



Chanukkah Is About Today

You've probably heard over and over that Chanukkah is a "minor" holy day. Something we make a big deal about especially in modern America – something especially for Jewish children in a Christmas-saturated environment.

It's true, Chanukkah is no Passover. But in fact, it's not a new thing, this question about how significant Chanukkah really is. In fact, the Jewish religious authorities in the time of the Talmud were anti-Chanukkah. At a time when Jews were under the thumb of Roman, Byzantine, and Sasanian emperors, the rabbis were none too keen on celebrating an uprising against imperial power. They managed to wrestle Chanukkah down to just a couple of paragraphs in the sprawling Talmud and left pretty much a single story about divine light, the cruse of oil in the Temple that lasted eight days.

In fact, Chanukkah has always been about the relationship of Jews and Judaism to the majority culture, its values and its forces. That's in fact what the original events were all about. So it's worth taking an adult look at the Chanukkah story.

The events of Chanukkah took place in the period of about 180-160 B.C.E. This was about 150 years after the conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedon, who brought the Land of Israel into the cultural and political world of Hellenism.

In many ways, Hellenism was the American culture of its time. There was a language, Greek, that spread to become a common language through much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Hellenism was a dominant world culture. Its positive elements included philosophy, art, and international trade. All of these linked people together across a large proportion of the world, and brought prosperity and material advancement. The negative side of Hellenism included a worship of the physical body and a focus on beauty and strength above other values. Pagan values that at their worst crushed human values.

The Jews in the Land of Israel, as well as those in exile all around the Mediterranean Sea, were deeply influenced by Hellenism. Each regional Jewish community faced the question of how much to adapt to Hellenism, whether to assimilate completely or in part, or whether to remain separate. Some Jews were ready to give up Judaism entirely as archaic and irrelevant. Most tried to integrate the new culture and ideas, and many leaders tried to enrich Judaism with the best of Hellenism.

It wasn't a one-way street. Because many Hellenists valued learning and culture in general, some non-Jews learned about Judaism and decided that it was a kind of pure philosophy, a truth without all the trappings of pagan gods and rituals. About a century after Alexander the Great, who himself had been a student of Aristotle, the Torah was translated into Greek. According to a legend written around the same time as the story of Chanukkah, a Hellenistic emperor in fact commissioned a Greek version of the Torah. He thought his library would not be complete without it. He invited scholars from Jerusalem to be his guest in Egypt, threw them a kosher banquet, and treated them like respected Greek philosophers!

Meanwhile at the Temple in Jerusalem, there was corruption among the *kohanim*, the priestly leadership of the Jews. The Temple was not only a religious center, but a power and financial center as well because of the gifts and offerings that people would bring. Ambitious people among the priests were vying for authority over the Temple. Some tried to curry favor with different imperial officials, by offering political support or outright bribes.

Just like today, the Land of Israel was situated geographically at a military and economic crossroads. Just before the events of the Chanukkah story, the land changed hands. When Alexander died, his empire had been split in half, ruled from capitals in Egypt and in Syria. Initially the Egypt-based rulers controlled Judea, and they were on the whole tolerant of the Jews. But then the Seleucids, the "Syrian-Greeks" we know from the Chanukkah story, took over. Even then, the situation of the Jews did not change right away.

A new and crazy emperor, Antiochus IV, came to power in Syria. He believed that he was himself a god. He ordered the takeover of the Temple in Jerusalem and banned key Jewish practices. Some of the historical sources say that he took advantage of the weakness of both Jewish society and the officials beneath him. Others say that the Jewish assimilationists actively invited his intervention and his decrees.

The group we know as the Maccabees came to lead the revolt against Antiochus. They were themselves *kohanim*, but separate from the corrupt priests of Jerusalem. Their family name was Chashmonai ("Hasmoneans"); their patriarch was Matityahu (Mattathias) and his sons included Yehudah (Judah).

They believed in Jewish distinctiveness, but they also believed in some modern adaptation to Hellenism. So for instance, during their three-year revolt that began in the 160s B.C.E., they made certain decisions that were not so traditionally Jewish. They decided fighting on Shabbat was permitted in order to save lives. Their battle plan had some of the same features that the modern Israel Defense Forces would use in 1948 and 1967.

When they finally drove out Antiochus' forces, the Maccabees led both a traditional religious revival and a new approach to Jewish culture and power. They instituted a new annual festival, Chanukkah, but based it on the Sukkot festival that had gone unmarked in the Temple in the prior years. (That's initially why Chanukkah is eight days; the story of the oil came

hundreds of years later.) They installed themselves as kings, even though they were not descendants of King David. Their leaders were known by both Hebrew and Greek names.

For me, celebrating Chanukkah reminds me that these issues of politics, value priorities, war, corruption based on money, and majority-minority relations are not new things. The candles remind me that light has to be shed on these matters, all the time.

The candles, against the darkness, are a symbol of the dedication and integrity it takes to keep our eyes open and to find and hold our moral center of gravity. The candles also remind me that Judaism could have been extinguished, could have burned out against all the political, military, economic, and cultural forces of that time. But it was not –Judaism bounced back, renewed and even began to reinvent itself.

In recent years, I've come to understand that the real miracle is that someone thought to store away a cruse of oil in the first place long before. Someone anticipated a time when we would lose hope. When our individual light, or the light of Judaism itself, would seem like they were running out. So they gave us this story, for us to find when we most need a story of hope. By standing up in the face of challenges of identity and moral choice in a “modern” world, our ancestors hid away a spark for us to find and then expand.

So Chanukkah is not just a children's story. It resonates for us in America today for all the same reasons it has resonated since the days of the Maccabees. Maybe it's not Passover, but Chanukkah is hardly minor.

Chag Urim Same'ach – A Joyous Festival of Lights,

Rabbi Jon

