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בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

CHANUKAH

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INTRODUCTION

Chanukah is the most pervasive Jewish holiday in North America.

The observances of other holy days and festivals may be better defined, their sacred message may be more apparent, their historical significance may be more identifiable, but Chanukah is better known. And it may very well be that it is so well known because it is “less than” in all the standard religious categories.

The Talmud famously asks the question, “What is Chanukah?” And while the sages arrived at an answer that seems to have at least provisionally addressed their concerns (see below), the fact remains that in some sense we are still asking their question: What exactly is Chanukah?

There are two places to begin the answers: inside the Jewish tradition, and outside the Jewish tradition. The “official” origin of Chanukah is described in *Maccabees*, one of the many books known by the sages who canonized the Bible, but not selected for inclusion among the thirty-nine books.¹ The beginning of the story is familiar. Mattathias, a *Kohen*, left Jerusalem after the Temple was desecrated by the occupying Greco-Assyrian Seleucids. He settled in the town of Modin, where he grew increasingly alarmed at the willingness of many Jews to acculturate and adopt the pagan practices of Hellenistic culture. His outrage reached its peak in 167 BCE when an altar was erected in Modin and Mattathias and his sons were approached by the king’s officer to make the first offering. When he refused, another Jew stepped up to do so, and in a rage Mattathias killed both him and the officer and tore down the altar. Exhorting the crowd to be loyal to God’s covenant, Mattathias and his sons, the Hasmonean clan, took to the hills to mount a guerilla revolution against the Seleucids.

The war waged by the Hasmoneans under the command of one of the brothers, Judah (known as “the Maccabee”), was bloody and lasted well beyond the establishment of an annual holiday. On the 25th of Kislev, the anniversary of Mattathias’ call to arms, the restoration of the desecrated Temple was completed and an eight-day dedication festival was declared. The war continued throughout the region, but the Hasmoneans were the clear victors; they became the rulers of Jewish nation and the priests of the Holy Temple. The winter holiday established on the anniversary of the uprising thus celebrated their legacy and their rule. But it did not take long for the power they amassed to corrupt them and for their legacy to deteriorate. Indeed, the last ruler to claim any connection to the Hasmoneans was, ironically, the assimilated and criminal Herod. So, it is no surprise the Rabbis of the Talmud were troubled by a holiday that perpetuated the heroics of the Hasmoneans.

The Talmudic debate over “What is Chanukah?” may, therefore, have arisen as much out of frustration as anything else. The sages’ solution to the dilemma of popular support for a festival commemorating an event which they found anything but memorable was to invoke the now-familiar story of the single cruse of ritually pure oil, sufficient to light the Temple menorah for just one day, which instead lasted eight days, enough time to allow more oil to be produced. This event, which the Rabbis declared to be a miracle symbolizing God’s presence in the restored Temple, was provided as an alternative focus for the celebration. It replaced the military success and pious devotion of the Hasmoneans, as the reason behind the festival in the Talmudic retelling.

While the miracle of the oil formed the backdrop and justification for the sages’ engagement with the Chanukah story, the question that occupied the bulk of the Talmudic discussion had to do with the ritual that had emerged as the focal point of the festival’s commemoration. The debate between the followers of Hillel and the followers of Shammai centered on the nine-branched candelabrum, which was identified as the vehicle through which to pursue “*pirsumei nisa*” (“publicizing the miracle”), now understood to be the purpose of Chanukah.

The scholars in Shammai’s school declared that eight lamps were to be kindled (by the ninth) on the first day of the festival and decreased by one on each subsequent night. Their rationale was very pragmatic: the lights were to recall the number of days remaining in the holiday, or perhaps the number of sacrifices to be offered. By inference, the notion is that just as the oil diminished each day, so does the light in the Chanukah lamps.

¹ This collection, known as the Apocrypha, was preserved by the Roman Catholic Church among other places.



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The scholars in Hillel's school declared that one lamp was to be kindled on the first night of the festival and increased by one on each subsequent night, until the ninth candle had put the other eight to flame on the last night. Their rationale was less literal and distinctly theological: the remarkable nature of the miracle increased with each passing day. "We increase in holiness, we do not diminish," they argued.

The Talmud spends time discussing who is obligated to light a *chanukkiyah* (menorah), the householder or every person in the household. It considers the placement of the lights so that they can be seen from the street. It even struggles with the liability of a shopkeeper if the lights of his Chanukah observance are placed too high or too low and then knocked over by a customer. This particular observance must have been enormously popular to have been discussed in such detail.

We all know that Hillel's ruling has become universally accepted among Jewish communities. As sometimes happens, values followed practice. No one – including the most practically-minded among us – accepts the logical and matter-of-fact practice that Shammai suggests. Aside from the fact that the increasing number of lights adds a momentum of happiness to the holiday, the notion that God's presence was tangible in that historic moment became integral to the festival's interpretation as the momentum of Jewish population shifted and Chanukah came to be observed by more people in the Diaspora than in proximity to the ruins of the rededicated Temple.

While the popular observance focused on the oil, the daily prayers of the Jews reflected a different miracle. At the same time as the Talmud discussed the lights of Chanukah, the author of the meditation that became part of our liturgy located God not inside the Temple, but rather outside. The miracles of the season included blessings, redemptions, heroics and military victories, all of which are attributed to God. A long paragraph summarizing the Hasmonean revolt depicts God as the central figure in the narrative, not just the reason for the rebels' devotion.

In a somewhat back-handed compliment to the remnants of the Hasmoneans, the prayer notes that God delivered "the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the scoffers into the hands of those who were occupied with Torah." Oppressed by the Romans and their puppet Jewish government (and then by the Romans alone) or exiled from any semblance of home and self-determination, the revised telling of the story of Chanukah was able to depict history as God's palate where, at a time of God's choosing, the reversal of fortunes against expectations might be repeated. The recounting of the Maccabean revolt in conjunction with the lighting of the *chanukkiyah* and the recitation of "*al hanissim*" make a the festival a back-story to God's role in the unfolding of human events.

The Chanukah liturgy did not find its way into people's hands until the printing press made *siddurim* widely available. Its seemingly innocuous description of events in days gone by was a means of offering hope and reassurance that God would facilitate a return to the Land and a rebuilding of the Temple when people gathered in the synagogues that replaced Temple sacrifices after the destruction in 70 CE. In particular, one small element of the liturgy which appears in the *siddur* becomes central to the evolution of Chanukah in the Middle Ages, the line crediting God with "*nakamta et nikmatam*" ("You visited revenge upon those against whom they sought revenge"). This theme comes to be reflected, for example, in the hymn *Ma'oz Tzur* which is sung during the holiday.

The majority of the text of *Ma'oz Tzur* was penned by the medieval poet Mordecai (no relation to the Biblical character), who "signed" his poem in an acrostic formed of the first letters of the first five verses.² The first verse of *Ma'oz Tzur*, the most familiar, seems to resonate with the liturgy of previous ages. God is praised for redemptive acts and called upon to restore the Temple, where we will present offerings and sing songs of dedication. Verses two through five, however, recount the misery inflicted on the Jews by Pharaoh in Egypt, Zerubbavel in Babylonia, Haman in Persia and the Greco-Syrians during Maccabean times. God's partnership and miracles on our behalf produced the split sea, the return from exile, the defeat of Haman and, eventually the restoration of the Temple.

² The sixth and last verse was likely not written by Mordecai, but is an insight into the concerns of Jews in Christian Europe.



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The sixth verse, the lines of which begin with words that form the acrostic “*chazak*” (strong!), call upon God to loose a mighty arm against Christian Crusaders who have made life miserable for the Jews of Europe. The penultimate verse reads “repel the Red One, in the shadow of the cross.” Some scholars consider this reference to imply Esau, who often stands in for Rome in rabbinic literature (and Rome, of course, comes to mean the Roman Catholic Church). Other scholars point a much more focused suspicion at Frederick the Red (Barbarossa), a particularly vicious Crusader King who died en route to the Holy Land. He was replaced by Richard the Lion-Hearted, who was also a red-head.

While it is unlikely that *Ma’oz Tzur* was intended as a call to arms to the Jews of medieval Europe, it nevertheless cast contemporary Jewry in the role of the oppressed Jews of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia and Hellenistic times. By attributing to God the willingness to wreak vengeance on those who oppressed us then, the poem – and especially its final stanza – kindles within a thirst for revenge against our enemies that increases as surely as the lights on the *chanukkiyah*.

The message of *Ma’oz Tzur* was changed when it was translated into English in the late 19th century by Gustav Gottheil and Marcus Jastrow (Jastrow wrote a dictionary of Talmudic Aramaic, so he certainly knew the back-story of the hymn). In this version, the Jews are “children of the martyr race” and our “Rock of ages” intervenes for us “when our own strength failed us.” In English, the song becomes a celebration of freedom’s triumph over tyrants, a notion that persists to this very day.

It is ironic that Chanukah, which began with an internal uprising provoked by the Hasmoneans’ intolerance for assimilating Jews, got transformed in post-Civil War America into a holiday celebrating religious tolerance. Indeed, a century later, Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul and Mary) wrote the anthem “Light One Candle” that suggests the candles inspire “the sacrifice justice and freedom demand” and the knowledge to know “when the peacemaker’s time is at hand.” Chanukah has become the festival of religious freedom.

In North America, where Christianity is the dominant religion, winter brings the Christmas season, one of the few aspects of Christian religion that bursts out of the walls of the churches and into the streets. Competing impulses have driven Jewish attention in this season to Chanukah. In many ways the elevation of this minor festival to major status seems to be the Jewish answer to Christmas. On the other hand, rabbis and other Jewish educators have insisted that the messages of Chanukah have nothing to do with Christmas – except, perhaps, as merchants and retailers have encouraged gift-giving for both holidays.

But a look at the commonalities of Christmas and Chanukah might help us understand what lies beneath both holidays. Each takes place on the 25th of the month, and at the darkest time of the year each celebrates the return of light to the world. Each emphasizes the place of God in human history. Each is (originally) an eight-day festival (Christmas begins with the birth of Jesus and concludes with the Feast of the Circumcision on January 1). And there is even some question about the accuracy of the dates of both festivals. In fact, such winter festivals were quite common in the ancient world. The Romans called their festival Saturnalia, and this rite was well-known to the rabbis who debated the meaning of Chanukah in the Talmud. In fact the rabbis described “*Saturna*” and “*Kalenda*,” the festivals on either side of the winter solstice, as having originated with Adam, who feared the decreasing amount of daylight and started lighting bonfires in hopes of returning light to the sky.³

It seems clear that for as long as there has been human society there has been a desire to bring light into the world at its darkest moments, in both literal and figurative senses. When the abbreviated hours of daylight provoke a sense of fear and isolation, people seek a reaffirmation of the hopes and dreams that can be seen more clearly in the sunshine. They look for a rededication to well-known values and practices, and a new light that will give new clarity to the future. And what they see in that new light is often what they value most at the time, whether it is autonomy, God’s presence, revenge against persecutors or human rights.

³ Note, the regulations for lighting a *chanukkiyah* include arranging the candles so that they each look separate and not in a formation that resembles a bonfire!



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Chanukah is the most pervasive Jewish holiday in North America because, in many ways, it is the most flexible. It speaks to various experiences in our past and to the needs of Jewish community in contemporary times. The transformation of this festival is far from complete. What is the next message of Chanukah?



CHANUKAH – TEXT 1

MACCABEES 1:43-2:28 AND 2:40-48

And King Antiochus wrote to all his kingdom, that all the people should be one: and every one should leave his own law... And many of Israel consented to his service, and they sacrificed to idols, and profaned the Sabbath. And the king sent letters by the hands of messengers to Jerusalem, and to all the cities of Judah: that they should follow the law of the nations of the earth; and should forbid holocausts and sacrifices, and atonements to be made in the temple of God... And he commanded altars to be built, and temples, and idols, and swine's flesh to be immolated, and unclean beasts. ... And that whosoever would not do according to the word of King Antiochus should be put to death... And he appointed rulers over the people that should force them to do these things ... and they drove away the people of Israel into lurking holes, and into the secret places of fugitives. On the fifteenth day of the month Casleu, in the hundred and forty-fifth year, King Antiochus set up the abominable idol of desolation upon the altar of God ... and they burnt incense, and sacrificed at the doors of the houses, and in the streets. ... And whosoever observed the law of the Lord, they put to death, according to the edict of the king. ... And many of the people of Israel determined with themselves, that they would not eat unclean things: and they chose rather to die than to be defiled with unclean meats. And they would not break the holy law of God, and they were put to death: And there was very great wrath upon the people.

... In those days arose Mattathias the son of John, the son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, from Jerusalem, and he abode in the mountain of Modin. And he had five sons: John who was surnamed Gaddis: And Simon, who was surnamed Thasi: And Judahs, who was called Machabeus: And Eleazar, who was surnamed Abaron: and Jonathan, who was surnamed Apphus. These saw the evils that were done in the people of Judah, and in Jerusalem. And Mattathias said: Woe is me, wherefore was I born to see the ruin of my people, and the ruin of the holy city, and to dwell there, when it is given into the hands of the enemies? ... To what end then should we live any longer? And Mattathias and his sons rent their garments, and they covered themselves with haircloth, and made great lamentation. And they that were sent from King Antiochus came thither, to compel them ... but Mattathias and his sons stood firm. And they that were sent from Antiochus, said to Mattathias: Thou art a ruler, and an honorable, and great man in this city, and adorned with sons, and brethren. Therefore come thou first, and obey the king's commandment ... and thou, and thy sons, shall be in the number of the king's friends, and enriched with gold, and silver, and many presents. ... Then Mattathias answered: I and my sons, and my brethren will obey the law of our fathers. God be merciful unto us: it is not profitable for us to forsake the law, and the justices of God: We will not hearken to the words of King Antiochus, neither will we sacrifice, and transgress the commandments of our law, to go another way. Now as he left off speaking these words, there came a certain Jew in the sight of all to sacrifice to the idols upon the altar in the city of Modin, according to the king's commandment. And Mattathias saw and was grieved ... and running upon him he slew him upon the altar: Moreover the man whom King Antiochus had sent, who compelled them to sacrifice, he slew at the same time, and pulled down the altar.... And Mattathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying:

Every one that hath zeal for the law, and maintaineth the testament, let him follow me. So he, and his sons fled into the mountains, and left all that they had in the city. ... And every man said to his neighbor: If we shall all do as our brethren have done, and not fight against the heathens for our lives, and our justifications: they will now quickly root us out of the earth. ... Then was assembled to them the congregation of the Assideans, the stoutest of Israel, every one that had a good will for the law. And all they that fled from the evils, joined themselves to them, and were a support to them. And they gathered an army, and slew the sinners in their wrath, and the wicked men in their indignation ... and they threw down the altars. and they circumcised all the children that were uncircumcised ... and they recovered the law out of the hands of the nations, and out of the hands of the kings: and they yielded not the horn to the sinner.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Mattathias' principled stand becomes an act of violence. Is it justified or impulsive?**
- **In defending themselves, the Hasmoneans commit some of the very acts they refused to do for the king. What justifies their "sinfulness?"**
- **In the Chanukkah story roving bands of religious zealots enforced ritual observance on others. How can we embrace those actions today?**



CHANUKAH – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף כא ע"ב

תנו רבנן מצות חנוכה גר איש וביתו והמהדרין גר לכל אחד ואחד. והמהדרין מן המהדרין בית שמאי אומרים יום ראשון מדליק שמנה מפאן ואילך פוחת והולך, ובית הלל אומרים יום ראשון מדליק אחת מפאן ואילך מוסיף והולך. אמר עולא פליגי בה תרי אמוראי במערבא רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר זבידא. חד אמר טעמא דבית שמאי כנגד ימים הנכנסין, וטעמא דבית הלל כנגד ימים היוצאין. וחד אמר טעמא דבית שמאי כנגד פרי הקדש, וטעמא דבית הלל דמעלין בקודש. ואין מורידין. אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן, שני זקנים היו בצידן אחד עשה כבית שמאי ואחד עשה כדברי בית הלל. זה נותן טעם לדבריו כנגד פרי הקדש וזה נותן טעם לדבריו דמעלין בקודש, ואין מורידין.

SHABBAT 21B

The rabbis taught in a beraita: The defining commandment of Chanukkah is the kindling of lights by each man and his household and those who are more vigilant kindle lights for each member of the household. Beit Shammai says that those who are the most vigilant kindle eight lights on the first day and from there kindle one fewer light on each successive day, while Beit Hillel says that they kindle a single light on the first day and add a light each day henceforth. Ulla says a disagreement has arisen between two Amoraim in the West (Eretz Yisrael), R. Yose bar Avin and R. Yose bar Zevida, about this question. One says that Beit Shammai's rationale is that the number of lights should correspond to the number of days remaining while Beit Hillel's rationale is to have the lights correspond to the number of days which have elapsed. The other says that Beit Shammai's logic follows the bulls that were sacrificed (in decreasing numbers) at Sukkot, while Beit Hillel's reasoning is based on the premise that in matters of holiness we increase rather than decrease.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Given that the essential obligation is to kindle a single light each night, why did the practice of kindling multiple lights become standard?
- Is there really a substantive difference between the positions of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai according to the first explanation?
- The second explanation pits a very practical notion (the actual number of sacrifices offered in imitation of the Sukkot ritual) against a philosophical idea (look for a way to increase rather than decrease holiness). The idea prevails – and the connection to Sukkot is all but lost. Can you argue for the other side?
- The eight days necessary to find a new cruse of oil may have had to do with the period of ritual purification for the priests, who had been bloodied in war. In this context, what does the miracle of the oil represent?



מעוז צור

מעוז צור ישועתי, לך נאה לשבח
 תכון בית תפילתי, ושם תודה נזבח.
 לעת תכין מטבח מצר המנבח.
 אז אגמור בפשיר מזמור חגפת המזבח.

רעות שבועה נפשי, בנגון כחי פלה
 חיי מררו בקשי, בשעבוד מלכות עגלה
 ובידו הגדולה הוציא את הסגלה
 חיל פרעה וכל זרעו ירדו כאבן במצולה.

דביר קדשו הביאני, וגם שם לא שקטתי
 ובא נוגש והגלני, פי זרים עבדתי
 ויין רעל מסכתי, כמעט שעברתי
 קץ בקל זרבבל, לקץ שבועים נושעתי.

פרות קומת ברוש בקש, אגגי בן המדתא
 ונהיתה לו לפח ולמוקש, וגאנתו נשפתה
 ראש ימיני נשאת, ואויב שמו מחית
 רב בניו וקנניו על העץ תלית.

יננים נקבצו עלי, אזי בימי השמנים
 ופרצו חומות מגדלי, וטמאו כל השמנים
 ומנותר קנקנים נעשה נס לשושנים
 בני בינה ימי שמונה קבעו שיר ורננים

חשוף זרוע קדשך וקרב קץ הישועה
 נקום נקמת עבדיך מאמה הרשעה
 פי ארקה השעה ואין קץ לימי הרעה
 דחה אדמון בצל צלמון הקם לנו רועים שבועה



CHANUKAH – TEXT 3

MA'OZ TZUR

O mighty stronghold of my salvation, to praise You is a delight.
Restore my House of Prayer and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.
When You have prepared the slaughter for the barking foe,
Then I shall complete with a song of hymn the dedication of the Altar.

My soul had been sated with troubles, my strength has been consumed with grief.
They had embittered my life with hardship, with the calf-like kingdom's bondage.
But with His great power He brought forth the treasured ones,
Pharaoh's army and all his offspring went down like a stone into the deep.

To the holy abode of His word He brought me. But there, too, I had no rest,
And an oppressor came and exiled me. For I had served aliens,
And had drunk benumbing wine. Scarcely had I departed
At Babylon's end Zerubabel came. At the end of seventy years I was saved.

To sever the towering cypress sought the Agagite, son of Hammedatha [Haman],
But it became [a snare and] a stumbling block to him and his arrogance was stilled.
The head of the Benjaminite You lifted and the enemy, his name You obliterated.
His numerous progeny – his possessions – on the gallows You hanged.

Greeks gathered against me then in Hasmonean days.
They breached the walls of my towers and they defiled all the oils;
And from the one remnant of the flasks a miracle was wrought for the roses.
Men of insight – eight days established for song and jubilation.

Bare Your holy arm and hasten the End for salvation –
Avenge the vengeance of Your servants' blood from the wicked nation.
For the triumph is too long delayed for us, and there is no end to days of evil,
Repel the Red One in the nethermost shadow and establish for us the seven shepherds.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What are the similarities and differences among the depictions of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia and Hellenistic Palestine?
- Does the sixth verse about Crusader Europe fit with the previous five? Why or why not?
- What message does the poet Mordecai wish to deliver when the original poem ends with verse five?
- How does Mordecai's message change with the later addition of the sixth verse?
- What thoughts or feelings do you think the author of the sixth verse hoped to inspire among his contemporaries?



CHANUKAH – TEXT 4

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה דף ח ע"א

תנו רבנן לפי שראתה אדם הראשון יום שמתמעט והולך, אמר אוי לי שפא בשביל שפסקתי עולם חשוך
בעדי וחוזר לתוהו ובוהו. וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים עמד וישב שמונה ימים בתענית
[ובתפלה]. כיון שראתה תקופת טבת וראתה יום שמאריך והולך אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא הלקח ועשה
שמונה ימים טובים לשנה האחרת עשאן לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים הוא קבעם לשם שמים והם קבעום
לשם עבודת כוכבים.

AVODAH ZARA 8A

The rabbis taught in a beraita: When the first man saw the diminution of the daylength (during the winter months) he said, “Woe is me, lest because of my misdeeds the world is becoming dark for me and will return to a state of null and voidness. And this is the punishment that will befall me from the heavens.” In the end he engaged in eight days of fasting (and prayer). He then saw the period of the solstice (*Teves*) and following that saw that the days began to grow longer. He said, “Ah, this is the natural order of the world!” and he established it as a matter of practice that these eight days (surrounding the solstice) were festival days, and he celebrated these days for the sake of Heaven. But those that followed established them for the sake of idol (star) worship.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Kalenda and Saturna were known to the rabbis. Could it be that they considered them precursors of Chanukah?
- Adam’s motives for initiating the festivals seem to be pure. Why does he continue the observance?
- The Romans allowed the festivals to devolve into paganism. What is the lesson for us?
- How can we take the profane practices of popular culture and make them holy?



CHANUKAH – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

“ROCK OF AGES” (AN INTERPRETIVE TRANSLATION BY JASTROW AND GOTTHEIL)

a) Rock of Ages let our song
Praise thy saving power;
Thou amidst the raging foes;
Wast our sheltering tower.

b) Furious they assailed us,
But Thine arm availed us,
And Thy word broke their sword,
When our own strength failed us.

c) Children of the martyr race,
Whether free or fettered,
Wake the echoes of the songs,
Where ye may be scattered.

d) Yours the message cheering,
That the time is nearing,
Which will see all men free,
And tyrants disappearing.

e) Kindling new the holy lamps,
Priests approved in suffering.
Purified the nation's shrine,
Brought to God their offering.

f) And His courts surrounding,
Hear in joy abounding,
Happy throngs, singing songs,
With a mighty sounding.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Jastrow and Gottheil were immigrants to America just after the Civil War. How are those experiences reflected in their interpretation of the hymn?
- The title of choice, “Rock of Ages,” is the title of an earlier and quite famous Christian hymn. It begins “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee,” and continues to extol a relationship with Jesus. How does the Jewish hymn “respond” to Christian imagery?
- Each of the three verses emphasizes the suffering of the Jews, yet each offers a message of redemption and celebration. What are the authors suggesting about the Jewish experience?
- What is the image of ultimate victory in this version of the hymn? How does it compare to the images in the Hebrew original (see Text 3)?
- The last verse of this version recalls the end of the text above from Shabbat 21b (Text 2). How well does this hymn match with the rest of the Talmud’s description?





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