



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

## **Night Eight: Choosing Light** **Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne, Class of 2021**

---

When I set out to articulate a definition for [Neurodivergent Torah](#), I suggested that it could be one of two things. It could be Torah read through the lens of neurodivergence, whether that means approaching characters or stories from the perspective of our experiences or by appreciating how new interpretations of Torah open up when seen through neurodivergent eyes. Neurodivergent Torah, however, could also refer to what happens when Jewish texts reach out and say words that a neurodivergent person—myself, for example—needs to hear. This essay is an example of the latter and I hope that, regardless of your neurology and experience of the world, you find it illuminating.

There is an interesting conundrum at the heart of the holiday of Hanukkah. The holiday itself commemorates the rededication of the Temple after the victory of the Hasmoneans over the Greeks and the miracle associated with it. The conundrum is the nature of the miracle. According to [Al HaNisim](#), the paragraph we insert into our daily prayers and blessings after meals, the miracle is that God gave victory to the Hasmonean priests who led the small band of fighters against the Greek army: God delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, and the sinners into the hands of God's servants. According to the Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud, [Shabbat 21b](#), the miracle of Hanukkah comes once the Hasmoneans retook the defiled Temple and discovered one small cruse of oil remaining, enough for one day. Miraculously, the oil burnt for the full eight days of the rededication.

Two miracles, two stories, two frameworks for understanding Hanukkah. Different rabbis throughout history are sensitive to the distinct understandings of the holiday expressed by these two models and discuss why the Bavli and the late Second Temple sources might focus on different elements of the holiday. Modern writers are more likely to ask why the focus of Hanukkah shifted from the military miracle to the miracle of the oil. The implication is that, since the Bavli is a relatively late source, the miracle

of the oil was introduced some time later to either expand or refocus the holiday of Hanukkah. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, in her essay on “Hanukkah and Adult Faith”<sup>1</sup> discusses some of these possible reasons, including an understanding reticence to loudly celebrate the trouncing of the former ruling empire while under the thumb of their replacement. In her article on “The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil,”<sup>2</sup> Vered Noam looks at the proposed sources for the story of the miraculous oil and concludes that the story of the miracle only truly appears in the Bavli and is not present in any sources that originate in Israel. She argues that the Bavli’s introduction of the miracle of oil does not tell us anything about what the rabbis thought of the Hasmoneans or why the story was introduced. Instead, this tale is a reflection of the kinds of literary works that the rabbis chose to create.

While I take Professor Noam’s point that we cannot intuit motivation from textual evidence, I am still drawn to the absences in this tale of miracles and to the openings into which I feel invited to step. Once we accept the presence of the miracle of the oil in Bavil, we must then turn to its absence in Israel. More than absence, actually. There is a passage in the Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Talmud that was redacted in the land of Israel, that suggests that there was a miracle of oil, but not the one with which we are familiar. In [Shekalim 6:1](#), on 43a, we read that the oil that Moshe prepared at the dedication of the Tabernacle was a miraculous work from beginning to end. There should not have been enough to even anoint all the wood for the Tabernacle, much less all the fixtures and all the newly installed priests. But there was a miracle and the oil lasted for the entire dedication of the Tabernacle or, to use the Hebrew term, Hanukat HaBayit. The real miraculous oil, according to this text, is not found in the rededication of the Temple that Hanukkah celebrates, but in the original dedication of the Tabernacle in the desert.

The Yerushalmi also observes, [a few lines after](#) the comment about the oil, that kings are only anointed from a horn of oil, and that kings like Shaul and Yehu, who were anointed from a cruse, were fated to lose the monarchy. Kings David and Shlomo, however, were anointed from a horn and so their dynasty endures. The Talmud remarks

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruttenberg, Danya. “Hanukah and Adult Faith.” Substack newsletter. *Life Is a Sacred Text* (blog), December 19, 2022. <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/hanukah-and-adult-faith>.

<sup>2</sup> Noam, Vered. “The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil: The Metamorphosis of a Legend.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 73 (2002): 191–226.

immediately afterwards, as part of this conversation about anointing priests as priests and kings as kings, that priests are never anointed as kings. The Yerushalmi takes a strong stance that cruses of oil are not special, and neither are any kings or dynasties associated with them, especially not priestly families that claim the kingship. The Hasmonean priests who claimed the kingship after defeating the Greeks are not explicitly mentioned, but they do not need to be. In his class on the topic of the miracle of oil, Rabbi Shlomo Wadler introduced these passages and suggested that this was evidence that the Yerushalmi was familiar with the miracle of the oil as an oral narrative and rejected it. They had heard of it but were not compelled by it.

Venturing out of historical evidence into the realm of speculation, these passages from the Yerushalmi appear to reject both the miracle of the oil and of the Hasmonean victory. Neither the oil nor the kingly triumph is seen as worth celebrating by this text. What, then, do we do with this dismissal of the things that make Hanukkah Hanukkah? I can only speak to how it resonates with me, but I see an attempt to come to terms with disappointment by walking away from it. The Hasmoneans grew corrupt and corrupting, only to be conquered by Rome, leaving a legacy that is at best spotted and at worst abhorrent to the rabbis. The Temple no longer stands and the Yerushalmi sees no end to the exile. The bright future promised by the original rededication tarnishes. And so they say that they were never real kings anyway. It was never a big deal.

And I suspect that I interpret the text that way because of how strongly it reflects my instincts to respond in just that way. It should be clear by now that I cannot speak for the rabbis, but speak instead for myself and of an experience that I am well aware does not belong exclusively to the neurodivergent community. All the privilege I claim for us (it is not a very enviable one; one need not covet it), is that we are most often in the position of needing to trust others and discovering, to our dismay, that our faith was misplaced. It is the disappointment we face when a promising person or situation or accommodation fails us. It turns out that our schools have no idea how to accommodate our different learning styles. It turns out that that specialist who really seemed to get it is just using the same failed approach with a new name. It turns out this employer does not actually want to hire us. We learn over and over again that those in whom we put our trust were anointed from mere flasks.

This is not even cynicism speaking; it is a kind of practicality. Being able to guard one's



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

heart and walk away is often the thing that allows us to keep going. Being able to take our disappointment and write “them” off—whether they are clueless teachers or Hasmonean rulers—is a kind of power. It seems like we—as individuals, as communities, as a people, as a world—find ourselves staring devastation in the face a lot these days. Perhaps we need the Yerushalmi’s pragmatism to keep going.

And yet here we are celebrating Hanukkah again. It is the Bavli’s story, the one that focuses on the miracle of the oil, that has burned itself into our understanding of Hanukkah. The miracle we learn about and celebrate turns on the moment when all seems lost: the moment when a small light is found and that light—which should not have lasted—turns out to give miraculously more than possible. Our miracle is the miracle of eucatastrophe, a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien that describes stories where the darkness seems impenetrable and no hope can be found until everything changes and, with the same intensity of catastrophe, light breaks in and all are saved. Tolkien himself was a master of eucatastrophe. But Tolkien used it so often because he believed that we need stories of eucatastrophe. Without telling such stories and reading them, we would never believe in them. As bad as things get, we need the hope that comes from knowing that, sometimes, benevolence breaks upon us like dawn in the most unlooked-for of places. In order to believe in the future, we must believe in eucatastrophe. The lesson of the Yerushalmi is true: the world will let us down and there will not always be a silver lining or a positive spin. And yet the lesson of the Bavli is also true: Hanukkah teaches us to believe that, no matter how deep our darkness, the possibility of sudden, miraculous eucatastrophe is right there too—not just for the world, but for ourselves.

---

*Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne is the Director of Academic Affairs at Yeshivat Maharat as well as a recent alumna. She came to Maharat after completing her Ph.D from University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studied the past, present, and future of digital reading. She loves old books in new forms, analyzes how halakha and technology can work together, and is a teacher committed to the idea that studying Torah can and must be for everyone.*