well as lack of enthusiasm of the exiled to return to Israel. See also [Yoma 9b](#), where Reish Lakish and Rav Yochanan explain why the shechina never returned during Bayit Sheni.]

Although left unrealized, these vital prophecies most likely were remembered, as they reflected the most optimistic goals of the Second Temple period. One might conjecture that the anniversary of the original construction date, the 25th of Kislev, was also remembered. This may have also been viewed as an appropriate date to recall the optimistic prophecies of Chagai, pronounced on the preceding day - the 24th of Kislev.

The Rise of Hellenism

Later during the Second Temple period, when the Jews were subject to Greek rule, Hellenistic culture slowly became dominant. The rise of Hellenism climaxed with the famous decrees of Antiochus IV in 167 BCE ([see Timeline](#)), the details of which are recorded in Sefer Ha-makkabim I (see chapters 1-4). There, we are informed that after the decrees were enacted, the Hellenists erected an idol on the mizbayach on the 15th of Kislev of that year. They waited, however, until the 25th of Kislev before sacrificing upon it ([see Sefer Ha-makkabim I](#)). On that same day they began killing women who circumcised their children.

Apparently, the Hellenists selected the 25th of Kislev intentionally. The choice of this day most likely was not just coincidental. One could suggest that the Hellenists chose this date specifically "le-hach'is" [to spite], being aware of its 'religious' significance.

The Revolt and the Return to the Mikdash

The Hasmonean revolt began that same year, and three years later Judah was able to secure control of Jerusalem and purify and rededicate the Mikdash. ([See Timeline](#).) It is commonly assumed that the battle to liberate the Temple Mount from the Greeks ended on the 25th of Kislev and on that same day they began the daily sacrifices (including the lighting of the menorah). According to this account there was no intentional selection of this historic date.

However, according to other traditional Jewish sources a slightly different picture emerges. [Megillat Ta'anit](#) records the 23rd of Cheshvan of that year, as well as the 3rd of Kislev, as days of rejoicing, marking dates of key victories which took place when the Hasmoneans fought the Greeks for control of the Temple mount.

It also appears from the account in Sefer Ha-makkabim ([see 4:36-60](#)), that the dedication ceremony was set for the 25th of Kislev on purpose, in order to coincide with the very same day on which it was defiled, three years prior ([4:52-56](#)). It also seems from Sefer Ha-makkabim that construction of the new vessels and mizbayach took several weeks ([see 4:40-51](#)).

Considering both the fact that the Temple Mount was already under the control of the Hasmoneans in Cheshvan and the account in Sefer Ha-makkabim, one can conclude that the decision to dedicate the Mikdash specifically on the 25th of Kislev was intentional. This day not only marked the date of its original construction, but also reflected the prophetic ideals and aspirations of Bayit Sheni. The reason they selected this date, as well as the reason that the Hellenists had picked this date three years earlier, was due to its prophetic and historic significance since the time of Chagai.

As mentioned earlier, the Hasmoneans most probably saw themselves as fulfilling the prophecies of Chagai. Evidently Rashi also accepted this view. [Rashi](#) explains in his commentary to [Chagai 2:6](#), "I will shake the heavens and earth: in the miracles that occurred to the Hasmoneans."

Choosing specifically the 25th of Kislev to dedicate the restored mizbayach and vessels demonstrated their belief that the military victory that they had achieved was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Chagai.

A Sign or a Reason?

Did the **Shechina** return as well (as foreseen by Zecharya)? One could suggest that the miracle of the "pach ha'shemen" [cruse of oil] and the Menorah could have been perceived by the Hasmoneans as a divine sign that the Shechina was also returning. Recall that the central vision of Zecharya is that of the Menorah ([see 4:1-7](#)). In that prophecy, not only does Zecharya envision the return of the **Shechina**, but also the return of sovereignty. The discovery of the cruse of oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol, and the ensuing miracle that took place with the lighting of the Menorah, although not the **reason** for establishing Chanuka, most likely provided the Sages with a**sign** that the military victories of the Hasmoneans were indeed the results of divine providence, and hence worthy of commemoration.

Our explanation so far has shown that the primary reasons for the establishment of Chanuka as a yearly holiday were the military victories and the dedication of the Bet Ha-mikdash. Yet, why is it that we find that Chazal in later generations emphasize primarily the miracle of the oil? [[See Mesechet Shabbat 21b.](#)]

As mentioned earlier, the central vision of Zecharya is that of the menorah surrounded by two olive branches. The main message of this prophecy was that Bayit Sheni

should be characterized by the predominance of spirituality (ruach) over physical strength (chayil and koach). ([See 4:6](#)) It is through this predominance of spirit that the pitfalls of the monarchy of the First Temple could be avoided. The miracle of the oil could be viewed as reflective of this prophecy.

It is understandable therefore, that the Sages placed such a heavy emphasis on the miracle of the oil. In the eyes of the Hasmoneans and the people living at the time of the revolt, the primary reason for celebration was due to the military victories, the return of Jewish sovereignty, and the rededication of the Mikdash - the fulfillment of the prophecies of Chagai. The Sages were aware of the dangers of the political power now achieved by the Hasmoneans. As time passed and there was a decline in the religiosity of the Hasmonean Dynasty, the Sages needed to emphasize specifically this message of Zecharya - "lo be-chayil ve-lo be-koach, ki im be-**ruchi**."

Bayamim Ha'heyim - Ba'zman Ha'zeh!

Even after the destruction of the Temple, we continue to celebrate Chanuka, since we are assured that another opportunity for the realization of these prophecies will arise.

The message of Chanuka for our own generation, just as it was two thousand years ago, should be more than just 'coincidental.' To a certain extent, the prophecies of Chagai have been fulfilled. Sovereignty and economic prosperity have returned to Israel in its own land. Will the prophecies of Zecharya also be fulfilled? Just as before, it will depend on our ability to find the proper balance between "ruach," "chayil" and "koach."