



Identity/Crisis

Yehuda Kurtzer with Joshua Kulp

Unpacking the Meaning of Hanukkah
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How did Hanukkah transform from a story about a military conquest and temple rededication into the festival of lights that we celebrate today? In this episode, **Yehuda Kurtzer** studies texts about Hanukkah with **Joshua Kulp**, senior scholar at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and scholar of ancient Judaism. They argue about the meaning of Hannukah as they explore the rabbinic relationship with militarism as well as historical and religious interpretations of the events connected to the Hannukah story.



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I. Hanukkah as a Reclamation of Sukkot (at 1:17 min.)

1. II Maccabees 10:5-8

5 On the anniversary of the day on which the temple had been profaned by the Gentiles, that is, the twenty-fifth of the same month Chislev, the purification of the temple took place. 6 The Jews celebrated joyfully for eight days as on the feast of Sukkot, remembering how, a little while before, they had spent the feast of Sukkot living like wild animals in caves on the mountains. 7 Carrying rods entwined with leaves, green branches and palms, they sang hymns of grateful praise to him who had brought about the purification of his own Place. 8 By public edict and decree they prescribed that the whole Jewish nation should celebrate these days every year.

2. Bar Kochva Coinage



A Bar Kochva silver shekel, depicting a lulav on the obverse. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).)

II. Rabbinic attitudes towards the Hasmoneans (at 12:25 min.)

3. Yochanan Kohen Gadol (John Hyrcanus): Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 18b

מוֹתֵיב רַב אַחָא בַר הוּנָא : בְּתַלְתָּא בְּתַשְׁרֵי בְּטִילַת אֲדָכְרַתָּא מִן שְׁטַרְיָא. שְׁגִזְרָה מְלָכוֹת יוֹן גִּזְרָה שְׁלֵא לְהַזְכִּיר שֵׁם שְׁמַיִם עַל פִּיהֶם, וְכִשְׁגִּבְרָה מְלָכוֹת חֲשֵׁמוֹנָאִי וְנִצְחוּם הִתְקִינוּ שְׁיֵהוּ מְזַכְרִין שֵׁם שְׁמַיִם אֶפִּילוּ בְּשִׁטְרוֹת. וְכֵן הָיוּ כּוֹתְבִים : בְּשַׁנַּת כָּד וְכֵן לְיוֹחָנָן כַּהֵן גְּדוֹל לְאֵל עֲלִיוֹן.

Rav Aḥa bar Huna raised an objection: It is stated in *Megillat Ta’anit*: **On the third of Tishrei the ordinance requiring the mention of God’s name in legal documents was abolished, and on that day fasting is forbidden. For the kingdom of Greece had issued a decree against the Jews forbidding them to mention the name of Heaven on their lips.**

When the Hasmonean kingdom became strong and defeated the Greeks, they instituted that people should mention the name of Heaven even in their legal documents. And therefore they would write: In year such and such of Yoḥanan the High Priest of the God Most High.

4. King Yanai: Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 66a

וְהָיָה שָׁם אֶחָד, אִישׁ לֵץ לֵב רַע וּבְלִיעַל, וְאֶלְעָזָר בֶּן פּוּעִיָּרָה שָׁמוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן פּוּעִיָּרָה לְיָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ: יָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ, לָבָם שֶׁל פְּרוּשִׁים עָלֶיךָ. וּמָה אַעֲשֶׂה? הֲקִים לָהֶם בְּצִיץ שֶׁבִין עֵינַיִךְ. הַקִּים לָהֶם בְּצִיץ שֶׁבִין עֵינָיו.

And there was one person present, a scoffer, a man of an evil heart and a scoundrel called Elazar ben Po'ira. And Elazar ben Po'ira said to King Yannai: King Yannai, the hearts of the Pharisees, the Sages, are against you. In other words, they harbor secret resentment against you and do not like you. The king replied: **And what shall I do** to clarify this matter? Elazar responded: **Have them stand by** wearing the frontplate between your eyes. Since the frontplate bears the Divine Name, they should stand in its honor. Yannai, who was a member of the priestly Hasmonean family, also served as High Priest, who wears the frontplate. **He had** the Pharisees stand by wearing the frontplate between his eyes.

הָיָה שָׁם זָקֵן אֶחָד וַיְהוּדָה בֶּן גְּדִידְיָה שָׁמוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה בֶּן גְּדִידְיָה לְיָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ: יָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ! רַב לָךְ כְּתֵר מַלְכוּת, הֵנַח כְּתֵר כְּהוּנָה לְזַרְעוֹ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן. שִׁהִיו אוֹמְרִים: אִמּוֹ נִשְׁבְּיַת בְּמוֹדִיעִים. וַיְבוֹקֵשׁ הַדָּבָר וְלֹא נִמְצָא. וַיִּבְדְּלוּ חֲכָמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּזַעַם.

Now there was a certain elder present called Yehuda ben Gedidya, and Yehuda ben Gedidya said to King Yannai: King Yannai, the crown of the monarchy suffices for you, i.e., you should be satisfied that you are king. **Leave the crown of the priesthood for the descendants of Aaron.** The Gemara explains this last comment: **As they would say** that Yannai's **mother was taken captive in Modi'in**, and she was therefore disqualified from marrying into the priesthood, which meant that Yannai was a *ḥalal*. **And the matter was investigated and was not discovered**, i.e., they sought witnesses for that event but none were found. **And the Sages of Israel were expelled in the king's rage**, due to this rumor.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן פּוּעִיָּרָה לְיָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ: יָנָאִי הַמֶּלֶךְ, הַדְּיוּט שֶׁבִּישְׂרָאֵל כָּךְ הוּא דִּינוֹ, וְאַתָּה מֶלֶךְ וְכֹהֵן גָּדוֹל כָּךְ הוּא דִּינְךָ? וּמָה אַעֲשֶׂה? אִם אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ לַעֲצָתִי: רוּמְסִים. וְתוֹרָה מָה תִּהְיֶה עָלֶיךָ? הֲרִי כְּרוּכָה וּמוֹנַחַת בְּקֶרֶן זְוִית, כָּל הַרוֹצֵה לְלַמּוֹד גְּבוּא וַיִּלְמוּד.

And Elazar ben Po'ira said to King Yannai: King Yannai, such is the judgment of a common person in Israel. In other words, merely expelling a slanderer is appropriate if the subject of the slander is a commoner. **But you are a king and a High Priest.** Is **this your judgment** as well? Yannai replied: **And what should I do?** Elazar responded: **If you listen to my advice, crush them.** Yannai countered: **But what will become of the Torah?** He retorted: **Behold, it is wrapped and placed in the corner. Anyone who wishes to study can come and study.** We have no need for the Sages.

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: מייד נזרקת בו מינות, דהנה ליה למימר: תינח תורה שבכתב, תורה שבעל פה מאי? מייד: ותוצץ הרעה על ידי אלעזר בן פועינה, ויהרגו כל חכמי ישראל, והיה העולם משתומם, עד שבא שמעון בן שטח והחזיר את התורה ליושנה:

The Gemara interjects: **Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak says: Immediately, heresy was injected into Yannai, as he should have said** to Elazar ben Po'ira: This **works out well** with regard to **the Written Torah**, as it can be studied by all on their own, but **what** will become of **the Oral Torah?** The Oral Torah is transmitted only by the Sages. The *baraita* continues: **Immediately, the evil** arose and **caught fire through Elazar ben Po'ira, and all the Sages of the Jewish people were killed. And the world was desolate of Torah until Shimon ben Shatah came and restored the Torah to its former glory.** This completes the *baraita*.

III. Rabbinic texts of Hanukkah: [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b](#) (at 16:44 min.)

מאי חנוכה? דתני רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמנא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שפשיננסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל. וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פד אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד. נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאוים ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

The Gemara asks: **What is Hanukkah**, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: **The Sages taught in Megillat Ta'anit: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them.** What is the reason? **When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary** by touching them. **And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest**, undisturbed by the Greeks. **And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the Sages**

instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings.

IV. Miluim: The dedication of the Temple (at 19:59 min.)

5. Moses and Aaron dedicate the Mishkan: Vayikra 9:1, 23-24

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי קָרָא מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו וּלְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ... וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־אֱלֹהֵי מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד־ה' אֶל־כָּל־הָעָם: וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת־הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־הַחֲלָבִים וַיֵּרָא כָּל־הָעָם וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם:

On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel. ... Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces.

6. King Solomon dedicates the First Temple: [1 Kings 8:64-66](#)

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא קִדֵּשׁ הַמָּקוֹד אֶת־תְּנוּךְ הַחֲצַר אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי בֵית־ה' כִּי־עָשָׂה שָׁם אֶת־הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־הַמִּנְחָה וְאֶת חֲלָבֵי הַשְּׁלָמִים כִּי־מִזְבֵּחַ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי ה' קָטָן מִהַכִּיל אֶת־הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־הַמִּנְחָה וְאֶת חֲלָבֵי הַשְּׁלָמִים: וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁלֵמָה בָּעֵת־הַהִיא אֶת־הַחֹג וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמּוֹ קָהָל גָּדוֹל מִלְּבֹא חֲמַת | עַד־נַחַל מִצְרַיִם לִפְנֵי ה' אֶ-לֵהִינוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְשִׁבְעַת יָמִים אַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם: בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שָׁלַח אֶת־הָעָם וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹד וַיִּלְכוּ לְאַהֲלֵיהֶם שְׂמֵחִים וְטוֹבֵי לֵב עַל כָּל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְדָוִד עַבְדּוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ:

That day the king consecrated the center of the court that was in front of the House of the LORD. For it was there that he presented the burnt offerings, the meal offerings, and the fat parts of the offerings of well-being, because the bronze altar that was before the LORD was too small to hold the burnt offerings, the meal offerings, and the fat parts of the offerings of well-being.

V. Festival of Lights (at 21:09)

7. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XII, Chapter Six

And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.

8. II Maccabees 1:10-36

We are now reminding you to celebrate the feast of Sukkot in the month of Chislev. **10** Dated in the year one hundred and forty-eight...**18** We shall be celebrating the purification of the temple on the twenty-fifth day of the month Chislev, so we thought it right to inform you, that you too may celebrate the feast of Sukkot and of the fire that appeared when Nehemiah, after he built the Temple and the altar, offered 4 sacrifices. **19** When our fathers were exiled to Persia, devout priests of the time took some of the fire from the altar and hid it secretly in the hollow of a dry cistern, making sure that the place would be unknown to anyone. **20** Many years later, when it so pleased God, Nehemiah, commissioned by the king of Persia, sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to look for it. **21** When they informed us that they could not find any fire, but only muddy water, he ordered them to scoop some out and bring it. After the material for the sacrifices had been prepared, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle with the water the wood and what lay on it. **22** When this was done and in time the sun, which had been clouded over, began to shine, a great fire blazed up, so that everyone marveled. **23** While the sacrifice was being burned, the priests recited a prayer, and all present joined in with them, Jonathan leading and the rest responding with Nehemiah. ...**30** Then the priests began to sing hymns. **31** After the sacrifice was burned, Nehemiah ordered the rest of the liquid to be poured upon large stones. **32** As soon as this was done, a flame blazed up, but its light was lost in the brilliance cast from a light on the altar...**36** Nehemiah and his companions called the liquid “tihur”, meaning purification, but most people named it naphtha.

VI. The Hammer (at 23:29 min.)

9. [Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b](#), con't.

תנן הָתָם : גַּח הַיּוֹצֵא מִתַּחַת הַפִּטְיִשׁ וְיֹצֵא וְהִזִּיק — חַיִּיב. גָּמַל שֶׁטָּעוּן פִּשְׁתָּן וְהוּא עוֹבֵר בְּרִשׁוֹת הָרִבִּים וְנִכְנְסָה פִּשְׁתָּנוּ לְתוֹךְ הַחֲנוּיִת וְדָלְקָה בְּגֵרוֹ שֶׁל חֲנֻנִי וְהִדְלִיק אֶת הַבֵּיָרָה — בַּעַל הַגָּמַל חַיִּיב. הַנִּיחַ חֲנֻנִי אֶת גֵּרוֹ מִבְּחוּץ — חֲנֻנִי חַיִּיב.

We learned there in a mishna with regard to damages: In the case of **a spark that emerges from under a hammer, and went out** of the artisan's workshop, **and caused damage**, the one who struck the hammer is **liable**. Similarly, in the case of **a camel that is laden with flax and it passed through the public domain, and its flax entered into a store, and caught fire from the storekeeper's lamp, and set fire to the building, the camel owner is liable**. Since his flax entered into another's domain, which he had no permission to enter, all the damages were caused due to his negligence. However, if the **storekeeper placed his lamp outside** the store and it set fire to the flax, **the storekeeper is liable**, as he placed the lamp outside his domain where he had no right to place it.

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר : בְּגֵר חֲנוּכָּה — פְּטוּר. אָמַר רַבִּינָא מְשׁוּם דְרַבָּה : זֵאת אוֹמְרַת גַּר חֲנוּכָּה מִצְנָה לְהַנִּיחָה בְּתוֹךְ עֵשְׂרָה. דָּאִי סָלְקָא דְעֵתְדָא לְמַעְלָה מֵעֵשְׂרָה, לִימָא לִיה : הִזָּה לָךְ לְהַנִּיחַ לְמַעְלָה מִגָּמַל וְרוֹכְבוֹ! וְדִילְמָא, אִי מִיטְרָחָא לִיה טוּבָא אֲתִי לְאִימְנוּעֵי מִמְצָוָה.

Rabbi Yehuda says: If the flax was set on fire **by the storekeeper's Hanukkah lamp** that he placed outside the entrance to his store, **he is not liable**, as in that case, it is permitted for the storekeeper to place his lamp outside. **Ravina said in the name of Rabba:** **That is to say** that it is a **mitzva to place the Hanukkah lamp within ten** handbreadths of the ground. **As if it should enter your mind** to say that he may place it **above ten handbreadths**, why is the storekeeper exempt? **Let** the camel owner **say to** the storekeeper: **You should have placed** the lamp **above** the height of **a camel and its rider**, and then no damage would have been caused. By failing to do so, the storekeeper caused the damage, and the camel owner should not be liable. The Gemara rejects this: **And perhaps** one is also permitted to place the Hanukkah lamp above ten handbreadths, and the reason Rabbi Yehuda exempted the storekeeper was due to concern for the observance of the mitzva of kindling Hanukkah lights. He held that **if you burden one excessively, he will come to refrain from** performing the **mitzva** of kindling Hanukkah lights. Since the storekeeper placed the Hanukkah lamp outside at the behest of the Sages, the storekeeper should not be required to take extra precautions.

10. [Mishnah Bava Kamma 6:6](#)

גַּךְ שֶׁיֵצֵא מִתַּחַת הַפְּטִישׁ וְהִזִּיק, חַיֵּב. גָּמַל שֶׁהִיָּה טָעוּן פְּשָׁתוֹ וְעָבַר בְּרְשׁוֹת הָרַבִּים, וְנִכְנָס פְּשָׁתוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַחֲנוּת, וְדָלְקוֹ בְּגֵרוֹ שֶׁל חֲנוּנִי וְהִדְלִיק אֶת הַבֵּירָה, בַּעַל הַגָּמַל חַיֵּב. הַנֵּיחַ חֲנוּנִי גֵרוֹ מִבְּחוּץ, הַחֲנוּנִי חַיֵּב. רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, בְּגֵר חֲנֻכָּה פְּטוּר :

In the case of a **spark that emerged from under the hammer** of a blacksmith and started a fire, **causing damage**, the blacksmith is **liable** for the damage caused. In the case of a **camel that was laden with flax and was passing through the public domain, and its flax extended into a store and the flax caught fire from a lamp** in the store **belonging to the storekeeper, and** as a result of the burning flax the camel **set fire to the building** together with all its contents, **the owner of the camel is liable**. But if **the storekeeper placed his lamp outside**, thereby causing the flax on the camel to catch fire, and consequently the building was set on fire, **the storekeeper is liable**. **Rabbi Yehuda says:** In a case where the lamp placed outside was a **Hanukkah lamp**, the storekeeper is **exempt**, since it is a mitzva for a Hanukkah lamp to be placed outside.

VII. The Hasmoneans: Negative or Positive? (at 27:36 min.)

11. [Talmud Bavli Sotah 49b](#)

וְשָׂלָא יִלְמַד אֶת בְּנוֹ יוּוֹנִית. תָּנּוּ רַבָּנָן : כְּשֶׁצָּרוּ מַלְכֵי בֵּית חַשְׁמוֹנָאִי זָה עַל זָה, הָיָה הוֹרְקָנוֹס מִבְּחוּץ, וְאַרִיסְטוֹבְלוֹס מִבְּפְּנִים. בְּכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹם הָיוּ מְשַׁלְּשְׁלִין דִּינָרִים בְּקוֹפָה, וּמַעְלִין לָהֶן תְּמִידִים.

The mishna taught that during the war of Titus the Sages decreed **that a person should not teach his son Greek**. **The Sages taught** that this decree came about as a result of the following incident: **When the kings of the Hasmonean monarchy besieged each other** in their civil war, **Hyrcanus was outside of** Jerusalem, besieging it, **and Aristobulus was inside**. **On each and every day they would lower dinars in a box** from inside the city, **and** those on the outside **would send up** animals for them to bring the **daily offerings** in the Temple.

הָיָה שָׁם זָקוּן אֶחָד שֶׁהִיָּה מִכִּיר בְּחֻכְמַת יוּוֹנִית, לָעוֹ לָהֶם בְּחֻכְמַת יוּוֹנִית, אָמַר לָהֶן : כָּל זָמַן שֶׁעוֹסְקִים בַּעֲבוּדָה — אֵין נִמְסְרִין בְּיַדְכֶם. לְמַחַר שֶׁלְּשָׁלוּ לָהֶם דִּינָרִים בְּקוֹפָה וְהָעִלוּ לָהֶם חֲזִיר. כִּינּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְחֻצֵי חוֹמָה, נֶעֶץ צַפְרָנְיוֹ, נִדְעָעָה אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פְּרָסָה.

A certain Elder was there, in Jerusalem, who was familiar with Greek wisdom. He communicated to those on the outside by means of Greek wisdom, using words understood only by those proficient in Greek wisdom. He said to them: As long as they are engaged in the Temple service, they will not be delivered into your hands. Upon hearing this, on the following day, when they lowered dinars in a box, they sent up a pig to them. Once the pig reached halfway up the wall, it inserted its hooves into the wall and Eretz Yisrael shuddered four hundred parasangs.

אותה שעה אמרו: ארור אדם שיגדל חזירים, וארור אדם שילמד לבנו חכמת יונית.

When the Sages saw this, they said at that time: Cursed is the person who raises pigs, and cursed is the person who teaches his son Greek wisdom.

VIII. The Commandment of Lighting: [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 23a](#) (at 34:10)

מאי מברך? — מברך: "אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה". והיכן צונו? רב אוקא אמר: מ"לא תסור". רב נחמיה אמר: "שאל אביך ויגדך וקניך ויאמרו לך".

And what blessing does one recite? He recites: Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us to light the Hanukkah light. The Gemara asks: And where did He command us? The mitzva of Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah, so how is it possible to say that it was commanded to us by God? The Gemara answers that Rav Avya said: The obligation to recite this blessing is derived from the verse: "You shall not turn aside from the sentence which they shall declare unto you, to the right, nor to the left" (Deuteronomy 17:11). From this verse, the mitzva incumbent upon all of Israel to heed the statements and decrees of the Sages is derived. Therefore, one who fulfills their directives fulfills a divine commandment. Rav Nehemya said that the mitzva to heed the voice of the Elders of Israel is derived from the verse: "Ask your father, and he will declare unto you, your Elders, and they will tell you" (Deuteronomy 32:7).