

**The Story of Hanukkah v. The History of Hanukkah:  
What Really Happened – And Does It Matter?  
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What's the story of Hanukkah? All of us, it seems, probably have a pretty good general idea of what is said to have happened. Some time, long, long ago, when the Greeks controlled the Land of Israel, the Greek ruler, Antiochus, imposed harsh measures on the Jewish people. In particular, he defiled the Temple in Jerusalem by insisting that pagan sacrifices be offered there. One day, a priest, Mattathias, and his five sons, known as the Maccabees, resisted. They led a revolt that ultimately was successful in ridding the land of Antiochus and his soldiers. And if we ask, "Why do we light candles on Hanukkah?" the answer is simple: when the Maccabees liberated the Temple Mount, they found it in shambles. They cleaned the place up, but when they got ready to light the Eternal Light which had gone out during Antiochus' rule, they found only one little cruse of pure oil that bore the seal of the High Priest on it. In that cruse was enough oil to last how long? That's right, one day. But, miracle of miracles, the oil lasted for eight days. And so, to this day, we light candles on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah in commemoration of that miracle.

So, that's the *story*. But isn't there more to it than that? What's the *history*? What really happened?

Well, if we want to try to find out what really happened, the first thing we should do is to look at the literature of the time. Now, since this is a story about what happened to the Jewish people, the first place we should go is to Jewish sources. But when we do that, we find something very surprising. First, we don't find any mention of Hanukkah in the Bible. That's not too surprising: Jews didn't fall under Greek rule until 333 B.C.E. when Alexander conquered the ancient world. It is true that most of the books of the Bible were completed by then. But the Bible wasn't sealed until 400 or so years later – over two centuries after the Maccabees. There was plenty of time for a book about Hanukkah to be written and included in the Bible, but that never happened. We might then go to the next classic Jewish literary source, the Mishnah, completed in around the year 200 in the Common Era. The Mishnah is a comprehensive compilation of Jewish law: it describes the Jewish law of Shabbat, of festivals, Jewish criminal law and civil law. There's a full

tractate on Sukkot, one on Pesach, another on the Megillah that we read on Purim. You name it, it's there. Well, it's there unless the subject is Hanukkah. Hanukkah is peripherally mentioned only seven times in the Mishnah – simply to refer to the date on the Jewish calendar – but there's no discussion of the observance of the holiday and there's certainly no historical account of what happened. No mention of the Maccabees, the fight with the Greeks, the lighting of the lamp. Nothing at all.

We can go to the next later source, the Talmud, which was completed in the sixth century. The Talmud is a huge work. Studying one page a day takes you seven years. If you were to do that, you'd find yourself reading about the story of Hanukkah on only one day, because only one page of the Talmud is devoted to the story of Hanukkah. And it's there (b. Shabbat 21b) that we see summarized the entire story of Hanukkah in about two or three sentences: “The Greeks entered the Temple and defiled all the oil there. When the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained only enough oil for one day. Yet a miracle occurred and they lit it and it burned for eight days. And so, on the following year, these days were declared to be a Festival with the recital of Hallel and praise.” Note what's missing: nothing about the military conflict, nothing about the actual leaders. The Hasmonean dynasty (*Beit Hashmonai*) is mentioned, but not any of the Maccabees. It's rather strange!

It's even stranger when we realize that there *are* earlier texts, texts from only 50 or 100 years after the Maccabean revolt, that do describe the events we're interested in. Those books do exist. Moreover, those books were originally Jewish books. That is, they were directed to a Jewish audience and several of them were originally written in Hebrew. *But the Jews didn't preserve them.* Those books never made it into the Bible. Instead, they were pushed to the side. Their Greek versions were preserved, which is why we can read them today. But not by the Jews. Instead, those books were eventually preserved by Christians, who had their own reasons for preserving them.

What do those books say?

Well, let's take a look at the books of the Maccabees. The first book was written around the year 100 BCE in Hebrew; the second book some decades later in Greek. It's there that we learn of the persecutions of Antiochus, such as the prohibitions against

circumcision and reading Torah, and of the defiling of the Temple. That's all very familiar. But then we read something that isn't as familiar. We learn that "many Jews gladly adopted the religion of [Antiochus] the King; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the Sabbath." (I Macc. 1:43). That's new. And then we read of the event that sparked the revolt: the King's officers came to the town of Modi'in, where Mattathias, the priest, lived with his five sons. (We're told that he moved there from Jerusalem, presumably in response to the persecutions.) And the King's officers assembled everyone in the public square and turned to Mattathias and said, "You are a leader here. Be the first to come and do what the King commands." But Mattathias responded and said, "Far be it from us to deviate from our religion either to the left or to the right." **At that point, a Jew came forward in the sight of all to offer the pagan sacrifice on the altar. Mattathias, in his zeal, became outraged and he ran and killed the Jew right there up on the altar.** Only then did he and his sons kill the King's officer. And then he cried out, "Whoever is zealous for the Torah and supports the *brit*, the covenant, follow me!" And off they went into the hills.

Now, let's think about this for a moment. Assuming that it's accurate, why might this story have disappeared from the Jewish accounts of Hanukkah? Why might the Jews not have wanted to preserve this memory?

First of all, we learn that some Jews were all too happy to abandon Judaism and adopt Greek ways. Second, we learn that the struggle, the conflict, that broke out was as much a *civil* conflict as it was a fight against an oppressive ruler. Third, Mattathias and his sons picked up weapons and killed their fellow Jews as well as the Greek officials – hardly the kind of activity that we would expect later Jewish leaders to approve of.

The books of Maccabees don't seem to know anything about oil burning for eight nights. Their explanation for the eight day festival is simple: The text tells us (2 Macc. 10:1-8) that during the year of the revolt, the Maccabees were on the run and were unable to celebrate the festival of Sukkot. So when they finally liberated the Temple, they made up for it, two and a half months later, with an eight-day festival. There's nothing there about a cruse of oil. Nothing about oil lasting for eight days.

In the books of the Maccabees the focus is on the military campaign. We also learn about the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty under the Hasmoneans. Now, you might

think that the Talmud would be thrilled about that. Why don't they get more than a page in the Talmud?

The answer is that the Hasmoneans did not remain true to their principles. They became corrupt. "They began as rebels against the Seleucid empire, but less than ten years after Judah's death, his brother was appointed high priest by [none other than a relative] of Antiochus Epiphanes!" (Shaye Cohen, "*From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*," p.15) The next generation of Hasmoneans all took Greek names and Greek ways. Have you ever read *Animal Farm*? Like the pigs who, after overthrowing the farmers began to look like them, the Hasmoneans quickly moved away from their pietistic origins. They became the enemies of the proto-rabbis who created the Judaism we know today. To the rabbis – the scholars and sages who produced the Talmud – the Hasmoneans were offensive; they were an embarrassment. The less said about them, the better.

Hmm. So the history of Hanukkah does not present a particularly inspiring story. It's no surprise that, centuries later, the Jews realized that they had a problem with Hanukkah. They had since become convinced, following two disastrous wars with Rome, that military resistance to gentile rule was not the proper way to proceed, nor was infighting amongst the Jews – two prominent elements in the historical background to Hanukkah. Instead, they believed, national unity and faith in God were vital to the preservation of Judaism, and the Jewish people. And so those aspects of the story that didn't comport with their world view, namely the part about the civil war, the part about the military victory, even the names of the leaders, like Judah Maccabee, whom they associated with violence and corruption – those aspects they allowed to disappear. Instead, other aspects were allowed to take center stage.

The military victory of the Hasmoneans over Greek rule receded in Jewish consciousness, and a different, very religious miracle became prominent: the miracle of the oil burning for eight days instead of one. The rabbis were trying to redirect our focus away from human rulers and human generals – whom, they knew (as do we) -- are flawed – to the Holy One, Blessed be He – in whom they wanted us to have faith, and to whom they wanted us to turn as the source of light, enlightenment, hope and freedom. And in so doing, what had been a celebration of a military victory became a source of hope during

centuries of despair, keeping Jews believing that somehow, some day, they would be redeemed.

Now, there's one final question to consider: Does it matter? Does it matter what really happened? Why not just pass on the story and forget the complex and confusing history?

One of my favorite Westerns is "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." Directed by John Ford, it stars John Wayne, Lee Marvin, Jimmy Stewart and a host of other terrific actors. In it, Jimmy Stewart is a well-known and well-regarded Senator from one of the Western states around whom a wonderful legend has grown. In the course of the film, it becomes clear "what really happened." The facts don't quite comport with the legend. He confesses up to the editor of the local newspaper and, in a scene that would never take place in Washington today, the editor takes his notes, puts them in the stove and says, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." That seems to stand for the proposition that when a story is complicated, or contradicted by history, we should forget about the facts.

There's a point to that. After all, all during two thousand years of Jewish life in the diaspora, when taking up arms and resisting foreign rule wasn't going to get us any closer to national independence, that story about the oil was a very appropriate one to focus on. It didn't make sense to focus on the historical account.

But in the late 1800s, when the Zionist revolution began, when Jews began to realize that they really could address Jewish powerlessness in the world – but only if they were willing to take action, buy land, work the land and, if necessary, take up arms -- the early Zionists rediscovered and re-appropriated the historical account of the Maccabean struggle. It was vital in giving them encouragement and hope.

There is a time for the story about the oil, and there is a time for the story of the Maccabees. There is a time for *Maoz Tzur*, in which we pray for the day when "[**God**] will eliminate our enemies (*l'et tachin matbeach mi-tsar ha-m'nabeach*)," and there is a time for the modern Zionist song, "*Mi Yimalel*," in which we cry out that, "In every age a hero or sage came to our aid, and now **all Israel must as one arise and redeem itself through deed and sacrifice** (*U'vyameinu kol am Yisrael yitached yakum v'yigael*)." There's a time to pray to God and there's a time to act.

Of course, the difficult question has always been: When should we do one, and when should we do the other?

The story of the oil is a hopeful one. It can inspire us during difficult days, when we might otherwise feel impotent and powerless, when despair might overcome us.

The historical account teaches us the dangers of assimilation, the necessity of remaining true to our principles, and how easy it is (particularly for those in power) to become corrupt, to lose their sense of mission.

When we are teaching our children or our grandchildren about Hanukkah, we can and should teach them that legend of the cruse of oil burning for eight days. It's complicated to start telling our kids about a civil war, about corrupt Hasmoneans, about Mattathias killing a Jewish Hellenizer.

And yet, at a certain point we should also share with them the historical account, when it's appropriate to do that. Notwithstanding that winning line in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," *that film presents the facts as well as the legend* – and that's what makes it so interesting. We shouldn't be afraid to expose ourselves and our children to history as well as to story.

There is religious and spiritual depth in history as well as in story. In their time, the rabbis may have been justified in suppressing some rather unpleasant facts about the Maccabees, and what they become. But where would we be without them?

I hope that all of us will light Hanukkah candles this coming Hanukkah. I hope we will do so aware that there are many ways to look at, to understand, and to interpret what happened during the 160s before the Common Era in the land of Judea. There are many lessons we can draw from those events and from their annual commemoration.

Whether we focus on the oil or on the military victory; whether we focus on the risks posed by assimilation or those posed by lack of faith; -- any way we look at it, it's fairly miraculous that this small people that was barely a speck in the vast Near East is alive and well two thousand years later, and the descendants of the Greeks and the Romans and the other peoples who surrounded us then are today nowhere to be seen. There's the miracle of the oil, and there's the miracle of the military victory. Let's celebrate each of them, and let's have ourselves a happy holiday. Happy Hanukkah!