

Hanukkah – the Adult Version

By Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon

*Light one candle for the Maccabee children, give thanks that their light didn't die.
Light one candle for the pain they endured, when their right to exist was denied.
Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice justice and freedom demand,
And light one candle for the wisdom to know when the peacemaker's time is at hand.*
-Light One Candle by Peter Yarrow

Hanukkah is a Festival of Light, Liberty and Tolerance. While it began as a minor post-Biblical holiday celebrating historical events, it has deep spiritual significance, with different themes emphasized over time. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of Judean rebels over the Hellenized Syrians (not Greeks *per se*) in 164 or 165 BCE (same as BC = Before the Common Era). Hanukkah, meaning "dedication," has evolved into a holiday about Jewish independence and cultural tolerance. Yet this Festival of Lights is also rich with political, cultural, and psycho-spiritual messages. As we trace the evolution of the Festival of Lights, let us see how it can enhance everyone's spiritual lives.

"It's all Greek to me"

Let's review some history. Around 333 BCE Alexander "the Great," son of Phillip of Macedonia (modern day Albania, Bulgaria, and Serbia) conquered a weakened Persian Empire with very little bloodshed. Phillip was a big follower of Greek culture, so he hired the philosopher Aristotle to tutor his somewhat spoiled young son. As a result, the young Alexander promoted "Hellenism" – a watered-down version of Greek culture - throughout his new empire. (Not unlike the export of American products and culture today!). His conquest of Persia was more a take-over than a bloody war, and both he and key generals married Persian wives to solidify his power base. Alexander permitted the Judeans and other peoples to live "according to their ancestral laws," and at least in theory, this was put into practice in the early years of his reign.

So Judea was conquered without little or no bloodshed, and the Judeans even appear to have been in favor of Alexander taking over the Persian Empire. He respected the Jews and was fascinated with their culture and writing, and they also respected him. Two legends are preserved in the Talmud, which suggest this positive relationship. The first says that he dismounted from his horse before the High Priest Simon upon arriving at the walls of Jerusalem, and the second was that many sons born in Judea in the first year of his reign were named "Alexander." The second story may actually be true. This is how Alexander or Alexandra became common names!

When Alexander died at age 33 a few years after the conquest, the empire was split between two main generals: Ptolemy, who controlled Egypt and the West, and Seleukus, who controlled Syria and the Eastern portion. The two sides vied back and forth to control Judea, but ultimately the Seleucids got control. The Ptolemies (descendants of that general) continued Alexander's tolerant policies in Egypt, leading to rampant assimilation of Judeans in those areas – which is why the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt - the Septuagint. In other words, the "Hellenist" conquerors simply embedded themselves into and over the cultures of their subject peoples. (By the way, Cleopatra was a Ptolemy descendant).

Unlike the Ptolemies, the Seleucid kings who ruled from Antioch in Syria favored the older rule that the conquered peoples should adopt the king's religion. This ultimately led to more tension in the Eastern half of the empire under the Seleucids.

The conquerors brought Greek language, architecture, government structure, dress, and behavior everywhere they settled, changing the landscape from Egypt to Persia within a generation. The previously isolated Judea prospered immensely from the influx of money and commerce. These two peoples regarded each other with a mix of curiosity and distrust: the occupiers were surprised to find such a "primitive" people so devoted to learning and literature, while many Judeans found Greek ideas fascinating, except they could not tolerate idolatry. Within a generation, some upper-class families in and near Jerusalem - seat of the Temple - adopted elements of the Greek language and lifestyle. There is little doubt that Greek philosophy, language and politics has profoundly influenced Jewish (and Western) philosophy from that time through the Middle Ages, and even today. On the other hand, certain irreconcilable conflicts still exist between these world-views. For example, young Jewish men were ridiculed for their circumcisions. This was only one of the ways the Jews began to feel "inferior" to the infiltrating dominant culture. These are the roots of the conflict which dominated the next two centuries (perhaps even two millenia until our own day?)

The Syrian conquerors routinely sought the assistance of the upper classes and priests in the empire, both to influence the countries they ruled, and to get revenue and economic support. This included placing Greek gymnasia, amphitheatres, academies, and other typical institutions in the larger cities, usually near the temples – and near the Holy Temple in this case. This encouraged many wealthier and priestly families to slowly adopt a more Hellenistic lifestyle, until by 175 BCE, the Hellenizing Jews in Jerusalem succeeded in turning Jerusalem into a *polis*, or Greek city-state. Within a generations, many of the wealthier and more influential Judeans in Jerusalem were Hellenized – although they still practiced Jewish rituals.

Maniac in the House

Eventually, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, seeking to unify the empire and get more revenue, declared himself "God-king," ordered all peoples to follow the Greek religion, and confiscated the treasuries of many religious shrines. He took the name *Antiochus Epiphanes* ("Image of the Gods"), but critics ridiculed him as *Antiochus Epimanes* ("The Maniac").

"The People are Revolting"

In 172 BCE, Antiochus had pro-Hellenist Judean Menelaus (Hebrew name was probably Mordechai) appointed as High Priest, against another priest Jason (Joshua) who had also bribed Antiochus for the job. In around 170, false rumors that Antiochus IV had died in battle caused rejoicing in Judea, prompting his swift reprisal and crackdown. With support from some Judean Hellenizers, he turned the Temple into a Greek shrine, outlawed circumcision, Shabbat observance, and Torah study. Rebellion broke out in Mod'in, led by Mattityahu (Mattathias), a priest from the house of Hasmon. (His family is therefore correctly called Hasmoneans, although they later took the name Maccabees). In addition to the Hellenists and Hasmonean rebels, a third party of pious Jews called "Hasidim" refused to fight on the Sabbath, and many died martyrs' deaths, as epitomized by the story of Chana and her seven sons. Such experiences affected Jewish rituals and strengthened

the Jewish will to survive. *Kiddush Hashem* (martyrdom) became an honored concept, and circumcision laws became even stricter to prevent men from hiding the operation. Ironically, Jewish antagonism to assimilation was greatly strengthened during this period.

Upon Mattityahu's death from natural causes, his third son Yehudah (Judah) raised a small guerrilla-style rebel force which won several key battles against the small Syrian local forces, while the bulk of the Syrian army was fighting other battles throughout the empire. According to the Books of Maccabees, in late Kislev 164/5, (December) the rebels reclaimed the Temple and rededicated it. However, none of these books say anything about an oil "miracle." Two hundred years later, the rabbis, in the Talmud related the story that the rebels found only one jar of pure olive oil with the High Priest's stamp, which they used to re-light the seven-branched Temple Menorah or candelabrum. In that story, one jar of oil lasted eight days, until more oil could be prepared. In the public mind, the real "miracle" was that the small rebel army had defeated the mighty Syrian-Greek army! As the tide turned, the Maccabean rebels, the Hasidim, and even some Hellenized Jews united against the Syrian invaders.

"Meet the New Boss – Same as the Old Boss"

War actually dragged on until 142 BCE, long after "Judah the Maccabee" was killed in battle. Overcommitted and with other battles and rebellions to fight, the Syrians decided it was best to cut a deal with the rebels. They retreated and granted the Judeans a modicum of autonomy, while still keeping Judea as their province. Yet civil war between Hellenist and nationalist Jews continued for years, and eventually many of the Hasmonean rulers became almost as corrupt and power-hungry as the Syrians before them. They appointed Judah's brother Shimon both king and priest, persecuted and killed rabbis, and even forced the Idumeans ("Edomites") of trans-Jordan to convert to Judaism. Among these were the ancestors of Herod, whom Rome later appointed as Judea's most cruel ruler – talk about karmic "payback"! Finally, exhausted by their battles against Hellenists and surrounding peoples, the Hasmonean rulers requested help from Rome. Bad move! Awaiting such an opening, Rome took over Judea in 63 BCE, marking the end of an independent Jewish state which had lasted just 102 years. This is a far cry from the stories we heard as children!

While Roman Jewish historian Josephus and the Books of Maccabees relate various versions of this story, the Rabbis chose not to include them in the Bible because they were written very late, and in Greek; and also because they grew to detest the Hasmoneans. However, as Roman rule grew more oppressive, the resistance story became a way fondly recalled their short-lived independence. Two customs may have come together to shape this popular holiday. First, the seven-branched Menorah had become a symbol of Judean resistance after Rome sacked the Second Temple in 70 CE and banned it as a symbol of Judean nationality. So, people began lighting a menorah with eight branches at home instead. Second, Jews and pagans alike lit home fires during the long Winter solstice. In the face of these popular celebrations, the Rabbis in the Talmud decided to emphasize features of the event which they felt met the needs of Jews who were facing a second Exile after Rome wiped out the Temple and Judea. So they downplayed the military aspect of the Hasmonean revolt in favor of the oil "miracle," and decided that people should light an *eight-branched* menorah to remember the Temple during this season. Hanukkah - the festival of re-Dedication - was born.

“My Head is Spinning” – Hanukkah Customs from Middle Ages to Modern Times

Among the many well-known Hanukkah customs that arose over the centuries are:

Foods. Foods fried in oil recall the "miracle" of the oil. Middle Eastern Jews eat dumplings called *sufganiyot*, while the Ashkenazic Jews made a fried *latke* with leftover vegetables (mostly leeks, until potatoes became part of the mix as a New World export in the 1800's).

Dreidel. European Jews adapted a four-sided children's top popular in Medieval Europe, decorated with the Hebrew letters *nun-gimel-hei-shin*. Eventually it came to stand for the phrase "a great miracle happened there." In Israel, the *shin* is replaced with the letter *pei*, to mean "a great miracle happened here."

Gelt. While the above customs stem from the Middle Ages, passing coins may actually have begun as resistance to Rome. Having a coin from Hasmonean times became a symbol of remembering the short-lived Judean independence. Later generations turned this into a mitzvah (good deed) of charity, giving children small coins to distribute to the poor. Of course, the chocolate coins came much, much later!

A Psycho-Spiritual Approach

Like the Talmudic rabbis of old, we ask ourselves “*Mai Hanukkah*” – What is Hanukkah? How should we celebrate Hanukkah today? (And by the way, what's the right way to spell it!??)

Three values can enrich and inform this holiday:

Religious and Cultural Diversity

Hanukkah commemorates more than a military victory; it is about tolerance, self-determination, and honoring diversity. Yet it also hints at commonalities between peoples. Hanukkah should not become a commercialized Jewish Christmas. While Hanukkah began as a minor commemoration, Christmas is the very root of the Christian faith. Although they both fall in the winter, the two holidays are very different. Or are they? In fact, they share certain common historical roots and spiritual themes. First, if not for the Hasmonean Revolt, Jewish life might have died by the time of Jesus! Second, "peace on earth and good will toward all" requires respecting diversity and minority rights. So maybe these two special days have a lot in common.

Power and Powerlessness

Hanukkah also teaches about the use and misuse of power. Imperialism and cultural oppression caused civil war, as we have seen many times with other peoples in our own century. The Rabbis questioned whether violence and the Hasmonean revolt and rule created more problems than it solved, especially when they themselves experienced the later Roman repression. Seeking a higher moral ground, they chose Zechariah 2-4 for the *Haftarah* (prophetic reading) for the Shabbat in Hanukkah with the warning: “not by might, and not by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord.” Right beliefs must be accompanied by right action, and the ends may not be used to justify violent means.

Lighting the Altar Within

There is a third common element in winter holidays: Longing for the Light. Since ancient times, many Northern Hemisphere peoples have lit fires during the Winter Solstice, when we feel most aware of the sun's distance. It is no coincidence that Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa all utilize lights as symbols of faith, hope, freedom, truth, and family warmth. On Hanukkah, we can rededicate ourselves to our Higher Power, re-light the altar within the Temple of the Soul, and find the hope that keeps us from giving up in the Darkness. Let us always remember that the "Darkest hour is always just before the dawn." *Happy Hanukkah!*

"Don't Let the Light Go Out!"