

Hannukah and Maimonides By Rabbi Yamin Levy

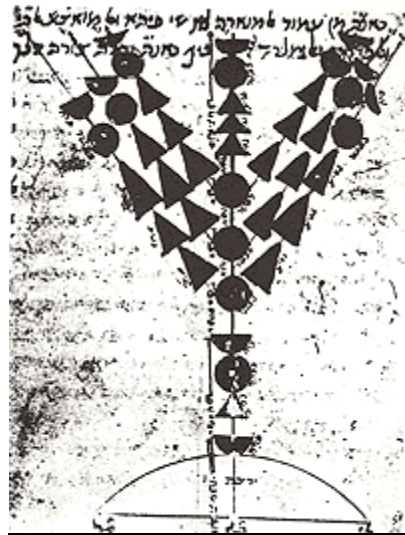
The student of Maimonides is one who seeks meaning not only in the content of the great teacher's written work but also in its structure and form. This is particularly true when studying the laws of Hanuka as presented by Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah.

The Mishneh Torah is a code of law; we would therefore expect its content to be limited to the laws describing a given holiday's observances and restrictions. This is indeed what we find in all the laws of holidays except Hanuka. When it comes to Hanuka, Maimonides provides not only the laws that relate to the holiday, but also the holiday's story and its historical context.

Every one of the Jewish holidays has a historical context and story behind its observance. Pesach celebrates the exodus from Egypt, Shavuoth recalls the giving of the Torah, and Succoth observes the Jewish people's journey through the desert during the 40 years preceding their entry into the land of Israel. The stories of these holidays, including Purim, are all part of the written tradition recorded in the Tanach (Bible).

Hanuka, however, has no written or biblical record. The historical events that led to the Hashmonean (Maccabees) victory occurred between 175 BCE and 165 BCE after the Biblical canon was closed. Therefore, all historical records of Hanuka are extra-biblical; Maimonides thus affords us a historical context for the holiday in lieu of a written tradition. Maimonides begins the story of Hanuka with the words "In the time of the Second Temple..." to provide a historical location for his story and to remind us that the event has been passed down in the oral tradition. This beginning indicates that it occurred in a time after the prophets of Israel when the Bible had been canonized, and new books could not be incorporated into the Bible.

Unlike any of the later codifiers, such as Rabbi Yoseph Karo, who limited themselves to being just a code of Law, Maimonides' intent was to be an organized and accessible repository of the entire oral tradition. Included in Maimonides' discussion on Hanuka are the laws of Hallel, the special prayers of thanksgiving to God. Hallel is recited on all the holidays including Rosh Hodesh (New Moon). Why then did Maimonides choose the chapters designated for Hanuka to discuss these laws at length?



A twelfth century hand drawing by Maimonides depicting the specifications of the temple Menorah. In this manuscript, the Menorah's seven branches extend diagonally, in straight lines, rather than the usual semicircular or oblong shape.

One might reasonably argue that the laws of Hallel belong more naturally with the laws of Tefilah (Prayer) and following the order of the Siddur, the laws of Hallel should be found immediately after the laws of the Amidah (Silent Prayer). Furthermore, Hanuka is only a Rabbinic holiday which makes it significantly less important than the Biblically ordained holidays like Pesach, Shavuoth and Succoth. If Maimonides' intent was to include the laws of Hallel with one of the holidays, why did he not select a holiday of greater import such as one of the biblical holidays?

The answer to this puzzle definitely lies in understanding the central motif of each of the holidays as reflected in its unique observance. Pesach's central motif is our celebration of freedom, and it is observed primarily through the eating of the Paschal lamb, the symbol of our freedom, and the Matza, the bread of affliction. Succoth is celebrated by sitting in booths, which symbolize our submission to God's grace in this world, and Rosh Hashanah is marked by the blowing of the Shofar, which calls us to introspection and repentance. Hanuka's central motif is giving praise to God for our providence and deliverance at times of national danger. The beautiful prayer recited when lighting the Hanuka Menora, Hanerot Hallalu, reveals the purpose of the candle lighting as done "in order to express our gratitude and praise to Your Great Name for Your Miracles." The blessing over the candles continues with the same language of thanksgiving to God "Who has wrought miracles for our forefathers, in those days and at this season."

On all of the holidays we recite Hallel as a verbal expression of gratitude; however, this is particularly meaningful on Hanuka where the central motif of thanksgiving is represented in the lighting of candles. Thus it is this physical act of observance which helps us understand Maimonides' location of the laws of Hallel within the laws of Hanuka.