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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

New Candles, New Torah:  
The Light of Hanukkah

By Miriam Gedwiser

Ronda Arking, Editor

# New Candles, New Torah: The Light of Hanukkah

By Miriam Gedwiser<sup>1</sup>

**H**anukkah gets notoriously short shrift in the Jewish textual canon. Its story is excluded from the Bible and has no dedicated tractate in the Mishnah. Even the Talmud only mentions it in passing a handful of times. The sparsity of Hanukkah's mentions is not for lack of material, as The Books of (I–IV) Maccabees are included in some non-Jewish bibles. What are we to make of this lack of text in our canonical sources?

In the absence of conventional sources, one avenue is to fill the void with unconventional sources. For example, some medieval commentators reached for liturgical poetry to find material to cite on Hanukkah<sup>2</sup>, even as such material is not usually a top source in halakhic or talmudic conversations. The Hanukkah-related books of the apocrypha have joined not the official canon, but the unofficial roster of texts in some circles. And Hanukkah is a favored topic of ever-proliferating Jewish children's books.

The Talmud in Yoma<sup>3</sup> points toward a different approach to the paucity of texts. The Talmud attempts to explain an enigmatic reference in Psalm 22:1's to אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר as referring to Esther.

א"ר אסי למה נמשלה אסתר לשחר לומר לך מה  
שחר סוף כל הלילה אף אסתר סוף כל הנסים

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2 See, e.g., Maharsha to Yoma 29b (quoting a poem of Yannai to explain one of the talmudic passages about Hanukkah); Hagahot *Maymoniyot*, Laws of Megillah and Hanukkah, 4:1 (quoting a poem of Kalir as a source for Hanukkah practice).

3 29b.

4 Because of the difficulty interpreting this phrase, many translations simply render it in transliteration and decline to translate it at all. (See, e.g., Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (JPS, 1984); The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation (JPS 1917); The Koren Jerusalem Bible (Koren).)

Rabbi Asi said: Why was Esther likened to the dawn? It is to tell you: Just as the dawn is the conclusion of the entire night, so too, Esther was the conclusion of all miracles.<sup>5</sup>

This line is curious. Are there really no miracles after Esther? The Talmud, in fact, asks about one prominent miracle in particular: והא איכא חנוכה, But isn't there Hanukkah? The Talmud answers: ניתנה לכתוב קא אמרין, We are talking about miracles that were given over to be written.

Esther is the last of the written, canonical miracles; Hanukkah belongs to a new era of miracles that were not "given over to be written." Purim has a book of the bible and, one might add, a tractate of Mishnah. Hanukkah has neither.<sup>6</sup>

This talmudic passage is not simply trying to resolve a textual issue with a Psalm. Rather, associating Purim with writing and Hanukkah with lack of writing tells us something about the fundamental nature of each holiday. In the words of Reb Tzadok ha-Cohen:

וזה שאמרו שניתנה ליכתב שהיה הנס בחינת תורה  
שבכתב . . . מה שאין כן נס חנוכה שהיה בחינת  
תורה שבעל פה

That which they said, that [Purim] was given over to be written, [is] because the miracle was in the genre of the Written Torah. . . . Unlike the miracle of Hanukkah, which was in the genre of the Oral Torah.

Hanukkah is not lacking texts by accident, but by design.

Reb Tzadok explains the linked dichotomies of Purim/Hanukkah and Written/Oral Torahs by way of a third pairing, from Devarim 32:2: יַעֲרֵף כַּמָּטָר לִקְחֵי תִזְלַת כֶּטֶל אִמְרָתִי, "May my discourse come down as the rain, My speech distill as the dew." Discourse, לקח, which stands for the Written

5 All Tanakh translations are from JPS 1984. Talmud translations are modified from the Koren translation available on Sefaria. Other translations are my own.

6 See also Maharsha to Yoma 29a, who suggests that the quality of not being given to writing extends even to exclusion from nonbiblical, nonhalakhic texts, such as the early liturgical poem by Yannai, (אז רוב נסים הפלאת בלילה ובין ויהי בחצי הלילה).

Torah, is like מטר, rain. Speech, אומרה, which stands for the Oral Torah, is like טל, dew.

As R. Tzadok sees it, rain is overt. It falls from heaven and hence is obviously from God. Dew, on the other hand, appears seemingly out of nowhere. To be like the Written Torah means to come obviously from God. To be like the Oral Torah means to have obscure, seemingly earthly origins.

According to R. Tzadok, the Purim miracle was at least somewhat explicit or overt, while the miraculous nature of Hanukkah was nearly imperceptible.<sup>7</sup> The Maccabees' military victory was not miraculous on its face; like the dew, it could seem to appear naturally. What of the miracle of the oil, which seems designed specifically to counter any suggestion that Hanukkah was purely a human victory? R. Tzadok asserts that the miracle of the oil "in particular . . . was certainly hidden and not given to be written down" (ובפרט נס השמן שהיה נסתר בודאי ולא ניתן לכתב). He seems to be suggesting that although the miracle of the oil was not a "hidden miracle" in the usual sense of one expressed through nature, it was literally hidden, occurring in the privacy of the Temple with few witnesses.

Reb Tzadok's schematic is neat: Purim/written/rain versus Hanukkah/oral/dew. But it also seems a bit forced, especially when it comes to shoehorning the Hanukkah miracle into the "hidden" box. A deeper dive into the meaning of orality may make the categorization more compelling.

How, exactly, does the Oral Torah parallel the subtlety of the dew, or the hiddenness of the Hanukkah miracle?

The dew and the Hanukkah victory both

appear to be self-generating, but in reality come from God. The same goes, R. Tzadok argues, for the Oral Torah, to which both dew and Hanukkah are connected.

We often talk about the Written and Oral Torahs as if they are two collections of texts—Tanakh on one side, and Mishnah, Midrash, parshanut, and so many more on the other. We understand that the Written Torah is closed, whereas the Oral Torah is dynamic and always in flux. And yet, we don't always think of the process by which words or ideas become part of the Oral Torah. R. Tzadok invites us to do so: "It appears to the sages that they are innovating (*mehadshim*), but in truth they are the words of the living God." The Oral Torah is expressed in its essential form at the moment of its generation. A sage, excitedly arguing in the Bet Midrash or silently studying at home, brings an idea into the world and thus into the corpus of the Oral Torah. But at the very same moment the idea is not really his: It has come from God and belongs to Torah already.

The miracle of Hanukkah, too, has a similar ever-generative power. The oil regenerated, and we continue to enact a similar generation every year, as we increase the light from night to night. Through this power of imperceptible generation, the Hanukkah miracle is akin to the Oral Torah. Hanukkah is the holiday of ineffable miracles better captured by light than by words, and of Torah of the same sort: new, bright, enlightening, but only now being verbalized.

*Masekhet Sofrim*<sup>8</sup>, one of the "minor tractates" (מסכתות קטנות) generally printed as addenda to the Talmud, notes that on Hanukkah "it is forbidden to light with an old lamp." R. Zvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov<sup>9</sup> connects this to the nature of memorializing the Hanukkah miracle.

When it comes to Purim, "The miracle, that is, the revelation of the light, is revealed again

<sup>7</sup> This position is somewhat counterintuitive, as the Purim miracle takes place through entirely natural means, while Hanukkah involves the miracle of the oil. R. Tzadok claims that the events of Purim were so improbable that God's direction was obvious. "Even though it was somewhat folded into nature, nevertheless everyone saw that the basic occurrence of the miracle was from God." I discuss the miracle of the oil below.

<sup>8</sup> 20:1.

<sup>9</sup> Bnei Yissaschar, Maamarim of Kislev–Tevet, 4.

every year. Therefore reading the Megillah was established as a reminder for the generations.”<sup>10</sup> The Purim miracle continuously recurs, and we memorialize that through reading a text. But Hanukkah was not given to be written, so “the activity of revealing the light of the miracle is done by lighting the candles. To hint this to us they also established, ‘it is forbidden to light with an old lamp,’ to hint as stated, that one should not light only for what happened in the past, but one must light anew, so that the light be revealed even now with the commandment of lighting.”<sup>11</sup> Lighting for Hanukkah every year reveals the renewed light of the miracle.

As we have seen, the light of Hanukkah is the light of the Oral Torah. Every year, as we reveal through wordless candles the possibility of generation and newness, we also revel in the possibilities of the Oral Torah that combines human effort and Divine guidance, and revel in the moment when that Torah emerges, even before it is reduced to words.

If Hanukkah is the time to celebrate this generative power of the Oral Torah, one way to do so is with Torah itself. May this year’s Hanukkah be one of new Torah content, but even more, of Torah-generating experiences, for you and yours!

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10 הנס היינו התגלות האור שוב מתגלה בכל שנה על כן נתקן  
לזכרון לדורות קריאת המגילה  
11 פעולת התגלות אור הנס נעשה על ידי הדלקת הנרות הנה  
לרמז זה גם כן תיקנו אסור להדליק בנר ישן לרמז כנ"ל שאין  
להדליק רק בשביל מאי דהוה מעשה שהיה, רק צריך להדליק  
מחדש כדי שיתגלה האור גם עתה במצות ההדלקה.



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