

“Hanukkah: A Tale of Jewish Survival”

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The \$64,000 question is “How has Judaism survived?” How has Judaism survived Babylonian captivity, Alexander the Great and Hellenization, Rome, Diaspora, Christianity, anti-Semitism, Reform Judaism, and the Holocaust? I don’t have an answer for you. I asked a Jewish friend this very question. Her response was, “I don’t know.” She too finds Jewish survival amazing. Three thousand years surviving Diaspora, with a language and religion intact. Her best guess is that Judaism’s emphasis on family ritual has enabled it to survive as well as its flexibility, but even this she finds a weak answer. The history of Judaism is an amazing tale of survival. One chapter in its struggle begins in Palestine with the story of Judah Maccabee, and the creation of Hanukkah in the second century before the birth of Jesus.

When Alexander the Great swept through the Middle East and Asia in the fourth century B. C. E. he and his army brought Greek, or Hellenistic, ideas and values with them. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg writes

Hellenistic culture was the most developed civilization that part of the world had ever known. Art, sculpture, and architecture flourished, as did poetry, satire, biography and history. Philosophy prospered, science attained peaks . . . The spread of Hellenism tore down barriers between peoples; in the process many traditional beliefs and ways of living proved vulnerable . . . The cosmopolitanism of Hellenistic culture and its vision of the individual, supported and associated with political power, proved irresistible to the wealthier educated and ruling groups through out the East and Palestine.¹

Think of Hellenization like Americanization. Both are forged on individuality and commerce with military might. Both are and were criticized for competing with traditional and community ways. Both are and were engaging and highly enticing. As Hellenization grew in Palestine, Jews experienced more divisions and conflicts within their own communities. In this way Hanukkah is really the story of the multiplicity of tensions and ideas within Judaism.

Even then Palestine faced conflict from its northern neighbors, the Seleucids (in modern day Syria), and the Ptolemies (in modern day Egypt). In early 200 B. C. E. Palestine was once more conquered by the Seleucids who gave considerable rights and privileges to the Jews (including the power to tax on behalf of the king), especially the Jewish elite composed of aristocrats and priests. By this time the Jewish elite spoke Greek (rather than Hebrew) and were both culturally Jewish and Greek. In other words, they were highly assimilated and at times felt they had more in common, and certainly

¹ Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *the Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (1988), 258.

more privileges from, the Seleucids. In the meantime more traditional Jews lived harder, less cosmopolitan, more traditional lives on farms and in small communities. At this point Judaism experienced that age-old stress between traditional country people and more urbane, assimilated city people.

When a new Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, took the throne, a wealthy Hellenized Jewish family petitioned the king to have a family member, named Jason, appointed to the high priesthood by the king. A couple of things going on here – the high priest of Judaism is no longer confirmed by the king, but appointed by the king. We have a merger of religion and state taking place. Also, note that the Jewish family appointed a family member by the name of Jason, which is a Greek name, not a Jewish name. Traditional Jews were outraged.

Eventually there was a struggle within Hellenized Judaism to replace the high priest Jason with another Hellenized Jew named Menelaus. Fighting broke out, and in order to bring “peace” to Jerusalem, Antiochus IV responded with harsh measures; the Torah was forbidden, monthly sacrifices to Zeus were established within the Temple, and sacred prostitution was allowed at the Temple. Jews who refused to follow the new laws were persecuted and killed. Again, traditional Jews were outraged, even as Antiochus’s measures gained some success among Hellenized Jews. At the same time, moderate Jews (whether Hellenized or not) were also offended. The multiplicity of ideas within Judaism was quickly leading to conflict.

One branch of Judaism, the Pietists, was particularly offended by these events, yet they lacked a theology that encouraged them to engage or fight the king. They struggled with the belief that their suffering was caused by their own sinfulness and that only Yahweh could change the situation. As miserable as they were, they believed that their only choice was to repent, suffer, and wait.

Enter Mattathias Hasmonian, priest of a small town, Modin, near Jerusalem. In 167 B. C. E., Mattathias had had enough, and even though a traditionalist, he was not willing to wait for God’s intervention any longer. In that year this faithful, committed Jew and priest stabbed another Jew who sacrificed to the new cult and then killed the king’s agent. Then he and his five sons fled to the mountains surrounding Modin. As Greenberg notes “Mattathias dared to assert that a king who commanded the violation of the Torah could not rule Jews by divine right. In effect, Mattathias was operating out of a covenantal model in which humans could not ‘leave it all to God’ but had to initiate some action to save the Torah and Jews.”²

Mattathias was soon killed, and his son Judah Maccabee assumed control of the uprising that came to be known as the Maccabean Revolt. The Maccabeans were able to survive because they rarely engaged in outright fighting. Instead they fought a guerilla war in the terrain they knew. Over time some Pietists and moderate Jews joined them. In 165 B. C. E., the Maccabeans negotiated a favorable treaty with the Seleucids where they received amnesty, the right to observe their faith, and control of the Temple as they had before.

Now the religious crisis really began. There were Pietists who were not interested in man’s laws or kingships. Many moderate Jews considered the Maccabees fundamentalists. Even, if you speak with someone today who is moderate and Jewish,

² Greenberg, 263.

and they get beyond telling you the story of the miracle of the oil, almost always both admiration and discomfort is expressed for the Maccabees.

The real problem for Judah Maccabee and his followers in 165 B. C. E. was that God did not intervene; there was no holy fire, no miracle that affirmed this striking departure into military action. After the Maccabees won access to the Temple, as they wanted, a great uncertainty settled among the people. Was this right by God? Was this not right by God? Where was God? Was it impious to make changes based on human will? These were questions of enormous religious, cultural, and political significance to the Jews of second century Palestine.

In an interesting display of caution and proactivity, Judah Maccabee began to slowly make human changes. After a few months the false idol was taken out of the Temple. A few months later the defiled altar was dismantled and taken out of the Temple. Eight months after their victory, the Maccabees removed the latticework used in sacred prostitution rites, eight months later! Still nothing happened. As Greenberg notes “Every stop of Judah’s policy constituted an act of covenantal responsibility-taking, probably done in the teeth of bitter criticism.”³

The Maccabeans went back to the Torah and chose to rededicate the Temple for eight days, the same length of time that Moses had dedicated the Tabernacle. The word “Hanukkah” means “dedication.” The Maccabees searched for “undefiled” oil and lit it in the prayer of thanksgiving “for the miracles”. This is the creation of Hanukkah, the story told in *1 Maccabees*.

I would like to tell you that everyone agreed and went home happy, but that is not how this complex, conflicted chapter ends. Instead one year later the Maccabees were once more defeated by a Greek general. Although they negotiated another treaty, the Maccabees were defeated one year later when another king assumed the throne. The Maccabees either fled or were executed. Later another Maccabee brother, Jonathan, was welcomed back to assist a Seleucid king. Over the years the Maccabeans united the kingship with the priesthood, and took Greek names, alienating many Jews. The Maccabeans went on to fight the Pharisees several generations later, which led to more strife and suffering within Judaism.

In later generations, the Rabbis struggled with the holiday of Hanukkah. The Rabbis did not approve of the later Maccabean/Hasmonean family and their politics. They struggled with the absence of divine intervention. As Rabbi Barr of Congregation Beth Adam shared with me

The Maccabees were reactionary. The Rabbis had to inject a miracle into what was a military holiday. They wanted divine intervention (“They had to make it about God just in case). There is no miracle cup of oil in the story of 1 Maccabees [He’s right, I checked]. This is the story we tell children to remind them of God’s power.

Even today Hanukkah is not considered sacred time (although children in Israel take a week off for winter break and festivals). Unlike most Jewish holidays, Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah. Even more significant, *1 Maccabees* is not part of the

³ Greenberg, 267.

Jewish Bible – it is only canonical within the Catholic, Greek, and Russian Orthodox Bibles. As another friend explained

The Maccabeans were zealots. Historically they are not my heroes. Hellenistic culture had some virtues. Their so-called victory was short lived. By the second or third generation they all had Greek names. In Israel starting in the 1900's the story [of Hanukkah] was co-opted to create a very nationalistic, militaristic holiday. In America it is a celebration of light.

Part of Hanukkah's success is that its meaning is flexible. Rabbi Barr noted that what is interesting about Hanukkah is its metamorphosis over time, to assist in the development of Israel, to counter an overwhelming consumerist and Christian American culture. Many of us have heard that Hanukkah is a story of freedom of religion, but as Rabbi Greenberg notes, Mattathias Hasmonean wasn't looking for freedom of religion for everyone or even within Judaism. He wanted to restore Judaism to its former, traditional status. He was a reactionary and a fundamentalist.

I like the messiness of Hanukkah, the people and political parties, the uncertainty, the stress between country and city, religion and state, assimilation and fundamentalism. Hanukkah is really a paradox but in many ways I think that paradox is one of the strengths of Judaism. Even today Judaism is a multiplicity of ideas and practice; Humanistic, Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, with subgroups within groups like Chasidism.

I was surprised when reading Rabbi Greenberg to find that he referred to the Pietists who existed at the time of the Maccabees as "Chasidic" which is not possible. I know from my Judaism class last year that Chasidism developed in the 18th century. It didn't exist two thousand years ago. All I can deduce is that Rabbi Greenberg has a concern with Chasidism that he added into his Hanukkah story. As Rabbi Barr always says to me about Judaism "For everything you have to figure out who the author is." This is the fullness and complexity of Judaism. Hanukkah asks that age-old question, "Who is a Jew?" It's really a dialogue within a religious community.

I struggle with the fundamentalism of the Maccabeans but I am grateful that Judaism was not completely assimilated by Hellenization. And then I wonder, was the Maccabean Revolt that much of a milestone or just a footnote? Did Judaism always have what it took to withstand Hellenization with or without the Maccabees? I asked this question of Rabbi Barr and he did not have an answer for me. As in much of Jewish history, he wasn't sure. What is significant about Hanukkah is the uncomfortable incorporation of human will in areas of life, the notion that humans are vital actors in their own lives with or without God.

One of my friends finished off her thoughts on Hanukkah by telling me "I don't care about the story. I like lighting the candles. I like the family, the culture, the ritual context. That is what matters to me." This is the power, resilience, reverence, irreverence, pride, ritual, and beauty of Judaism and Hanukkah. It should not be underestimated. It is an answer to Jewish survival in a world that continues to be surprisingly anti-Semitic.