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Chanuka and the Prophecies of the Second Temple Period

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Throughout the history of Am Yisrael, there were many military victories, yet Chazal never established a holiday commemorating those events. Many varieties of miracles have also occurred, yet no Rabbinically-ordained holiday commemorates them [1]. Why are the military victory and miracle of Chanuka different?

To answer this question it must be understood that the date of Chanuka possessed historic and prophetic significance several hundred years before the Hasmonean revolt! The following article will attempt to understand Chanuka based on its roots in the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya [2].

Chagai and Zecharya were the two prominent prophets active during the beginning of the Second Temple period [3]. We shall begin with a selective quote from the Book of Chagai of a prophecy delivered, interestingly enough, on the 24th of Kislev.

"(10) On the 24th day of the ninth [month], in the second year of Daryavesh (Darius), the word of the Lord came to the prophet Chagai... (15) And now, take note from this day forward, as long as no stone has been laid on another in the House of the Lord, if one came... (18) Take note from this day forward, from the 24th day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation was laid for the Lord's House - take note... for from this day on I will send blessings. (20) And the word of the Lord came to Chagai a second time on the 24th of the month: (21) Speak to Zerubavel, the governor of Judah: I am going to shake the heaven and the earth. (22) 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, each by the sword of his fellow."

It is clear from verses 15 and 18 above that the construction of the Temple was to begin on the next day, the 25th of Kislev. Several hundred years later, that very same Temple was rededicated on the 25th of Kislev, and the rabbinically ordained holiday of Chanuka was instituted to commemorate that event.

As the date of Chagai's prophecy seems to be more than coincidental, we should expect a connection between this prophecy in Sefer Chagai and the celebration of Chanuka [4]. In order to locate this connection, Sefer Chagai must be understood in light of its historical setting.

We shall begin with a brief overview of the major events leading to this time period.

The destruction of the first Temple and the exile to Bavel left Am Yisrael in an unprecedented condition. Ever since the Exodus from Egypt, the mishkan (Tabernacle), and later the Bet Hamikdash (Temple), had served as Israel's spiritual and national center. In addition, Israel had always enjoyed sovereignty in its own land; although there were times of relative weakness, Israel was never under the official sovereignty of a foreign empire [5]. Suddenly, Israel was left without its land, its mikdash, and its sovereignty.

Near the close of the First Temple period, Yirmiyahu had already foreseen the exile and destruction [6], proclaiming the sovereignty of Bavel over Israel for the next 70 years. As Israel had abused its sovereignty, its divine punishment was its subjection to the "yoke of the king of Bavel" (*Yirmiyahu 27:12*). At the conclusion of these seventy years Israel was to return to its land and sovereignty, ideally, in a fashion even grander than the 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)."

This redemption, however, was not unconditional. 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 Me, and come and pray to Me, I will give heed to you. You will search for Me and you will find Me... (29:10-14)."

It was the hope of the prophets that upon the return from exile, a new and better society would be established, correcting the ills of the First Temple period. At the end of these seventy years, Bavel's empire fell to the Persians and Koresh (Cyrus the Great) became king. In his famous edict, issued during the first year of his reign, Koresh allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple (*Ezra 1:1-6*). They were even granted autonomy - but not sovereignty. Zerubavel, for example, the political leader of the returning Jews, is consistently referred to as "pechat Yehuda" - "the governor of Judah" (*Chagai 1:1, 2:2*). Only a small portion of the exiles returned and this small population succeeded only in building the mizbeyach [altar] (*Ezra 3:2-6*). Attempts to begin construction of the actual mikdash were thwarted by the local non-Jewish population (*Ezra 4:4-5*).

It was only some 18 years later that the opportunity to begin construction of the Temple emerged. Clearly, Yirmiyahu's prophecies of redemption were only partially fulfilled. It was the challenge of the prophets of shivat Tzion (the Return to Zion), Chagai and Zecharya, to revive this redemption process.

It is in this setting, in the autumn of the second year of Darius, that Sefer Chagai opens:

"(1) 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. (2) Thus said the Lord of Hosts: These people say, The time has not yet come for the rebuilding the House of the Lord. (3) And the word of the Lord continued: (4) Is it the time for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while this House is lying in ruins?"

Chagai's challenge is formidable, given the lack of enthusiasm surrounding the building of the mikdash. As the redemption process had not yet materialized, the people saw no point in building the mikdash. The first Bet Ha-mikdash had been built after a monarchy had been firmly established and Israel had reached economic prosperity (see [Shmuel II 7:12-13](#), [Melakhim I 5:5](#), [5:16-19](#)). Due to the lack of sovereignty and prosperity during shivat Tzion, a general feeling of apathy prevailed (see [Chagai 1:2](#), [2:3](#), and [Zekharya 4:10](#)).

It is exactly this attitude which Chagai counters. In the following prophecies, Chagai calls for a national soul searching and a united effort to rebuild the mikdash. He foresees the return of economic prosperity and political sovereignty to Israel only after the mikdash is rebuilt ([1:8-9](#), [2:7](#), [2:15-19](#)). Building the mikdash, an act directing the nation's devotion to God, was a prerequisite to being worthy of attaining sovereignty and economic prosperity.

The people accept Chagai's challenge, and prepare the materials for rebuilding the Temple. On the 24th of Kislev, the day before construction is 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 and political sovereignty shall ensue ([2:21-23](#)).

"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..."

Although this vision was never fulfilled during that time period, there is no doubt that these closing words of Chagai were echoing in the ears of the Hasmoneans as triumphed over the great Greek armies. We shall return to this point after completing the picture, by studying the prophecy of Chagai's sole prophetic contemporary, Zecharya.

Sefer Zecharya also commences in the second year of Darius. Yet, while Chagai had 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:

"Turn back to me, says the Lord... and I will turn back to you. (1:3)"

The next six chapters continue with the visions that Zecharya saw of the Divine Presence returning to Jerusalem [7].

Chagai and Zecharya strike a critical balance between 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 to be worthy of the Shekhina (Divine Presence).

This balance is underscored in Zecharya's main prophecy, 'coincidentally' the haftara of Shabbat Chanuka ([2:14-4:7](#)).

"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 Shekhina is returning. This is followed by a charge to Yehoshua, the High Priest, to be sure to follow the way of God and his commandments, and to work in harmony with Zerubavel. The prophecy climaxes with the vision of the menorah surrounded by two olives trees. 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 by my spirit (ruchi)... ([4:6](#))"

This emphasis of ruach over chayil [8] and koach is the primary message to Zerubavel, the political leader to whom the sovereignty is destined to return. It is he who needs to be reminded of the importance of this balance.

Despite the optimism of Zecharya's prophecies, their fulfillment was conditional. In his concluding prophecy [9] of 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](#))"

Unfortunately, the prophecies of Chagai and Zecharya - of prosperity, sovereignty and the shekhina returning - were not fulfilled during that generation, nor in the following generations [10]. 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 to be worthy of a full redemption, seems not to have been met [11].

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.

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, the details of which are recorded in Sefer Ha-makkabim I [12]. We are informed that after the decrees were enacted, the Hellenists erected an idol on the mizbeyach on the 15th of Kislev of that year. They waited, however, until the 25th of Kislev before sacrificing upon it. 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 again may be just coincidental, or it might be that the Hellenists chose this date specifically le-hakh'is (to spite), being aware of its religious significance.

The Hasmonean revolt began that same year, and three years later Judah was able to secure control of Jerusalem and purify and re-dedicate the mikdash [13]. 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 [14] records the 23rd of Cheshvan [15] of that year as well as the 3rd of Kislev as days of rejoicing, marking dates in which various idols erected by the Greeks on the Temple mount were dismantled. It appears from the account in Sefer Ha-makkabim that the dedication ceremony was set for the 25th of Kislev, in order to coincide with the very same day on which it was defiled, three years prior [16]. It also seems from Sefer Ha-makkabim that construction of the new vessels and mizbeyach took several weeks.

Considering the fact that the Temple Mount was already under the control of the Hasmoneans in Cheshvan, and from the account in Sefer Ha-makkabim, it appears that the dedication of the mikdash 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 mizbeyach and vessels, demonstrated their belief that the

military victory that they had achieved was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Chagai.

Had the Shekhina also returned as foreseen by Zecharya? The miracle that took place with the cruse of oil and the menorah could have been perceived as a divine indication that the shekhina was also returning. Recall that the central vision of Zecharya is that of the menorah. In that prophecy, not only does he envision the return of the Shekhina, but also the return of sovereignty. The discovery of the cruse of oil with the seal of the kohen gadol, and the ensuing miracle which took place when lighting the menorah, although not the reason for establishing Chanuka, most likely was a strong enough sign to the Sages that the military victories of the Hasmoneans were divine, and worthy of commemoration.

Our explanation so far has shown that the primary reasons for Chanuka 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? [17]

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). 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 was 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 re-dedication 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."

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.

Footnotes: ***** [1] The commemoration of Purim as a chag de-rabanan differs in many ways; this will be dealt with in a future article. [2] For the reader unfamiliar with sifrei Chagai and Zecharya, it is recommended to read Sefer Chagai, and the first six chapters of Sefer Zecharya. It is also recommended to read the first four chapters of Sefer Ezra, as well as chapters 25

and 29 of Sefer Yirmiyahu. [3] This time period is commonly known as shivat Tzion. It was during this time that Jews of the Persian empire returned to Jerusalem with the aspiration of rebuilding the mikdash and establishing a community. See Ezra 1:1-8 [4] In his article "Yom Yisud Heikhal Hashem", Megadim Vol. 12, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun addresses this question at length. His approach emphasizes the agricultural importance of this date, marking the end of the olive harvest, and the finale of the agricultural season of the previous year. He also deals with the historical importance of this date and its relationship to Chagai and Zecharya, as will be presented in this article in a more simplified manner. [5] This freedom from foreign dominion, celebrated yearly on Chag Ha-Pesach, is also of religious significance. Only a nation free from foreign dominion can become a nation totally dedicated to God. [6] Yirmiyahu perek 25, in the fourth year of Yehoyakim (18 years prior to the destruction of the First Temple). These seventy years of Bavel's dominion are repeated again in perek 29. These 70 years should not be confused with the 70 years that transpired from churban ha-bayit until binyan bayit sheni mentioned by Zecharya (1:12 & 7:5). [7] The shekhina actually left Yerushalayim prior to the Temple's destruction - see Yechezkel 10. [8] Chayil can also imply economic prosperity; see Devarim 8:17 in its context. This understanding would relate nicely to the prophecy of Chagai. [9] Chapters 1-6 form a unit as they are all prophecies of the second year of Darius. [10] Although there is no account in Sefer Ezra as to what happened after the construction, their situation was close to pathetic. There is mass inter-marriage, chillul shabbat etc.; Nechemya several years later finds the city in ruins. They are obviously under Persian sovereignty as Ezra and Nechemya receive their authority from the Persian king. [11] 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 shekhina never returned during Bayit Sheni. [12] See chap 1:54-61, Sefer Ha-makkabim I, part of the Apocrypha. Although this book is not prophecy, from its style it is clear that the author was a god-fearing Jew. See introduction by Avraham Kahane "Ha-Sefarim Ha-Chitzonim" (Hebrew) . [13] Macabees I chapter 4:36-60. From this account, it appears that more than one day was necessary to prepare the mikdash for the dedication ceremony on the 25th of Kislev. It was necessary to build a new mizbeyach, shulchan, menorah etc., and prepare the courtyards, as well as remove all the pagan idols. [14] A tannaitic source, listing various days of the year in which it is forbidden to fast or deliver a eulogy, due to a festive event which occurred on that day. [15] On 23 Cheshvan - the "soreeyga" (a cultic building of the Hellenists) was dismantled and removed from the azara. On 3 Kislev - the "simaot" (pagan idols) were removed from the Azara. [16] Maccabim I chapter 4:52-56. The reason for celebrating the dedication of the mizbeyach for eight days is not clear from this account. The miracle of the pach shemen is not mentioned. Most likely the original celebration of eight days was based on the original dedication of the mishkan. [17] See Shabbat 21b.