

The Story of Chanukkah
Shaarei Shamayim Chanukkah Party
December 17, 2014

Characters

- Maccabees (Judah, Mattiathas, extras)
- Hellenized Jews (guy offering pagan sacrifice, extras)
- Syrian-Greeks (army, King Antiochus)

Here's the story that we usually tell about Chanukkah:

- Once upon a time there was a war between the mean, terrible Seleucids (Syrian-Greeks), led by King Antiochus and the righteous, brave Maccabees, led by Judah Maccabee.
- You see King Antiochus demanded that the Jews abandon their religion and worship Greek gods. The Jews were terribly opposed. Thankfully, Judah Maccabee and his group of rebels came along!
- The Maccabees, as they were known, were small and weak, but they believed in themselves and their cause. They fought for religious freedom! They fought the Syrian-Greek empire and against all odds, they won!
- When they back to the holy Temple in Jerusalem – they found that the Syrian-Greeks had ruined it. There was pig blood in the Temple. And pagan idols. It was terrible.

- Now the holy lights were out, and there was only enough oil to last for one day. But a miracle happened. The flame lasted for eight whole nights (until new oil could be found).
- And this is the story of Chanukkah.

But here's the thing. It didn't quite happen like that:

- You see, Greek culture had been spreading throughout the Middle East, and some people didn't think it was so bad. It emphasized the power of reason and the importance of individual conscience. With Greek culture came theaters and gymnasiums, and debating societies. It was responsible for raising living standards.
- And the Maccabees weren't the only game in town. There were other Jews too. They were the Hellenized Jews, which means that they really liked Greek culture and philosophy and art and sports. So they dressed like them and acted like them, and they even tried to make it look like they weren't circumcised!
- This made the Maccabees, who were much more traditional, just furious. They would have none of it.

- There were economics at play here too. The Hellenized Jews were the elite. They had much more money than the Maccabees, and they were well-educated. They were trying to become part of sophisticated Greek culture. They had made it, and they wanted to cash in on the political and economic benefits of being part of the mainstream culture.
- But the Maccabees were poor. And they were very religious. Super religious. People called them fundamentalists and zealots. And they actually weren't so nice. They hated the Hellenized Jews – the assimilated Jews who were really into Greek culture – and they got mad. Really mad.
- Things were getting bad. King Antiochus was a pretty awful guy. And he issued a series of decrees that were just as awful as he was. He permitted the Temple to be desecrated, he took people's money, and he banned Jewish religious practice. If you refused to eat pork, you could get killed.
- Here's what happened. One of the leaders of the Maccabees – his name was Mattathias – spotted one of the Hellenized Jews who was about to offer a pagan sacrifice (that means he was about to do something really against Jewish practice). And he got so mad that he killed the guy. Things went downhill from there.

- So there was the war between the Syrian-Greeks and the Maccabees. But it wasn't really the mean Syrian-Greeks against the nice Maccabees. There really weren't good guys and bad guys. There was lots and lots of fighting and people did some pretty terrible things. And it was a civil war among the Jews as much as a war between the Jews and the Syrian-Greeks.
- Here's one of the worst parts. After the Maccabees won the war, they were in charge. They got to make all the rules. And it turns out, they were terrible leaders. Terrible! They didn't believe in reforms, and they forced people to act a certain way. And they were so corrupt and brutal and reactionary that they destroyed their society and made it so weak that the Romans came in and destroyed things once and for all.
- And if that's not enough, there's one more part. It's about the oil. This story took place in 164 BCE. The story about the miracle of the oil didn't appear until hundreds of years later. It was written by the Rabbis. Actually, they just made it up. See they had their own agenda. They read the story of the war with the Maccabees and they thought that we couldn't keep celebrating the war year after year.

- The Rabbis didn't want to encourage the Jews who lived in their time (after the Second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans) to fight for political independence.
- So they made up this story about a miracle of light, and chose a text for Chanukkah that was all about peace. It says, "Not by might and not by power" – the idea is that we don't have to always fight. Might and power only get us so far.
- Our history has a dark side, and I think we should talk about it even as we eat latkes and spin the dreidel, because there are lots of Jews today who are just as fundamentalist and reactionary and intolerant as the Maccabees were.
- We can keep our hearts open to miracles in our world – the miracles of compassion and justice and community. We can sing songs of hope, and we can honor the bravery and courage of people who wanted to change their world and make it a better place.