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BH

HANNUKKAH: INDIANA JONES AND STARGATE

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Have you ever suspected the whole, "the oil burned for eight days" story about Hannukkah? If you have, welcome, super sleuth. You are eligible for membership in the Indiana Jones/Stargate, true-life Hannukkah club. Here's how the how this holiday probably really happened.

We all know about the Hasmoneans and the Greeks. That stuff is in all likelihood true. The Greeks had sacked the Temple and removed the menorah. It had been gone for 3 years by the time the Hasmoneans won. So imagine you're a Marine or an Army Ranger. You're getting your first look inside a building that's been wrecked. There are no windows. It's winter so the days are short. You have no idea whether the building's been booby-trapped or not. It almost certainly wasn't left in good working order. You don't have night-vision goggles. So you need a light source, a flare of some kind. You are resourceful, so you make one out of the equipment you have on hand, as the midrash tells us:

Why are lamps kindled during Hannukkah? At the time that the sons of the Hasmonean, the High Priest, triumphed over the kingdom of Greece-the time referred to in the verse, "When...I raised up your sons, o Zion, against your sons, o Greece (Zechariah 9:13)-upon entering the Temple they found there rods of iron which they grooved out and then kindled wicks in the oil why they poured into the grooves. (Pesikta Rabbati 2:1)

What we have here is a combination of Indiana Jones and Stargate. The victors enter the Temple holding their spears. These spears were long iron shafts covered in tin. At one end, they were hollowed out so that spear tips could be inserted into that end. Soldiers would pour oil into the spearheads and use them as flares. (Such spearheads are also mentioned in the War Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls.) They stood these spears up as a light source in order to survey the inside of the Temple.

But What About That Miraculous Oil?

Well, you might not like this section. You see, Hannukkah, like most other Jewish holidays had very ancient pagan roots. In this case, the holiday was rooted in light festivals celebrated in the dark of winter. Think of it from an ancient perspective: the days keep getting shorter and shorter. You don't understand the science as to why that happens. You might be afraid that they're going to keep on getting shorter and everything will dissolve into darkness. But by four days after the Winter Solstice, a practiced eye would be able to discern that the days were becoming longer and this would lead to festivity. It could also have been that lighting the lights at the Solstice served as sympathetic magic: the "light deity" would take a spark of the human light and light the sun with it.

Still, what about that oil? Sadly, we almost surely got that story from...the Greeks. They had a myth that they put of

few drops of oil into the lamp near the goddess Athena on the Acropolis and it burned for an entire year. If that's too uncomfortable, you could say the oil story is rooted in Elijah's and Elisha's miraculous oil (I Kings 17:16, II Kings 4:1-6). Or you could morph the Greek story into the light of Torah burning for a year. (Athena was, after all, the deity of wisdom.)

Eight Days of Light? What's That About?

Our most important instance of sympathetic magic in Judaism is the Water Drawing Ceremony of Sukkot. As the priests poured out water below, they "triggered" the pouring out of water from above, i.e., rain. Sukkot begins with a big holiday and ends with a big holiday and lasts 8 days altogether in Israel. (This is very much like what Americans experience during the Winter Break: big holidays at the start and finish of an 8-day period with half-holidays in between. It could also be birth and circumcision parties for Jesus, but that's a discussion for a different day.) The party of Sukkot was wild: huge lights flaring all night long, a spectacular vision in a world with only moonlight and starlight.

When the Hasmoneans got the Temple back up and running, the first thing they did was celebrate Sukkot, including the all-night party lights. (Think: Olympic flame-sized.) Hence, we have the eight days of the first Hannukkah. How do we know this? Not just from texts, e.g., Megillat Taanit, but from archeology. Here's a Hannukkah menorah that tells the tale:



There are places for eight wicks, at the top. And it is decorated with the rising sun in the middle and with bound branches of the lulav on either side. (Alternatively, according to Hannah Abrams, the middle figure could be a bisected etrog.) In fact, it doesn't take much imagining to see wreaths with lights on them as adaptations of this custom.

So What's the Take Home?

Am I the Grinch that stole Hannukkah? No, I want you to enjoy Hannukkah just as much as ever. I want you to appreciate what it really was. Was there gambling? Even more than there is today: it was a gamble to go into that building in the dark. Was there light: yes, makeshift, flickering lighting, more sparklers and flares than serene candles. Make Hannukkah a commemoration of bravery and commitment, daring and ingenuity. Conquer the darkness where you find it. And light your way as best you can. Happy Hannukkah!