

Hanukah

The Real Story, Then and Now

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Let me begin by setting the record straight. Hanukah is a celebration of victory in war. The miracle of Hanukah was that the few defeated the many in battle. Many today erroneously believe that the primary miracle of Hanukah was the miracle of a one-day supply of oil for the menorah staying lit eight days. Yet, in the additional prayer about Hanukah inserted into the daily Amidah prayer no mention of this miracle occurs. Indeed, the prayer of thanksgiving that we recite for Hanukah is one of victory at war, not one of a miracle of lights. In essence, Hanukah is a holiday celebrating a Jewish religious military victory over the forces of ancient secularism (Hellenism).

In accordance to American style commercialization, Hanukah has become secularized and observed as somewhat a "Jewish" Christmas. Its true meaning has become lost in history. Secular Jews mostly believe that Hanukah is all about dreidels and latkis (potato pancakes) and celebrate it for its cultural value, without any real knowledge of what really happened, or its spiritual significance. Before we move along to discuss what really happened, let us remember that while the two holidays have very different meanings, historically, they are in a fact connected.

It is no coincidence that Hanukah falls on the 25th day of Kislev and that the other (pagan/Christian) holiday falls on the 25th day of December. According to the Sefer HaMacabim (I Macabees 1:59), the Greeks decided to profane the holy Temple in Yerushalayim specifically on the 25th day of that month, because that day was their pagan holiday Saturnalia, honoring the winter solstice. Their holiday celebrated the lengthening of the winter days. They called their holiday the "birthday" of the sun. Hundreds of years later when the pagan Roman/Greek ceremonies were adopted by Christianity, the winter "birthday" of the sun, became the "birthday" of the new "son." Thus many Christmas pagan rituals were born. I am only briefly describing the Saturnalia as it applies here. More information about it is readily available online.

Mind you, information about the pagan origins of the Christmas celebrations did not originate with Jewish authors. There are many Christian groups of different denominations that are aware of the true history of the Christmas holiday. One can easily do a web search and read numerous articles from Christian authors to verify this. I do not wish to surprise or offend anyone and I certainly do not intend that by offering this information to attack anyone's personal faith. My purpose in this essay is simply to relate a historical account based upon the available evidence. Now, back to our topic.

The Macabees, with full intent rededicated the holy Temple to HaShem three years to the day after it was defiled, on the 25th of Kislev, specifically to make a statement against the religion of the Greeks. The day that the pagan Greeks celebrated victory over the Jews and their religion became the day that the Jews took their revenge and celebrated their victory over the Greeks.

One must understand that according to the Sefer HaMacabim, which is the most authoritative historical record of this time period, the war of the Macabees was two fold. It was fought against both the pagan Greek invaders and with their Jewish sympathizers, whose number was the majority of the country. In essence, the Maccabee war was a Jewish civil war of the religious verses the non-religious. Sefer HaMacabim is very clear on this point. This was first a battle of Jew verses Jew (I Macabees 2:27).

The war began when Matityah(u) Ben Yohanan HaKohen (the priest) struck down a Jew who was coming to offer a sacrifice on an altar of idolatry in Modi'in. Only after he killed the rebellious Jew did Matityah then kill the supervising Greek officer. His family and followers then fled for the hills, knowing that both Greek and Hellenistic Jew would hunt them down at all costs.

Matityahu and his band were very few in numbers and were not well versed in the ways of war. Although they had zeal and Kedusha (holiness), these were not enough to win a war. When a large group of Torah faithful men, women and children were cornered by the Greeks on one Shabat, they refused to fight because to do so would violate Shabat law. The pagan Greeks slaughtered over a thousand innocent souls on that day. Only after this incident was the Halakha ordained that "Pikuah Nefesh Doheh HaShabat" (saving lives takes precedence over the Shabat; ref. I Mac. 2:41).

Sefer HaMacabim recounts that the Macabees then met and teamed up with a group referred to as the Hasidim, who were "war-like Israelites, every one a volunteer for the Torah" (I Mac. 2:42). It was only by receiving these reinforcements that Yehuda Maccabee had enough men with military experience to conduct guerrilla warfare and acts of terrorism against the superior forces of the Greeks and their Hellenistic Jewish allies.

The identity of these Hasidim is a matter of great importance, for we see that prior to the Maccabee revolt there already were pious Torah observant G-d fearing Jews who had separated themselves from Hellenistic Israel. Although these Hasidim did not start the war, they nonetheless fought it. Some recent scholars have attempted to associate these Hasidim with the Essenes or others similar to the Dead Sea Scroll community. However, this association cannot be not accurate. At this time in history, the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scroll community were in open conflict with what they considered the unclean priesthood of Yerushalayim. Since Matityahu was the then a deposed priest of Yerushalayim, it is almost certain that the Essenes and their like would have wished Matityahu "good riddance" and would be glad to see him go. As his opponents, the Essenes would not have jumped on the Maccabee bandwagon to help Matityah and Klal Yisrael (the general Jewish public).

This political/religious divide in ancient Israel is reflected today between those who would fight for the Jewish state and those who would abstain from any fighting,

claiming themselves to be religiously superior, just as did the Essenes of old. Ultimately, the Essenes and their way passed into eternity leaving only a footnote in history. One wonders if modern groups embracing the same attitude will face the same fate and ultimately fade away into history in spite of however powerful and influential they appear today.

The Gemara (Berakhot 5) enlightens us as to the true identity of these mysterious Hasidim who assisted the Maccabees. They were known as the Hasidim Rishonim (the pious ones of old). These holy individuals were known for their pietistic practices and teachings. They were well loved by the rank and file everyday Jew, for unlike Essenes, these Hasidim never elevated themselves and separated from their fellow Jews. They were very much like today's religious Zionist camp, who are devoted fully to a life of Torah and who still see it as a high priority to serve in the army.

These Hasidim Rishonim however did separate themselves from the Hellenistic world around them and associated exclusively within the realm of Torah Judaism. As such, another name given to these Hasidim was the "Perushim" (the ones who separate). Today most know this group as the Pharisees, who in Christian sources are wrongly portrayed as being hypocritical opponents to Yeshu. This is but one of many examples of Greco-Roman anti-Semitism that was adopted and incorporated into the Christian religion.

The Maccabee war against the Greeks and the Hellenistic Jews waged for three years. It took that long for Yehuda Maccabee and his forces to conquer Yerushalayim. Upon entering the Temple, they found that it had been used for pagan idol worship. Everything therein was contaminated. Everything had to be replaced. Even the altar stone was removed and secreted away somewhere under the Temple Mount. Sefer HaMacabim (4:46) states that the stone was hidden until a navi (prophet) would come and reveal to them what to do with it. A new altar stone was put in place. After many days of preparation, the Temple was rededicated. The dedication ceremony, like those before it was to last eight days. Yehuda Maccabee then ordained that these eight days were to be remembered and observed throughout our generations. Thus, we have the holiday of Hanukah.

Stop for a moment. Did you notice what is missing from this story as told in the most accurate historical record of this time? The miracle of the consecration oil lasting eight days (instead of just one) is not mentioned. The origins of this story are found in the Gemara and not in the historical text. This is not to insinuate that the miracle did not occur, G-d forbid. For if our Sages said that it happened, then it happened.

It is however, possible that the miracle was kept quiet and only the Jews most closely associated with the Temple knew about it at the time when the Sefer HaMacabim was authored. More likely, the reason why the miracle is not mentioned is that the authors of Sefer HaMacabim did not want to overshadow the real miracle, which was the victory at war, as shown by the Al HaNisim prayer inserted into the Amidah. All too often people pay attention to the wrong things. If the miracle of the oil were emphasized, then people in later generations would forget that it took a war, which was miraculously won, in order to make the miracle happen.

The lesson we learn from the Hanukah story is that in spite of how bleak things look for Torah and for those Jews faithful to it, when we put our trust in HaShem and act upon it, we become the instruments of manifesting His salvation. The Hasidim Rishonim who joined forces with the Macabees were known to be powerful practitioners of the mystical arts. Many of their number were known as the "Yordei HaMerkava" (those who stand before the Throne of G-d). They knew the secrets of the names of the angels. They had the power to call for Divine intervention. Yet, in spite of all this spiritual power, nothing availed against the enemies of Torah until the righteous combined their spiritual power with military might.

This then is our lesson to learn. Even though Israel and the Galut (exile) are full of yeshivot and students studying Torah, all this combined spiritual power cannot materialize into anything physical without the necessary vessel of physical action. Our world will remain a place marred by violence and dominated by the forces of evil all the while that the sons of Torah do not act to prevent it from being such. Mind you, in order for the actions by the sons of Torah to be fruitful, they themselves must be righteous souls. This requires of them "Mesirat Nefesh" (complete sacrifice), i.e., to place Torah as the number one priority, above all other things in life.

Alas it is for lack of "Mesirat Nefesh" that we do not have today successful Torah warriors, modern day Macabees or Melekh HaMashiah. Although the modern religious son of Torah loves his religion and his G-d, many also have other loves, which might be equal to or greater than their love of Torah; these are the love for money and power. It is this sin that has corrupted many of even the greatest Torah giants of our days. The politics and economics of certain segments of the religious communities, (in Israel and abroad) have so weighed down these communities, that they have actually become more of a hindrance than a help in bringing about the Geulah (redemption).

Because of our present low state of spiritual affairs, we are left without the hope of a modern religious revolution. All the while that the secular in Israel spoke about their "secular revolution," no one in the religious camp ever bothered to mention anything about a "religious revolution." Apparently, the religious parties in Israel's Knesset are more concerned about keeping their boys out of the army and in receiving large grants for their yeshivot than in doing what is moral and right for Klal Yisrael (the general populace).

In order to be a Maccabee or a true Hasid, one must first be impeccably moral. Rabbi Haim Vital writes in his Sha'arei Kedusha that "Midot Kadmon L'Mitzvot" (proper morals are a prerequisite for observing the mitzvot). This lesson must be learned by many in the religious community today.

Granted, "Talmud Torah K'neged Kulo" (the study of Torah is the most important of things). In Israel, this does justify sincere and devoted Torah students being temporarily exempt from military service. Yet, this does not apply to just any religious young man who is either lazy or afraid of military discipline. Unfortunately, we see from the level of one's learning, one's devotion and one's commitment whether he falls into the former category or into the later. Israeli religious communities today are festering with social problems that can only be successfully addressed with military discipline and Maccabean resolve.

Many Israeli Rabbis are rightfully concerned that young religious men in the secular Israeli army will be faced with a bewildering blitzkrieg of secular temptations. Yet, if these young men were taught proper Torah morals as they grew up and the Torah was firmly rooted in their souls, then instead of being influenced by the secular, they in turn would do the influencing.

If tens of thousands of sincere young Haredi Torah students were turned loose in the Israeli army, there is no telling how many of their young secular peers they would convince to return to the Torah way of life. Alas, we many never know what a modern Israeli religious Torah army might look like. As long as fear reigns in the hearts of the religious (including Rabbis), we will never rise to meet our fullest potentials. The Macabees had no fear. That is why they succeeded. We unfortunately do fear. That is why we fail.

With all their victories, the Macabees only succeeded in bringing temporary relief to Israel. Their victory soon slipped away. In order to protect themselves from further Greek aggression, Yehuda Maccabee himself signed a mutual defense treaty with none other than Rome. Yehuda Maccabee initially saved Israel because he trusted in G-d. Yet, once he lost his faith in G-d and instead placed his faith in men (in this case, Roman military might), he unknowingly sealed the fate of the Jewish people and brought destruction upon us all. Soon after this pact was made, Yehuda Maccabee met his fate and was killed in battle. Let this lesson of history serve as a reminder to those today who wish to put their faith in the might of others instead of having faith in the Might of G-d.

The state of Jewish and Torah affairs today is at a great low. As long as our religious leaders can be manipulated through fear, money and power, we will not have a new Matityah Maccabee. Until all our religious youth learn the art of war, not one of them can ever become the next Yehuda Maccabee. The forces of our enemies rejoice in the weakened state of Jews and Torah Judaism.

Our anti-Semitic enemies of today seek to destroy Torah Judaism with vigor equal to our enemies of old. Without a Yehuda Maccabee today, we must ask if after all these years, will our enemies finally succeed in silencing the voice of Torah? We hope not and pray not. We defiantly proclaim, "Shema Yisrael" (Hear O'Israel, Deut 6:4; the pledge of Torah allegiance). Yet, with every cry, lesser and lesser sincerity is heard in the voices. If we do not do something fast to turn the religious community back to being truly religious in Maccabee style, there might not be much left of the religious community after the next decade or two.

As we light the Hanukah lights (with pure olive oil, rather than with candles), we must remember that Torah is the light of the world and it is our job as Jews to make sure that the true light shines. This very well necessitates that each of us takes on the role of warrior, one who stands for Biblical morality in face of modern secular atheist attacks. As shown by the Macabees and the Hasidim centuries ago, unless those in the Torah community take action to protect the Torah way of life, nothing in the world will be able to help us.

If we do take the right action and fight for what is right, to defend and protect ourselves, then nothing in the world will be able to stop us. The American patriot,

Benjamin Franklin summed it up when he said, "G-d helps those who help themselves." As Rabbi Tarphon has said, "it is not up to you to complete the work, but you are not free to avoid your share." Hillel said, "if not now, then when."

We know what must be done. Will we now do it?

A Word to Non-Jews

Hanukah is a holiday that the non-Jews can also celebrate. For this is an occasion of celebrating the victory of truth over falsehood, morality over depravity, and good over bad.

If they wish, non-Jews can set up for themselves menorahs and light candles every night. However, they may not recite the specific blessings reserved for this lighting. The first blessing includes the word "vitzivanu" (who has commanded us). No non-Jew can say that G-d commanded them to light a menorah.

The second blessing includes the words "Sh'asah Nisim L'Avoteynu" (who did miracles for our fathers). The miracle was not done for the fathers of the non-Jews; therefore, they cannot honestly say these words.

Thus, non-Jews may certainly join the Jewish people in celebrating this joyous victory, for the message of this victory is the same for us all; Light and right will triumph, when we stand up and shine the Light and do what is right.

Let us all thank G-d, each in our own way, for His bringing us to know the truth of His Ways.

Hag Hanukah Sameah.

