



The Fire That Never Dies

The history of the Jewish nation has been rife with miracles. Yet some get commemorated while others do not. What is so unique about the Chanukah miracle?

Which Miracles Get Celebrated?

Every Jewish child knows the reason we celebrate the holiday of Chanukah. We are all familiar with the story of the miraculous jug of oil: how the Chashmonaim entered the Holy Temple and found only one small jar of pure oil containing enough oil for one day—and how a miracle happened and it burned for eight days. As a remembrance of the miracle, the Sages instituted the holiday of Chanukah and the lighting of the candles.

The arises: many miracles occurred throughout Jewish history. Why did the Sages institute a holiday specifically for this miracle, complete with the recitation of the Hallel prayers, when they didn't establish holidays to commemorate any other miracles?

For example, many of you may be familiar with the story of the conquest of Yericho, or Jericho. The Book of Yehoshua tells us that when the Jewish Nation stood on the brink of conquering Yericho, G-d told Yehoshua to walk around the city wall once every day, together with the Aron, the Ark of the Covenant, and seven Kohanim blowing shofars. And that is what they did. They started on Sunday and continued for seven days. On the seventh day, which was Shabbos, they circled the city seven times, and at the seventh time they

sounded the shofars... and the walls fell.

It was an awesome miracle that occurred before the entire Jewish People's eyes—but does anyone know its exact date? I do not know myself. Yehoshua did not establish any holiday to remember this miracle.

There is another lesser known miracle which also involved Yehoshua. Several chapters later in the Book of Yehoshua we read about the battle of the five Amorite kings against the Jews. We are told that the battle occurred on Friday afternoon, and that Yehoshua was afraid that the Jews would violate the Shabbos by fighting into the Shabbos—so he lifted his hands in prayer to Heaven and said, before all of Israel, “Let the sun be subdued in Givon and the moon in the Ayalon Valley.” And a miracle happened. For around 24 hours, the sun stopped in the sky and the moon stood still until the Jews were victorious. But has anyone ever heard of any sort of holiday established to remember this awesome miracle? There is simply nothing. When did this miracle happen? I happen to know—it was on the Third of Tammuz, the Rebbe's yahrzeit.

But the bigger miracle, one which occurred for over 40 years while the Jews wandered the desert, was the daily “bread from heaven.” Every day, the manna fell, which was the Jewish Nation's longest-running miracle—all following miracles took mere moments or perhaps one night, like the Splitting of the Sea. The manna, however, came down daily for 40 years—and yet, there is no holiday recalling this miracle.

Perhaps this is a good thing. If we celebrated every miracle in Jewish history, virtually every day would be a holiday. So now we are back to the first question: why did the Sages see fit to celebrate the miraculous jug of oil more than all the other miracles?

Burning Bush Miracles

In Jewish history, we know of another famous miracle involving a flame not consuming its fuel, similar to the oil from the jug not running out. Which miracle was this? The Burning Bush.

When G-d revealed Himself to Moshe Rabbeinu for the first time, the Torah tells us (Shemos 3:2) that “he saw the bush burning in flames, but the bush wasn’t being consumed.” Moshe Rabbeinu saw a shrub, very susceptible to fire and easy to burn, burning but not being consumed by the fire. This caused him to come closer, and it was then that G-d revealed Himself to him for the first time.

But if G-d wanted to speak to Moshe Rabbeinu, why did He need to stage such a strange miracle? He simply could have revealed Himself to Moshe in a prophecy, just like He did with Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov and all the way back to Noach and Adam. He simply could have come to Moshe in a vision or a dream and have said the exact same thing he said at the Burning Bush: “Go forth and I shall send you to Pharaoh, and take my people the Children of Israel from Egypt.” Why did He need to do this wondrous miracle? Are we not taught that G-d does not do miracles for show?

The Midrash explains: “Why did G-d appear to Moshe in this manner? Because in his heart Moshe felt that perhaps the Egyptians were annihilating the Jews—so G-d showed him a bush burning but not being consumed. G-d said to him, ‘Just like the bush is aflame but is not being consumed, so too the Egyptians are unable to consume the Jewish People.’”

In doing this, G-d gave Moshe, and the entire Jewish People for all generations, a message of encouragement and strength. Too many times, it seems that fires have ignited the Jewish People, and we all fear what will happen to us. It is then that we remember that “the bush was not consumed”—there is no fire in the world that can extinguish the Jewish Nation.

The Miracles of Fire

This style miracle happened several times in Jewish history. The first was with Avraham, the first Jew, who was cast into a fiery furnace but was unburned. Thus, the first Jew proved that fire does not harm the Jew.

There's another miracle that everyone knows from their local synagogues. In every shul, above the ark, there is a "Ner Tamid" light that remains constantly lit. Where did this custom come from? In the Beis Hamikdash, the seven-branched menorah was lit every night. It would be filled with enough oil to burn through the night. Despite this, in the morning when all the other candles had burnt out, one candle would remain kindled and miraculously burning throughout the day: the "Ner HaMa'aravi," the western-most candle. This miracle occurred in both the First and Second Temples.

Additionally, there was the miracle of the fire that burned upon the altar. In the Torah portion of Devarim (4:13), Rashi comments on the phrase "they spread a purple cloth upon it," explaining that "the flame which had descended from the heavens, crouched beneath the cloth like a lion, would not burn the cloth because they had covered it with a bronze dome." In other words, a fire was always burning upon the altar, even when it was traveling—so again, we have the theme of the flame burning but not consuming the fuel.

Why We Commemorate Chanukah

The concept of the flame burning but failing to consume the fuel is seen in the Chanukah miracle. The candles burned for eight days—but still didn't succeed in consuming the oil, which symbolizes the soul.

We might say that the reason the Sages chose to mark this particular miracle and not others is because it was really not a one-time miracle, but rather, a miracle that continues to this day. No matter how many nations and governments try to burn down the House of Israel, G-d

forbid, we see that the “bush is not consumed”— the Nation of Israel continues to endure, and not only that, but continues to get stronger and more powerful... until the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen.