

## **Chanukah, Whose Life Is It Anyway?**

**By Rabbi Mat Hoffman**

When I was first exploring Judaism, I found Rabbinic authority one of the most difficult concepts to understand. After all, I reasoned, G-d gave His law to us all. Since I was a pretty bright fellow, couldn't I understand and interpret it better, much better, than some old, bearded guy poring over a bunch of musty books with no contact with reality? Whose life was it anyway? I was going to make the decisions for myself!

I was hardly alone in these views. Year after year I heard them expounded by lots of people who should have recognized that rabbis are, after all, trained to interpret Jewish law. They spend many more years in study, and constant ongoing study at that, than doctors or lawyers do. Yet, if we have a medical issue, we try to find the best trained and most experienced doctor. If we have a legal problem, we search for the best lawyer, one who has seen this issue time after time. (I suppose I should thank G-d for this, since I earn my living as a very experienced lawyer.) But rabbis? What do rabbis know? When it comes to Judaism everyone is an expert!

Perhaps that is why we need Chanukah, which is often referred to as the Yom Tov Shel Torah Sheh'baal Peh, the Holiday of the Oral Law. It is the quintessential Rabbinic holiday, particularly because it is not mentioned in a single book of the written Torah.

We all know, or think we know, why we celebrate Chanukah: the oil that was supposed to burn for one day burned for eight days, giving the Jews time to make new, pure oil to burn in the Temple. Actually, it was pretty miraculous that the Jews found pure oil at all, since there was no notion that the High Priest ever sealed and stamped any jug for purity other than the one they found. But what was the big deal about this miracle? In fact, the Rabbis tell us in Pirke Avot [Ethics of the Fathers] 5:5 that there were ten ongoing miracles in the Temple. (My favorite one -- that no Jew ever complained to another about a lack of room in Jerusalem. Can you imagine Jews not complaining? Now, that is a miracle!) So who cares about this oil? Obviously, we do. But why? The first thing we need to know is that, under the circumstances, the Jews were not required to burn pure oil. For a variety of complicated legal reasons, the requirement was inapplicable at that time. Why, then, did they care about burning pure oil? Because the rabbis told them to! Oh boy, I can just hear what the young Mat Hoffman would have said: "Who do they think are? G-d said we don't need pure oil. They know it. We know it. But there they go deciding things for me and my life."

I am sure there were a huge number of Jews just like this at the time. After all, this was the period of the beginning of the redaction of the Oral Law and many Jews questioned the authority of the rabbis. But the rabbis had the perfect defense: G-d. After all, He confirmed the authority of the rabbis through the

miracle of Chanukah. And our celebration of this holiday, a holiday contained only in the Oral Law, confirms our acceptance of Rabbinic authority, because without the rabbis there would not be a holiday at all.

The importance of Chanukah to Rabbinic law is actually upheld by what appears to be its lack of independence in the Talmud. It is interesting to note that only two of our holidays do not have their own Talmudic tractate: Shavuot and Chanukah. I suggest that this is because they have similar functions as holidays. Shavuot commemorates our receiving of the written law on Mount Sinai. In that sense, the Torah and Talmud are all about Shavuot - the acceptance of the law - and, therefore, it does not need its own section. Similarly, Chanukah represents the whole entire oral law; and, thus, it too does not need its own section.

The Oral Law, which is Rabbinic authority, is the foundation stone of Judaism. Through the miracle of the oil of Chanukah, G-d reminded the people that the understanding of the Written and Oral law is in the hands of the rabbis. So the next time we see one of those bearded (or not bearded) experts, we might remember a few things: First, that expert has been studying for quite a few years (or decades). Second, that fellow has seen more people and decided more difficult problems than most great lawyers or doctors ever will. Third, while finding your own rabbi is more an art than a science, it really is necessary. And finally, our rabbis get their authority not just from their brilliance, not just from their experience, but also directly from G-d. (And, to answer the young Matt Hoffman's question, "Whose life is it anyway?" It is not my life, it is G-d's. He gave it, and some day, hopefully after at least 120 years, He will take it away.)

This article is dedicated to Rabbi Avraham Kaufman, one of the earliest rabbis who tried so hard to teach Torah to a stubborn, young Mat Hoffman.