



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Shamash: Oil and Blood **Rabbi Dr. Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Advanced Kollel Class of 2023**

I recently heard from a friend in Jerusalem. Hanukkah is her favorite holiday. She usually goes above and beyond to make the holiday special for her children and community. But this year, in the midst of war and pain, she worried about how—and whether—to celebrate. She doubted that she could deep fry jelly donuts and latkes, delicacies associated with the miracle of oil, a miracle that now defines the celebration of Hanukkah. She preferred to spill wine from her cup, a Passover seder ritual that acknowledges deep loss not only of one's own people but also of another. She confessed that this year, marking death and destruction feels more apt and appropriate than rejoicing about victory or marveling at miracles. Her ambivalence resonated deeply with me.

Oil and blood. These substances characterize the multivalent legacy of Hanukkah.

Bavli Shabbat 21b asks: “What is Hanukkah?” The Bavli answers that Hanukkah is a holiday that begins on the 25th of Kislev and lasts eight days. No eulogies are recited on those days, nor can one fast on them. Why? The Bavli explains that when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled the oils that would have been used to light the menorah; after the Hasmoneans defeated the Greeks and reentered the Temple, the Hasmoneans discovered only a single cruse of undefiled oil. Though they assumed it would last a single night, “a miracle occurred and they lit [the menorah] for eight days.” In this rendition of the Hanukkah miracle, the oil, central to the eight days of celebration, lasted far longer and was used to illuminate the Temple after it had experienced a period of darkness and despair. Indeed, many of the holiday's laws engage with the Hanukkah lights: how many are lit, what substances can be used, where to place them, how long they ought to burn. Hanukkah is an oily week of rituals.

Oil is not the only liquid substance related to the holiday, however. Blood, too, is interwoven into ancient stories about Hanukkah, including early texts about its history. 1 Maccabees 1 describes Antiochus arriving in Jerusalem, entering the Temple, taking the golden altar and the menorah and other vessels, and shedding blood. Later in that

same chapter, a member of Antiochus' government returned to the region with a large force, plundering the city and taking captives. The account describes how "on every side of the sanctuary they shed innocent blood." The book of Judith, often studied on Hanukkah, also includes bloody details: a severed head, a bloody sword. The Hanukkah miracle in these accounts is military victory and the Temple rededication that followed.

Oil and blood are themselves complicated substances. Oil is used to anoint and to heal. It is used to kindle flames and provide illumination in dark spaces and times. Fire is generative and beautiful. But fire is also destructive; it can consume, it can cause chaos when it gets out of control, and it can be used to deliberately damage, destroy, and kill. Blood so often symbolizes death and loss of life, murder, violation, and violence. But it is also essential to life; it illuminates faces and enlivens them.

I have few words these days. I have no answers. But I pray for better times ahead, for comfort for all those in mourning, strength for those so traumatized, a lasting peace, and future Hanukkahs when we will celebrate less ambivalently, with more joy and less sorrow.

Rabbi Dr. Sarit Kattan Gribetz is an associate professor in the Theology Department at Fordham University. Her areas of research and teaching include rabbinic literature, the history of Jews in the Roman Empire, conceptions of time and time-keeping, and gender and sexuality. Her first book, Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism (Princeton University Press, 2020) examines how rabbinic texts use time to define Jewish identity. She is now writing her second book, Jerusalem: A Feminist History. Sarit received her BA and PhD from the Religion Department at Princeton University, studied Talmud and Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as a Fulbright Fellow, and served as a research fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Study.