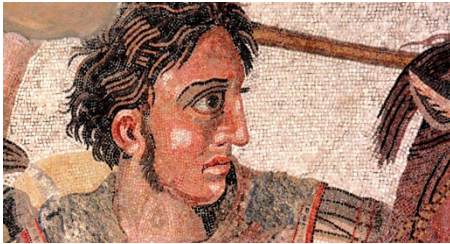


The Real Story of Hanukkah for Adults

by Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon, DD

Hanukkah is one of the most joyous Jewish holidays, with lights, dreidels, latkes and parties. Yet it is also one of the most misunderstood holidays, with many deep themes beyond the stories we heard as children. *Hanukkah*, meaning "dedication," began as a national liberation holiday; yet different themes have been emphasized over time, include Jewish independence, religious and cultural tolerance, hope against adversity, and faith in dark times. As we trace the evolution of the Festival of Lights, let us see how it can enhance our spiritual lives today.

"Funny, you don't look Greek"



Around 333 BCE, Alexander "the Great" of Macedonia (more or less Albania today), conquered the weakened Persian Empire, quickly unifying the Middle East from Egypt, to Persia – in fact, he wanted to invade India until his troops as much as rebelled: "we've had it, boss! We want to go home to our families!" Alexander promoted a watered-down version of Greek culture known as "Hellenism" throughout the new empire, similar to today's world-

wide American cultural influence. Yet good ol' Alex allowed subject peoples to follow their unique religious customs, as long as they paid obeisance (and money!) to the Empire. Among other things, Alexander had many of his generals marry into royal families, making them instant "insiders." Hellenization took root everywhere in the empire. In a very short time, there were over 20 cities named Alexandria throughout the empire, and the Greek-style city-state called a "polis" became wide-spread (yes, as in "metropolis"). A *polis* required Greek-style buildings such as theatres, temples and gymnasia, "democratic" governance by the elite males (!), and other "civilized" features. Naturally, becoming a *polis* also brought an influx of funds and privileges to the city-state.

Alexander's "conquest" of Judea was a peaceful march-through. The Talmud and Josephus relate that when Alexander approached Jerusalem expecting a battle, Shimon the high priest and other dignitaries came out to meet him. According to this legend, Alexander got down from his horse and bowed before the High Priest! Shimon in turn declared that, far from being rebels, they would pray for Alexander's welfare. Whether this story is exaggeration, political theatre, gratitude at being rid of Persian control, or just a better choice than fighting, Alexander was quite favorable toward Judea, especially Jerusalem. Again, the Talmud suggests for the next year many Judean boys were named "Alexander" in his honor. And to this day, Alexander or Alexandra are common Jewish names!

Quiet, provincial Judea at first responded favorably to this influx of culture - especially the money and commerce. Within a generation, many upper-class Judeans had adopted Greek language and ways - especially in Jerusalem, seat of the Temple. Greek culture focused on the body, pleasure, physical prowess and sporting events, which captured the interest of some Judeans. Jewish men who attended Greek *gymnasia* (in the nude!) even attempted operations to reverse their circumcisions, rather than be ridiculed. It's believed that an idol of Apollo stood at the entrance to the gymnasium, and offerings were mandatory (a little like YMCA membership?) This was only one of the ways the Jews began to feel "inferior" to the infiltrating dominant culture. Greek thought, language and politics profoundly influenced Jewish literature; yet the conflicts between these two world-views began then, and continues even to our own day. This was one of the first known episodes of "cultural oppression."

“Maniac in the House”

When Alexander died suddenly during his conquests, the empire was split between two generals: Ptolemy, who ruled from Egypt westward, and Seleukus, who ruled from Antioch in Syria. For several years the two empires fought over strategic Judea, until it ended up under the Syrian Seleucids. Within a generation, most conquered peoples were conversant in the common *Koine* Greek dialect and adopted Hellenistic dress, customs, literature, foods - and even religious customs! It became common to blend the native religion and gods with the dominant Greek religion – a practice known as *syncretism*. (“Your Ba’al is just like our Zeus, so what’s the problem?”). In short, much of the Near East very quickly became Hellenized.

The large Seleucid empire eventually became virtually ungovernable with dozens of ethnic, language and religious groups lacking a common bond (remember the Soviet Union?). By 175 BCE, 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 placed Hellenizers in the temples and governments of his subjects, hoping to tap into their shrines’ treasuries. He therefore took the name *Antiochus Epiphanes* (“Image of the Divine”). Yet due to his egotistic and impetuous personality, critics ridiculed him as *Antiochus Epimanes* (The Madman”).



In Jerusalem, a pro-Hellenist Judean party began to lobby Syria to make Jerusalem a Greek *polis*, and for restrictions against more traditional Judeans. Antiochus appointed a Hellenizer named Menelaus as High Priest. Other Judeans favored Jason (also a Hellenist, but Menelaus outbid him before Antiochus for the post) After a rumor spread that Antiochus had been killed in Egypt, some in Jerusalem staged a revolt against Menelaus. When Antiochus returned from Egypt in December 168 BCE, he retaliated by destroying sections of Jerusalem, restoring Menelaus, and executing thousands of Judeans. It was then that he outlawed circumcision and Shabbat observance, and turned the Temple into a Greek shrine, complete with an altar to Zeus - with the support of some Judean Hellenizers! This was too much for many Judeans. Thus, what began as a civil conflict escalated into a war of conquest.

“The People are Revolting, Sir!”

In Mod’in, a rebellion broke out led by Mattathias (Mattityahu) a Kohen of the house of Hasmon. While his family is correctly called *Hasmoneans*, the name “Maccabee” came to be applied to this party. After Mattathias died of old age, his five sons Yochanan, Shimon, Yehudah, Eleazar and Yonatan took up the battle using what today would be considered guerilla tactics.

Theories about the name “*Maccabee*” include:

- a) the initials of Mattityahu haCohen Ben Yochanan
- b) the Aramaic *makkevet* (sledgehammer) signifying how they fought
- c) an acronym for “Mi Chamocha BaEylim Hashem,” (Ex. 15:11), remembering the miracle of the sea parting to escape Egypt;
- d) and even a story that Judah had a large bumpy forehead!



So now there were three Judean parties or sects: the Hellenists, the Maccabees led by the Hasmonean brothers, and pious pacifists called “Hasidim” who refused to fight, and died martyrs’

deaths. These experiences strengthened the Jewish will to survive, but they also hardened certain Jewish rituals. *Kiddush Hashem* (martyrdom) became an honored belief, and the laws of circumcision became more strict to prevent men from reversing the operation. Perhaps herein lie the roots of strong Jewish feelings against assimilation, as well as many other issues.

For three years the “Maccabee” guerilla fighters won several key skirmishes near Jerusalem using guerrilla tactics against under-supplied Syrian troops. Some Hellenists also fought against their fellow Jews, but eventually, many Judeans found common cause against the Syrian rulers. Antiochus the Madman sent more troops, but they were still under-supplied, because meanwhile he had other rebellions to quell, as well as fighting on the home front against rivals for the throne. According to 2 Maccabees, on 25 Kislev in 165, the Judeans reclaimed and rededicated the Temple. However, the Talmud is the ONLY source for the story that they only found one jar of purified olive oil with the High Priest’s stamp to re-light the seven-branched Eternal Lamp – the Menorah. That story is not in any of the Books of the Maccabees. **The rabbis re-wrote history.** Why?

“Meet the New Boss – Same as the Old Boss” [The Who - *Won’t Get Fooled Again*]

Yet this was not the end of the story: Syria finally reluctantly agreed to a truce in 142 BCE – they still would still retain control, but they withdrew and allowed religious rites. However, civil war between pro-Hellenist and nationalist Judeans continued for many more years. The Hasmonean family appointed themselves rulers, and quickly became almost as corrupt and power-hungry as their opponents had been. They appointed Jonathan and later Shimon “priest-king,” and his descendant John Hyrcanus even forced many Edomites to convert Judaism! Among these were the ancestors of Herod, whom Rome later appointed as Judea’s most cruel ruler – talk about “karma” or “payback!” The Hasmonean rulers also persecuted and killed many Pharisees (i.e. Rabbis)! Worst of all, in 63 BCE, the Hasmoneans requested help from the Romans. Bad move! In 63 BCE, Rome took over Judea, marking the end of the semi-independent Judea state, which lasted a mere 102 years, from 165-63 BCE.

But wait you say! This is a far cry from the stories we were told as children!

The Talmudic Rabbis of later Roman times came to detest the Hasmonean rulers, and chose not to canonize the Books of Maccabees into the Bible. In 70 CE the Romans destroyed the Second Temple after the first rebellion in 66 CE, and in 135 CE they retaliated against a second larger Bar Kochba rebellion by wiping out Judea entirely! They outlawed the seven-branched Temple menorah and carted off all the gold to Rome. It was out of this trauma rather than the Greek experience that two customs may have grown together:

1) the outlawed 7-branch menorah became a symbol of Judean resistance to the Romans; and 2) Jews and pagans alike had adopted the ancient custom of lighting fires in the home during the Winter nights. In the face of these popular celebrations, the rabbis shaped Hanukkah into a holiday which they felt met the needs of the newly-exiled Jews: they downplayed the military aspects of the Hasmonean revolt in favor of the oil “miracle,” and ruled that people should light an *eight-branched* menorah (nine counting the *shammash* or starter oil lamp) to remember the Temple during this season. The School of Shammai ruled that we should start



with eight lamps and reduce one each night, while the School of Hillel favored starting with one and adding one each light (*guess who won?) Thus, Hanukkah, the festival of re-Dedication - was born.

“So Rabbi, Then What IS Hanukkah?! - A Psycho-Spiritual Approach

Like the rabbis of old, today we ask ourselves “*Mai Hanukkah*” – Why Hanukkah?” How should we celebrate Hanukkah today? Is it just a Jewish response to a commercialized Christmas? I see three interconnected values that can inform our teaching and rituals:

Diversity is a Good Thing

Hanukkah commemorates more than a military victory; it is about tolerance of all people's rights to self-determination. It celebrates Jewish pride, yet glimpses beyond, toward the commonalities between peoples. While Hanukkah and Christmas are very different, they do share some common historical roots and spiritual themes. First, if not for the Hasmonean rebellion, there might not have been practicing Jews in Judea in the time of Jesus 150 years later! Second, “peace on earth and good will toward all” necessitates appreciating diversity and minority rights. Feel free to share these ideas with other faiths and cultures.

Power and Powerlessness

Hanukkah has much to teach us about the use and misuse of power. Imperialism and cultural oppression from without brought about a civil war between factions of Jews, as we have seen many times with other peoples in our own century. With the wisdom of hindsight, the Rabbis realized that the Maccabean Revolt created more problems as it solved, and that ultimately war did not solve anything. They sought a higher moral ground when they chose the *Haftarah* reading for the Shabbat of Hanukkah from the Book of Zechariah with the famous quote: “...Not by might, and not by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord.” Righteous beliefs must yield righteous action, and the end may not be used to justify violent means.

Lighting the Altar Within

Since ancient times, many Northern Hemisphere peoples have lit fires during the Dark of Winter, when we feel most aware of the sun's distance. It is no coincidence that Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa all evoke 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 rays of hope that keeps us from giving up in the Darkness. Especially during these times of pandemic and political turmoil, let us remember that the “Darkest hour is always just before the dawn.” *Don't Let the Light Go out!*

*We are lights, lights of memory
Rememb'ring times long gone,
We are glowing, growing miracles
We are light
We are light
Shining on and on....
From We Are Lights
Music: Stephen Lawrence Schwartz
Lyrics: Steve Young*

