

Hanukkah and Purim: Similar yet Different

Introduction

-Hanukkah and Purim, the next two holidays, are not in Torah: Both are rabbinic.

-Torah only has Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the three pilgrimage festivals – Pessah, Shavuot and Sukkot.

-Both colorful – stay in mind of kids.

-Both celebrate Jewish victory over persecution.

-Both miraculous: We recite *Al HaNissim* on both.

-Both so important rabbis turned their observance into post-Torah (rabbinic) commandments.

YET:

-The story of Purim has a book in the Bible (Esther), a tractate in the Talmud (Megillah) and a volume in the Midrash (Esther Rabbah). Hanukkah has none of them. It rates only a few mentions in Talmud [Shabbat 21a-24a], as an appendage to a discussion of what wicks and oils one can use for Shabbat lights.

-The Book of Esther does not mention God, yet is in the Bible; the Books of Maccabees do, yet are not in the Bible.

-The story of Purim is not known outside the Bible, yet is in the Bible. The events of Hanukkah are known outside the Bible, yet are not in the Bible.

-Hallel (psalms of praise for God) recited on Hanukkah, but not Purim.

-Hanukkah began with the physical (armed rebellion) and ended with the spiritual (rededication of the Temple). Purim began with the spiritual (prayer and fasting) and ended with the physical (armed resistance to killers).

-On Purim, persecutors wanted to kill ALL the Jews. On Hanukkah, persecutors wanted to kill only observant Jews.

Note: The State of Israel is no less a miracle than those celebrated by Hanukkah and Purim.

-We will explore:

- History behind each
- How each celebrated – commandments and customs
- Authorship of biblical books
- Talmudic debates on what books to include in Bible (Esther yes; Maccabees no)

-Special Hanukkah topics

- Hanukkah in the Bible?
- Menorahs on Public Property?
- Story of the mother and her seven sons
- “Hanukkah bush”
- Other

-Special Purim topics

- Should you get drunk on Purim?
- Issue of intermarriage
- Vashti, a feminist icon?
- To bow or not to bow?
- Other

What does Hanukkah commemorate?

- First recorded struggle for religious freedom
- Story in extra-biblical Books of Maccabees
- I wrote this children's story for the "Hanukkah diskette", part of Judaica software my then-ten-year-old son Michael and I produced in the late 1980s:

The story of Hanukkah (for children)

Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi

A long, long time ago -- more than two thousand years ago! -- the Jews were living happily in the land of Israel. They had a beautiful Temple in which they worshipped God. They studied the Torah and followed the Jewish traditions.

Then one day, a conqueror named Alexander invaded the land and made it part of his Greek empire. When he died, a wicked king named Antiochus became the ruler of the Jews.

Antiochus was wicked because he would not let the Jews worship God in their own way. He wanted them to worship the Greek gods. These gods were not real, but the Greek people believed they were. He also wanted them to worship him! Can you imagine, people worshipping a man instead of God?

Antiochus tried to prevent the Jews from teaching the Torah to their children. He burned Torah scrolls and defiled the Temple. He would not allow the Jews to follow their traditions. He forced them to eat foods that were forbidden by the Torah. He made them work on Shabbat. He brought Greek statues in the Temple.

He even killed many, many Jews who refused to obey him. Everybody was afraid of him.

The Jews were very sad, but instead of crying too much they decided to fight back. A Jewish priest named Mattathias went up to the mountains to lead the fight. He had five sons: Eleazar, Simon, John, Jonathan, and Judah.

After Mattathias died, Judah became the leader of the Jews. He was called "Judah Maccabee". In Hebrew, this means "Judah the Hammer", because he was so good at hitting back the wicked invaders. The people loved him and followed him.

Judah fought many battles with the Greeks, and won most of them. He won even though the Greeks had a lot more weapons and a lot more soldiers than Judah.

The most important battle was the one where he took Jerusalem back from the invaders. Jerusalem is the city where the Temple stood. It is the capital of the state of Israel today.

When Judah Maccabee led the Jews back to Jerusalem and the Temple, he found that much had been destroyed, and had to be rebuilt. When the Temple had been repaired, the Jews looked for special oil to light a menorah, to celebrate their victory.

But they could only find one small cruse of oil. It was so small that it could light the menorah for only one day.

But then a miracle happened: The oil burned for eight days, not just one!

The people were so happy they decided to have a special celebration each year, to remember that miracle, and to remember their victory over Antiochus. They decided the celebration would last eight days, because the oil burned for eight days.

What is the name of this celebration? You guessed it: It's Hanukkah! Hanukkah is a Hebrew word that means "dedication", because at Hanukkah we remember the time when the Temple was again dedicated to the worship of God.

On Hanukkah we eat many foods that have been fried in oil, to remember the oil that lasted for eight days. Some of these foods are potato pancakes, called "latkes", and jelly doughnuts, called "sufganiyot".

But most of all, we light candles at Hanukkah: One candle on the first day, two candles on the second day, and so on until the eighth day.

These lights remind us of the menorah that Judah Maccabee lit when he took Jerusalem back. They remind us that we must fight for the right to follow our own Jewish traditions. The lights also remind us that, even when we feel very sad, there is always hope for a brighter tomorrow.

What does Purim commemorate?

Esther lives in Persia. Her cousin Mordechai raises her as his daughter. Esther becomes part of King Ahashverosh's harem. He makes her queen, but does not know she is Jewish. Mordechai advises her not to tell. Haman, advisor to the king, hates Mordechai because Mordechai refused to bow down to him. So he plans to kill all the Jews, telling the king:

There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your realm. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not observe the king's laws.

Therefore it is not befitting the king to tolerate them. [Esther 3:8]

The king tells Haman to do as he pleases with them. Mordechai convinces Esther to plead for her people. She and other Jews fast for three days, then she goes to see the king, tells him who she is, and informs him of Haman's plot. The king allows the Jews to arm themselves and fight their killers, and they prevail. Scholars believe that King Ahashverosh was Xerxes I of Persia (485-465 BCE).

The Book of Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not mention God. However:

-Mordechai does say that if Esther will not plead for her people, the Jews will be saved by "someone else", but details are not spelled out:

Mordechai [told] Esther: Do not think that you yourself shall escape [because you are] in the king's palace, any more than the rest of the Jews. If you remain silent, then relief and deliverance shall come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house shall be destroyed. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? [Esther 4:13-14]

-Haman's wife and his advisers do tell him:

If Mordechai is really of the seed of the Jews, then you will not prevail against him, but you shall surely fall before him. [Esther 6:13]

-The Shabbat before Purim is *Shabbat Zakhor* -- The Sabbath of Remembrance. The first words of the Torah portion are:

Remember (*Zakhor*) what Amalek did to you as you came out of Egypt ... You will not forget. [Deut. 25:17-19]

Haman is a descendant of Amalek, because the Bible calls him an Agagite, and Agag was king of the Amalekites fighting King Saul [1Samuel 15:1-34] (which is the haftarah of the week).

How is Hanukkah observed?

-Mitzvah: Light the hanukiah after sunset on the eve of each of the eight days of Hanukkah, from 25 Kislev on.

-“Publicize the miracle” (*Pirsumay Nisa*): Place hanukiah near a window, visible from the street, “except in times of danger”. [Shabbat 21b]

Rava asked: [If there is a choice between lighting] the Hanukkah lights and saying kiddush over the wine [for the Sanctification of Shabbat], is [kiddush] more important, because it is a more frequent obligation [weekly, whereas kindling the Hanukkah lights is only an annual event]? Or are the Hanukkah lights preferable, on account of publicizing the miracle? After asking, he himself answered it: The Hanukkah lights are preferable, because they publicize the miracle. [Shabbat 23b]

Chabad has been erecting giant hanukiot all over the world.

-Make special effort to observe mitzvah. Rambam:

It is said that “Even he who depends on charity should borrow, or sell his cloak, to buy oil and lamps and light the Hanukkah lights” [Rambam, Yad, Megillah va-Hanukkah 4:12].

-Either one hanukiah per household or one per family member:

Our Rabbis taught: The commandment of Hanukkah [requires] one [hanukiah] for a man and his household. The zealous [kindle] a [hanukiah] for each member [of the household]. [Shabbat 21b]

-Put candles in hanukiah from right to left: One for the first day, two for the second day, etc.:

Beth Shammai maintain: On the first day 8 lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced [one per day]; but Beth Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased [one per day].... Beth Hillel's reason is that in [matters of] holiness, we increase but do not reduce [*Maalin bakodesh, ve-en moridin*]. [Shabbat 21b]

-Light an extra candle (the “*shammash*”, or “attendant”) to light the others, one by one, from left to right. Total candles needed: 44.

-You may use an oil menorah (Sephardic tradition). Olive oil is preferred because it “yields a clearer light”. [Shabbat 23a]

-Recite three blessings before lighting: For the lights, for the miracle, for the season (“*sheheheyanu*” -- first night only).

-Recite “*Hannerot hallalu*” (“These lights”)

-Add *Al HaNissim* to daily prayers and Grace after Meals:

And [we thank You] for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, for the saving acts, and for the wonders which You have wrought for our ancestors in those days, at this time.

[Then recalls events of Hanukkah:]

In the days of Matityahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons, when the wicked Hellenic government rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the

decrees of Your will. But You, in Your abounding mercies, stood by them in the time of their distress. You waged their battles, defended their rights, and avenged the wrong done to them. You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah. You made a great and holy name for Yourself in Your world, and effected a great deliverance and redemption for Your people Israel to this very day. Then Your children entered the shrine of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courtyards, and instituted these eight days of Hanukkah to give thanks and praise to Your great Name.

- Sing traditional songs (e.g. "*Ma'oz Tzur*")
- Sephardim recite Psalm 30, "A psalm and song at the dedication of the house".
- Hanukkah days are regular workdays (except for Shabbat).
- Do not work while the lights are burning.
- Do not use the lights for any purpose (light, heat, beauty, etc.)
- Customary to eat foods fried in oil (latkes, or *levivot* -- potato pancakes; *sufganiyot* -- doughnuts).
- Do not fast. [Shabbat 21b]
- Feasts are customary.
- Give children money (Hanukkah "*gelt*") or other gifts.
- Encourage them to play with dreidels ("*s'vivon*"), which are small tops with four sides, with the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimel*, *heh*, and *shin* on each side (for "*nes gadol haya sham*", "a great miracle happened there"). In Israel *shin* becomes *peh* (for "*nes gadol haya po*", "a great miracle happened here").
- Israel has torch relay races from Modi'in, where the Maccabean revolt began. Large Hanukiah kindled atop Knesset and other buildings, visible from afar.
- Read Torah section describing sacrifices at dedication of Sanctuary, and lighting of the Menorah. [Numbers 7:1-8:4]
- Read haftarah section where Zechariah encourages rebuilding of Temple that had been destroyed in 586 BCE. [Zechariah 2:14-4:7]
- Recite Hallel at services.
- Some consider Hanukkah lights to symbolize the modern reawakening of the Jewish people.

How is Purim observed?

-Mitzvah: Listen to the reading of the Megillah (Scroll of Esther) on the eve, and then again on the day, of Purim (14 Adar, or 14 Adar II in leap years). Say blessing before.

-The actual mitzvah is to read the Megillah aloud. But saying "Amen" after someone else reads it aloud fulfills obligation.

-When you hear Haman's name, boo, hiss, stamp your feet, twirl graggers (*ra-ashanim*, or noisemakers), and give other sonorous signs of disapproval to drown out his name. Purim is the only time when it's a mitzvah to make noise!

-Add *Al HaNissim* to daily prayers and grace after meals:

And [we thank You] for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, for the saving acts, and for the wonders which You have wrought for our ancestors in those days, at this time.

[Then recall events of Purim:]

In the Days of Mordechai and Esther, in Shushan, the capital, when Haman, the wicked, rose up against them and sought to destroy, to slay, and to exterminate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, on the same day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions; But You, in Your abundant mercy, nullified his counsel and frustrated his intention and caused his design to return upon his own head and they hanged him and his sons on the gallows.

-Do not recite Hallel.

-Fast on the day before Purim (Fast of Esther, 13 Adar), from 3 hours before sunrise to 40 minutes after sunset, to commemorate the day of fasting and prayer the Jews held before their victory.

-Persian (Iranian) Jews have always adhered more strictly than others to the Fast of Esther on 13 Adar.

-Bible says:

They are to observe these as days of feasting and gladness, and for sending delicacies to one another, and giving gifts to the poor. [Esther 9:22]

So:

-Eat a festive meal on the day of Purim, with family and friends (*se'udat Purim*).

-Joke: A Jew was eating a large meal on 13 Adar, the day of the Fast of Esther. When his friends took him to task, he said: "Mordechai was wrong in not bowing down to Haman, thereby endangering his whole community." The next day the same man was seen enjoying the Purim *se'udah*, the traditional festive meal of Purim. When asked why he turned observant from one day to the next, he said: "I listened to the reading of

the Megillah in shul this morning, and concluded I was wrong. Mordechai had indeed acted properly. So today I am repenting and observing the Purim tradition.” ☺

- Eat hamantaschen (or *Oznay Haman* -- Haman's ears) -- triangular cookies, in the shape of Haman's hat, filled with jam or poppy seeds.

- Become so drunk that you cannot tell the difference between “Baruch *Mordechai*” (“Blessed be Mordechai”) and “*Arur Haman*” (“Cursed be Haman”). A Talmudic injunction!

- Go to a community Purim carnival wearing a mask or a costume. They are usually held on the nearest Sunday. Play games like “Pin the hat on Haman's head”, “Find your way to Shushan”, etc. Large public parades (“*Adloyada*”) in Israel.

- Listen to a Purim spiel, a funny play reenacting the story of Purim. The script is usually original and local.

- Send gifts of food to friends (cookies, fruit, beverages) (*mishloach manot*). The messengers are usually children.

- Give charity (*tzedakah*) to the poor, preferably directly (*mattanot la-evyonim*).

- Give 3 half-dollar coins to charity to commemorate the half-shekel each Jew gave at the time of the Temple (*Machatzit Hashekel*).

- Some Jewish communities also celebrate a “local” Purim, to commemorate their deliverance from a great danger. The celebration follows the pattern of Purim (scroll reading, prayers of thanksgiving, banquet, etc.). Examples:

- Narbonne (29 Adar, since 1236)

- Frankfurt (20 Adar, since 1616)

- Leghorn (22 Shevat, since 1743)

- Cairo (28 Adar, since 1524). (I grew up with it.) Story:

In 1524 the Governor of Egypt, Ahmed Pasha, was going to exterminate all the Jews of Cairo unless an impossible sum of money was paid to him, much more than all their assets combined. But he was also plotting against the Emperor, Suleiman. On the deadline he set for the Jews, the 28th of Adar, he was assassinated by troops loyal to the Emperor, and the Jews were saved. Since that time, a scroll recounting that story was read in Egyptian synagogues on that day, *Purim Mitzrayim*, the Purim of Egypt.

- In Europe, some elected a talmudic student as rabbi for the day.

- Purim will be observed forever:

- Bible:

These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city. These days of Purim should not fail to be observed among the Jews, nor the memory of them perish from their descendants. [Esther 9:28]

- Talmud:

-In the Time to Come all Prophets and Writings will lose their worth, except for the Torah of Moses and the Book of Esther. [Megillah Y 1:5]

-Our rabbis taught: 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses prophesied to Israel, and they neither took away from nor added to what is written in the Torah, except for the reading of the Megillah. [Megillah 14a]

-Midrash:

All festivals will be abolished in the future except Purim and Yom Kippur. [Yalkut Shim'oni on Proverbs 9:2]

The seven rabbinic mitzvot

They are:

- 1-Recite a blessing before each enjoyment, e.g.:
 - Food: *Motzi, mezonot, ha-etz, ha-adamah, etc.*
 - Drink: *Boreh peri haggafen, shehakol nih'ye bidvaro, etc.*
 - Other: *Boreh minnei b'samim, boreh me-orei ha-esh, ha-mavdil ben kodesh l'chol, leshev ba'sukah, likvo'a m'zuza, shehecheyyanu, al hat-villa, hagomel, etc.*
- 2-Wash hands ritually before eating bread (*al netillat yadayim*)
- 3-Kindle Shabbat lights (*le-hadlik ner shel Shabbat*)
- 4-Build an eruv to be able to carry into public areas on Shabbat (*al mitzvat eruv*)
- 5-Recite the Hallel psalms on holy days (*likro et ha-hallel*)
- 6-Light the Hanukkah lights (*le-hadlik ner shel Hanukkah*)
- 7-Read the Megillah (Scroll of Esther) on Purim (*al mikra megillah*)

The last three have to do with Hanukkah and Purim.

These are rabbinic mitzvot (*d'rabbanan*), but are treated as biblical mitzvot (*d'oraita*), because preceded by:

Baruch atta HaShem Elokenu melech ha-olam, (asher kidshanu bemitzvotav, vetzivanu)...

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, (Who has sanctified us by your commandments, and has commanded us to)...

“*Keter Torah*” (“The Crown of the Torah”) = 620 (613+7).

Divine origin implied in commandment to follow instructions of rabbis [Deuteronomy 17:11, 32:7; Shabbat 23a].

Hallel

Hallel means “praise”. Psalm 136 is called The Great Hallel (*Hallel HaGadol*) because it praises God profusely and every other line is:

Ki leolam hasdo

For His mercy endures forever

What we call “The Hallel” consists of six other Psalms, 113-118, that also praise God. So the Talmud asks, since we have The Great Hallel, why do we need the other one? [Pesachim 118a] And it answers: Because it contains five fundamental Jewish themes:

- 1-The Exodus
- 2-The Spitting of the Sea

- 3-The Giving of the Torah
- 4-The Resurrection of the Dead
- 5-The Coming of the Messiah
- 1-The Exodus in “*Betset Yisrael miMitzrayim* -- When Israel came out of Egypt” [Ps 114:1]
- 2-The Spitting of the Sea in “*Hayyam ra'a vayyanos* -- The sea saw and fled” [Ps 114:3]
- 3-The Giving of the Torah in “*He-harim rakedu che-elim* -- The mountains skipped like rams” [Ps 114:4]
- 4-The Resurrection of the Dead in “*Et-halech lifnei HaShem [be-artzot ha-chayyim]* -- I shall walk before the Lord [in the land of the living]” [Ps 116:9.]
- 5-The coming of the Messiah in “*Lo lanu, HaShem, lo lanu* -- Not for our sake, O Lord, not for our sake, [redeem us]”. [Ps 115:1]

The “regular” Hallel is called the “Egyptian Hallel” because it emphasizes the Exodus. It is recited on Pessah, Shavuot, Sukkot, Hanukkah and Rosh Chodesh. (Now also Yom Haatsmaut.)

- Not on Purim (because miracle not in Israel, and Jews stills subjects of foreign king after miracle) [Megillah 14a]
- Not on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur. Talmud:
Is it seemly for the king to be sitting on His Throne of Judgment, with the Books of Life and Death open before Him, and for the people to sing joyful praises to Him? [Arachin 10b]
- Only partial Hallel (*Chatzi*) on the last six days of Pessah (because of the damage done to Egypt) and on Rosh Chodesh (because introduced much later).

Near the end, in “*Odcha ki anitani*”, custom is to repeat each verse twice. Rashi: It's because earlier part of Ps 118 repeats *themes* twice, such as:

- It is better to take refuge in God than to trust in man.
- It is better to take refuge in God than to trust in princes.
- The right hand of God does valiantly.
- The right hand of God is exalted.

but only up to “*Odcha*”. So people decided to continue the pattern to the end of the psalm. We rise during Hallel because it testifies to Hashem's miracles and testimony must be made standing [Mishnah Berurah 422:28].

Behind the Bible

How did the Tanach get put together?
What was included and what was left out?
And why?

The Talmud lists the authors of all the biblical Books:

- Umi ch'tavan?* And who are the writers [of the Scriptures]?
- Moshe katav sifro*, Moses wrote his book [that is, the Torah, dictated by God],
- uparshat Bilaam*, and the parts dealing with the gentile prophet Bilaam, in the Book of Numbers, [Num. 23-24]
- v'lyyov*, and the Book of Job.
- Yehoshua katav sifro*, Joshua wrote his book,
- ve-shmona f'sukim she-baTorah*, and [the last] eight verses of the Torah [which deal with the death of Moses].
- Samuel wrote his book and the Books of Judges and Ruth.
- [King] David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman [the Ezrahite], Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korach.
- Jeremiah wrote his book, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations.
- [King] Hezekiah and his assistants wrote [compiled?] Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

[Tradition ascribes Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to King Solomon when he was young/middle-aged/old]

- The Men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Daniel, and the Scroll of Esther.

[The Men of the Great Assembly, or *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*, were a group of 120 sages that ruled between the age of the prophets (ending with Malachi, near end of Babylonian exile) and the age of the rabbis, ongoing.]

- Ezra wrote his book and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time... Who then completed it? Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. [Bava Batra 14b-15a]

So the Torah was dictated to Moses by God, but all subsequent books after the Torah were written by inspired individuals. Some of these books were controversial, but after much discussion the Sages accepted them as part of the Bible. Many other books were examined, found to be unacceptable, and rejected.

Let us examine first the controversial books that were eventually accepted. (Note: When a book is deemed “holy” or “inspired”, the

Talmud says it “defiles the hands”, meaning it requires handwashing after handling the scroll. The following quotes will simply say “holy”.)

-The Song of Songs. Controversial because does not mention God explicitly and deemed too erotic:

-Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies. [Song of Songs 4:5]

-You are all beautiful, my love; there is no blemish in you. [Song of Songs 4:7]

Eventually it came to be understood as a love poem between God and the Jews, not between a man and a woman. Akiva was champion:

Rabbi Akiva said... The whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies. [Mishna, Yadayim 3:5]

-The Book of Ecclesiastes. Most controversial because too pessimistic, self-contradictory, and just one man’s opinion:

-Havel havalim, amar Kohelet, havel havalim, hakol havel

Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. [Ecc. 1:1]

-Ma yitron ha-Adam bechol ‘amalo she-yaamol tachat ha-shemesh?

What does a man gain from all his labor under the sun? [Ecc. 1:3]

-Ve-en kol chadash tachat ha-shemesh

And there is nothing new under the sun. [Ecc. 1:9]

Talmud:

-The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory. Yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching.

-Its beginning is...

What profit does man have of all his labor under the sun? [Eccl. 1:3]

...Under the sun he has none, but he has [profit] before the sun.

[That is, he profits if he toils in the Torah, which existed before the sun]

[Pes. 54a; Ned. 39b].

-Its end is...:

Let us hear the conclusion of the matter, fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole of man... [Eccl. 12:13]

The entire world was created only for the sake of this [type of] man.

[Shabbat 30b]

Midrash:

Rabbi Benjamin bar Levi stated: The Sages wanted to exclude the Book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned towards heresy. They argued: Was it right that Solomon should have said the following:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth [Eccl. 11:9]?

Moses said:

Do not seek after your own heart and your own eyes [Num. 15:39], but Solomon said:

Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes [Eccl. 11:9]!

What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said:

But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment [Eccl. 11:9],

they admitted that Solomon had spoken well...

[But again,] should Solomon have uttered the following:

What does a man gain from all his labor [under the sun]? [Eccl. 1:3]

This might imply, might it not, that labor in the study of the Torah was also included? On the other hand, they argued, if he had said "of all labor" and left it at that, we might have thought that he meant to include also labor in the study of the Torah. However, he does not say this, but says, "of all HIS labor", implying that it is in his own labor that man finds no profit, but that he does find profit in the labor of studying Torah.

Rabbi Yudan explained that "under the sun" he has no profit, but "above the sun" [in heaven] he does. [Leviticus R. 28:1]

Another challenge:

Rabbi Shim'on b. Menasia said: Ecclesiastes [is not holy] because it contains only the wisdom of Solomon [that is, no divine inspiration]. They said to him, [But Solomon also wrote] "3000 proverbs". [1Kings, 5:12] [Since these were not written down and Ecclesiastes was, we conclude that Ecclesiastes was inspired.] [Megillah 7a]

-The Book of Esther. Controversial because it does not mention God and Purim is not biblically mandated. Jerusalem Talmud:

The rabbis said: "Have we not had enough of impending oppressions? Do you want to increase them by recalling the oppression of Haman?"

Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan:

"85 elders, including 30 prophets, refused to recognize the Feast of Purim. They said: Moses has told us that no prophet should add anything to the Torah, and yet Mordechai and Esther desired to create and establish a new institution [as recorded in the Book of Esther]!" They did not cease to ponder over it, until God opened their eyes and they found justification for it written in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. [Megillah Y 1:5]

Talmud:

-Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: [The scroll] of Esther [is not holy]... It was composed to be recited [by heart], but not to be written.

-Rabbi Eleazar said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, because it says, "And Haman said in his heart" [Esth. 6:6] [How could the author know this if he was not inspired?]
 -Rabbi Akiva says: [It also] says, "And Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all that looked upon her." [Esth. 2:15, Again: How could the author know this if he was not inspired?]
 -Rabbi Meir says: [It also] says, "And the thing became known to Mordechai." [Esth. 2:22. Who revealed it to him if not the holy spirit?]
 [Talmud, Megillah 7a]

-The Book of Proverbs. Controversial because deemed self-contradictory. Talmud:

They desired to exclude also the Book of Proverbs, because its statements are self-contradictory. Yet why did they not exclude it? They [found...] a reconciliation...

How are its statements self-contradictory? It is written:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly. [Prov. 26:4]
 yet it is also written:

Answer a fool according to his folly. [Prov. 26:5]

There is no difficulty: One refers to matters of learning, [that is, Torah, in which case he may be answered, and] the other to general matters [in which case he does not have to be answered]. [Shabbat 30b]

-The Book of Job. Controversial because suspected of being fictional. Talmud:

-A certain rabbi [said], Job never was and never existed, but is only a typical figure [to teach the virtue of resignation.]

-[Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahmani] replied: [But...] the text says, "There was a man in the land of Uz. Job was his name". [Job 1:1] [His name and city are given. Why do that if it's only a parable?]
 [Bava Batra 15a]

-The Book of Ezekiel. Controversial because contradicts Torah. Talmud:

Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: In truth, that man, Hananiah bar Hezekiah by name, is to be remembered for blessing... If it weren't for him, the Book of Ezekiel would have been excluded, for its words contradicted the Torah. [Ezek. 18:4,20 with Ex. 20:5, 24:7; Ezek. 44:31 with Lev. 22:8; Ezek. 44:22 with Lev. 21:14; also Ezek. 45:20, about a sacrifice for the 7th day of the first month, not in Torah. See also Rashi and Kid. 78a]

What did he do? Three hundred barrels of oil were taken up to him [for lighting] and he sat in an upper chamber until he had explained away everything. [Shabbat 13b, also Chag. 13a and Men. 45a]

But most books were rejected, either for occasional reading, or for inclusion in the canon, or both. The rabbis who had to rule on their fitness rejected them

- because they had secular/Hellenistic tendencies, or
- because they contradicted the Torah, or
- because they were believed to be fictional, or
- because they were not written in Hebrew, or
- because they were not Jewish, or
- because they were too recent, or
- because they did not add new teachings.

Best known of these: Apocrypha of King James Version:

- The First Book of Esdras, written in Greek, adds 99 verses to Ezra;
- The Second Book of Esdras, apocalyptic and written in Hebrew;
- Tobit, fictional, with Hebrew fragments discovered at Qumran;
Tobit is a Jew living in Nineveh after Sargon II had deported the northern tribes of Israel to Assyria in 721 BC. He remains loyal to the Torah, refusing the cult of the golden calves that Jeroboam, king of Northern Israel, set up at Dan.
- The Wisdom of Solomon, written in Greek;
- Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah, written in Hebrew;
Baruch ben Neriah was Jeremiah's scribe. Purports to have been written by Jeremiah to the Jews who were about to be carried away as captives to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, warning them against idolatry.
- The Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Holy Youths, written in Hebrew;
Daniel's Jewish friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) are thrown into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, after they refuse to bow down to his image [Daniel 3]. Book includes penitential prayer of Azariah in the fiery furnace, account of a radiant figure who met them in the furnace yet was not burned, and the hymn of praise they sang when they realized their deliverance.
- The Story of Susanna, written in Hebrew;
Blackmailers threaten Susanna, a Jewish wife, to falsely accuse her of adultery unless she has sex with them. She refuses and is arrested and tried. Daniel interrupts the proceedings, asking that the accusers be separated and cross-examined. They differ so much in their testimony that Susanna is freed and they are executed for false testimony.
- The Idol Bel and the Dragon, written in Aramaic;
Daniel exposes and ridicules the tricks of the idolatrous priests.
- The Prayer of Manasseh, written in Hebrew;
The penitential prayer of Manasseh, king of Judah. He reigned for 55 years, strongly encouraged idolatry, and persecuted priests and faithful Jews. Taken captive by the Assyrians [2Chronicles 33:11–13], he prayed God for mercy, was freed, restored to his kingship, and renounced idolatry [2Chronicles 33:15–17]. Bible references prayer, but does not give prayer itself [2 Chronicles 33:19]. This book does.
- Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira, written in Hebrew;
- The Additions to Esther, written in Greek;
- The First Book of Maccabees, written in Hebrew; and
- The Second Book of Maccabees, written in Greek.

Recount the events of Hanukkah.
-Judith, probably fictional, written in Hebrew.

Sometimes these rejected books were preserved by Christians in Greek translation (Septuagint) or in Latin translations. In some cases, some Hebrew fragments were found later. Let's discuss the last five.

Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira. Best known. 2nd-century BCE author, Ben Sira, is the only apocryphal author who signed his work. Most of Hebrew original was recovered in the Cairo Genizah. Popular with Jews, quoted by name in the Talmud 17 times, in the Midrash Rabbah 8 times, and in the Zohar once. For example, the Talmud says:

It is written in the Book of Ben Sira [Ecclesiasticus 3:21-2] "Do not seek things that are too hard for you, and do not search things that are hidden from you. Think about the things that have been permitted to you. You have no need of the things that are secret." [Talmud, Chagigah 13a]

The commentators excluded it because it shows Epicurean and Sadducean tendencies. However, the Talmud says:

Rabbi Joseph said: [We may ban the book as a whole, yet still] we may expound to [the masses] the good things that the book contains. [Sanhedrin 100b; also Bava Kamma 92b]

Nevertheless, the Midrash says:

And furthermore, my son, be admonished: There is no end to making many books, [but] whoever brings into his house more than the twenty-four books [of the Bible] introduces confusion into his house, as, for example, the book of Ben Sira and the book of Ben Tagla. [The latter is lost.] [Ecclesiastes Rabbah 12:11]

The Additions to the Book of Esther. They mention God abundantly, as a counterweight to the fact that the basic Book of Esther does not mention God. For example, they say:

Then Mordechai thought about all the works of the **Lord**, and prayed to Him, saying, O **Lord, Lord**, the King Almighty, the whole world is in Your power, and if You have appointed to save Israel, there is no man that can contradict You. For You have made heaven and earth, and all the wondrous things under the heaven. You are **Lord** of all things, and there is no man that can resist You, who are the **Lord**. You know all things, and You know, **Lord**, that it was neither in contempt nor pride, nor for any desire of glory, that I did not bow down to the proud Haman. For I could have been content, with good will for the salvation of Israel, to kiss

the soles of his feet. But I did this, that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of **God**; neither will I worship any but You, O **God**, neither will I do it in pride. And now, O **Lord God** and King, spare Your people: for [our enemies'] eyes are upon us to bring us to nought; yea, they desire to destroy the inheritance, that has been Yours from the beginning.

[AddEsth 13:8-15]

[Esther said:] You know all things, O **Lord**; you know that I... abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of all the heathen. [AddEsth 14:15]

The Eight (!) Books of the Maccabees

- 1 Maccabees, in Hebrew but survived in Greek translation in Apocrypha. Covers the 40 years from Antiochus' accession (175 BCE) to the death of Simon Maccabee (135 BCE): The rise of the revolt, the struggle under Judas, Israel under Jonathan, then under Simon.
- 2 Maccabees, in Greek, in Apocrypha, till 161 BCE. Focus on Judas Maccabee. Written independently of 1 Maccabees. Adds details. From Alexandria, it emphasizes to Greek-speaking Jews the duty of observing Hanukkah. Story of mother of seven martyred sons.
- 3 Maccabees, in Greek; 3rd-century BCE persecution of the Jews of Egypt.
- 4 Maccabees, praises supremacy of reason over passion, using the story of mother of seven martyred sons as examples.
- 5 Maccabees, in Arabic, from 186 BCE to 6 BCE. (Same title used for Syriac version of 6th book of Josephus' Jewish War.)
- 6 Maccabees, Syriac poem, may have shared a lost source with 4 Maccabees.
- 7 Maccabees, Syriac, speeches of Maccabean Martyrs and their mother.
- 8 Maccabees, account of revolt from Seleucid sources, preserved by John Malalas (6th-century Greek chronicler from Antioch).

Why were 1 and 2 Maccabees rejected? They are not even mentioned in Talmud:

Why was Esther compared to the dawn? To tell you that just as the dawn is the end of the whole night, so is the story of Esther the end of all the miracles. [An objection was raised:] But there is Hanukkah? [The answer was:] We refer [only] to those included in Scripture. [Yoma 29a]

Speculation:

-2 Maccabees not in Hebrew (Greek)

-But Daniel is in Aramaic and was kept

-Too recent. Age of prophecy ended 2400 years ago, long before Maccabees. Anything after that *cannot* be "divinely inspired".

-Hanukkah began with the physical (armed rebellion) and ended with the spiritual (rededication of the Temple), rather than the other way around, as it should have (like Purim)

-Maccabees were a priestly family. Rivalry between Sadducees (who were priests) and Pharisees (rabbis) dissuaded rabbis from inclusion.

-Rabbis did not approve of Hasmoneans assuming kingship of Israel, instead of giving it back to David's family. Torah says:

The staff shall not depart from Judah, nor the scepter from between his feet, until Shiloh arrives, and to him shall the obedience of the people be.

[Gen. 49:10]

Ramban comments:

In my opinion, the kings who reigned over Israel who came from tribes other than Judah, after David, were violating the expressed wishes of their forefather Jacob and were usurping Judah's rightful inheritance... And this was the punishment of the Hasmoneans who ruled as kings during the Second Temple [period]. [Now,] they were [certainly] righteous people, and if not for them, Torah and mitzvot would have been forgotten by the Jewish People. Even so, they were punished with great retribution: Four of the sons of the elder Hasmonean [Matityahu], who were righteous rulers and ruled one after the other, died by the sword of the enemy despite their courage and success [Yehuda, Elazar, Yonatan and Yochanan. Shim'on, the last remaining son, did not die in battle]. Their punishment was so severe that our Sages said about them "whoever says that they are a descendant of the Hasmonean house, is surely a slave" [Bava Batra 3b, Kiddushin 70a]. All descendants were killed off because of this sin. Even though there was of the seed of Shim'on those who were punished because of their affiliation with the Sadducees, all the descendants of Mattityahu, the righteous Hasmonean perished because of the sin that they ruled over Israel while not being descendants of the tribe of Judah and from the house of David. And they removed the scepter of leadership totally from the Tribe of Judah and therefore their punishment was measure for measure: Hashem caused their slaves to rule over them and caused those slaves to destroy them... [Ramban on Gen. 49:10]

-Rabbis did not want to encourage another revolt (they lost the First Temple because of the last one).

-Rabbis did not want to provoke the Romans.

However, a Hanukkah scroll, similar to the Purim scroll, was made: *Megillat Chachmona'im* (or *Megillat Antiochus*).

-The original (published 1557 in Mantua, Italy) is in Aramaic.

-A Hebrew translation (*Siddur Otzer Yisrael*) was read in Italian synagogues on Hanukkah in the Middle Ages.

-Survives today only in Yemenite liturgy.

-Saadia Gaon (892-942) says: The five Maccabees wrote it.

Note: The story of the oil lasting eight days is found ONLY in the Talmud – not in the Books of Maccabees:

What is [the reason for] Hanukkah? Our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev the eight days of Hanukkah begin. Lamentations for the dead and fasting are forbidden. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils they found there, and when the Hasmonean dynasty defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil with the seal of the High Priest. It contained only enough oil for one day. Yet a miracle occurred and they lit [the lamp] for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving. [Shabbat 21b]

The Book of Judith

Judith (Yehudit) is a young widow, daughter of Yochanan, the High Priest. Jerusalem is under siege by the cruel Greek general Holofernes. She goes to his tent, seduces him, then beheads him. Without their leader, the Greeks are defeated by the Jews. She is the counterpart of Esther and the male variant of Judah [Maccabee].

Rashi (11th-century France) mentions her indirectly when arguing that women, as well as men, are required to light Chanukah candles:

[The women] were part of the same miracle. When the Greeks decreed that Jewish virgin brides were to be bedded first by the ruler, a woman brought about the miraculous rescue. [Rashi on Shabbat 23a]

Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam, does mention her by name:

The chief miracle of Purim came about through Esther, and that of Hanukkah through Judith. [Tosafot on Megillah 4a]

Book was rejected because it contains anachronisms and was deemed fictional. Probably written in Hebrew, but only Greek translation available.

Does it matter?

One may wonder: Does it matter whether the rabbis allow a book to be part of the Bible or not? It matters greatly, for three reasons:

- First, inclusion means that it can be used in exegesis, to clarify parts of the Torah.
- Second, inclusion implies an obligation to teach it and study it.

-Third, and most importantly, inclusion implies an obligation to reproduce the book and include it in rabbinical libraries. In those days, books were hand-written scrolls and were very expensive. Without the obligation to reproduce, and with all the upheavals and destruction brought about by wars, many books among those that were left out were lost forever.

Now, are these books actually banned in Judaism? The Mishna says: All Jews have a portion in the World to Come... [except] those who maintain that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine [such as the Sadducees and the Samaritans], those who maintain that the Torah was not divinely revealed, and *apikorsim* [that is, those who lead dissolute lives]. Rabbi Akiva added: [Also] those who read outside books... [Mishna; Sanhedrin 90a]

Maimonides says: Rabbi Akiva's expression "outside books" refers to idolatrous, non-Jewish books. [Rambam, Hilcot Av. Zarah 2:2]

Commentators add that what is meant is a ban on reading those books *publicly*, as if they were holy books. Private reading is allowed. The Jerusalem Talmud says:

The reading of Homer and all subsequent books is the same as the reading of a letter. [Sanhedrin Y 28a]

So we may read those books, but not as expositions of Judaism or Jewish teaching. There is definitely no ban on reading anything but holy books.

Special Hanukkah topics

Hanukkah in the Bible

“Hanukkah” means “dedication”, because of the rededication of the Temple after the Maccabean victory. The events and holiday of Hanukkah are not mentioned in the Bible. However:

- The word “Hanukkah” is mentioned in the Torah. The Book of Numbers talks about “*hanukat ha-mizbeach*” (“the dedication offering for the altar”) [Numbers 7:10]. This section is a supplemental reading during the holiday.

- The word “Hanukkah” is also mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah. When Ezra and Nehemiah dedicated the walls of Jerusalem:

They sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication (“Hanukkah”) with gladness.
[Nehemiah 12:27]

- Some even say that the story of creation, where God says:

Let there be light! [Genesis 1:3]

is the source of the commandment to light Hanukkah lights!

Is the Maccabean revolt predicted in the Bible?

The Book of Daniel [Daniel 11:15-39] seems to predict the events commemorated by Hanukkah, 400 years into Daniel's future, but without naming names:

- Some say the prediction of the Maccabean revolt and its success may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, emboldening the Jews to take up arms against Antiochus Epiphanes, confident of their ultimate triumph.

- Some also say the Book of Daniel was written during those times of Greek persecution.

Examples of predictions:

Then a warrior king will appear who will have an extensive dominion and do as he pleases. [Daniel 11:3]

Alexander the so-called “Great”.

But after his appearance, his kingdom will be broken up and scattered to the four winds of heaven. [Daniel 11:4]

Alexander's Greek empire splits into four when he dies.

The king of the south will grow powerful... [Daniel 11:5]
Kingdom of Egypt founded by Ptolemy I Soter.

However, one of his officers will overpower him and rule, having an extensive dominion. [Daniel 11:5]
Seleucus I Nicator establishes the largest empire, in Syria.

After some years, an alliance will be made, and the daughter of the king of the south will come to the king of the north to effect the agreement. [Daniel 11:6]
Antiochus II Theos, grandson of Seleucus I, marries Berenice, daughter of Ptolemy II Philadelphus [ca. 250 BCE]

Then the king of the north will again muster a multitude even greater than the first. After a time, a matter of years, he will advance with a great army and much baggage. [Daniel 11:13]
Antiochus III the Great conquers much land.

In those times, many will resist the king of the south, and the lawless sons of your people will assert themselves to confirm the vision, but they will fail. [Daniel 11:14]
Some Jews join the Seleucids (North) against Ptolemaic Egypt (South).

His opponent will do as he pleases, for none will hold out against him. He will install himself in the beautiful land with destruction within his reach. [Daniel 11:16]
Antiochus the Great takes Judea.

He will turn to the coastlands and capture many, but a consul will put an end to his insults, nay pay him back for his insults. [Daniel 11:18]
Antiochus the Great conquers some Greek islands, but the Romans push him back.

His place will be taken by a contemptible man, on whom royal majesty was not conferred. He will come in unawares and seize the kingdom through trickery. [Daniel 11:21]
Antiochus IV Euphron, the villain of the Hanukkah story.

The forces of the flood will be overwhelmed by him and will be broken, and so too the covenant leader. [Daniel 11:22]
The killing of the high Priest Onias III. [2Macc 4:34]

He will muster his strength and courage against the king of the south with a great army. The king of the south will wage war with a very great and powerful army but will not stand fast, for they will devise plans against him. [Daniel 11:25]

Antiochus Epiphanes wages war with Egypt under Ptolemy VI, wins.

At the appointed time, he will again invade the south, [Daniel 11:29]

Antiochus Epiphanes' second invasion of Egypt.

Ships from Kittim will come against him. He will be checked, and will turn back, raging against the holy covenant. Having done his pleasure, he will then attend to those who forsake the holy covenant. [Daniel 11:30]

-The Romans force Antiochus Epiphanes to withdraw from Egypt. He attacks Judea again, and confers with Jews who support him.

Forces will be levied by him. They will desecrate the temple, the fortress. They will abolish the regular offering and set up the appalling abomination. [Daniel 11:31]

Antiochus Epiphanes profanes the Temple, sets up an idol there, cancels the daily sacrifice.

He will flatter with smooth words those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people devoted to their God will stand firm. [Daniel 11:32]

He allies with anti-Torah Jews, while the Jews loyal to the Torah oppose him.

The knowledgeable among the people will make the many understand, and for a while they shall fall by sword and flame, suffer captivity and spoliation. [Daniel 11:33]

The wise Jews teach to accept the suffering, and wait for the Messiah.

This last teaching can be problematic. Change is sometimes necessary and sometimes only violence can bring it about, even if it goes against official teaching. Consider the following five events in Jewish history:

1-In 164 BCE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Greeks. That's the story of Hanukkah.

2-In 70 CE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Romans. That's the story of the fall of the Second Temple.

3-In 135 CE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Romans again. That's the beginning of the Diaspora.

4-In the early 1930s, the Jews of Europe were wondering whether to try to leave when Naziism was slowly on the rise.

5-In the 1980s, the Lubavitch Hassidim were wondering whether to leave New York in light of problems with the Black community.

What do all these events have in common? Simply this: In all cases, the leaders counseled against change. They always do. They are old, set in their ways, they want to keep power, they are confident in their ability to deal peacefully with the devil they know, etc. They are sometimes right, as in events 2, 3, and 5; and sometimes wrong, as in events 1 and 4:

- The rabbis counseled against fighting Greek oppression, and they were wrong. We won.

- The rabbis counseled against fighting Roman oppression, and they were right. We lost big.

- The rabbis counseled against leaving Europe, saying that Hitler was just a temporary phenomenon and would blow away, and that Jews should especially avoid going to America where they would assimilate, or going to the Holy Land and be ensnared by godless secular Zionists. They were wrong, big time. They all perished in the Holocaust, as night descended on the Jews of Europe.

- The Lubavitcher Rebbe told his people that they should stay where they were, that in time calm will return and all problems with the Black community would be worked out. He was right.

All this suggests that if the people really feel fundamental change is needed, they must go against teachings and Establishment and flee or engage in violence, whether in the end they are right or wrong, because real change will never come from the Establishment.

Menorahs on Public Property?

There are menorah lightings in *public* places, especially by Chabad (e.g., on White House lawn). The story they tell has universal value: Victory of religious freedom against coercion. But do religious displays on *public* land threaten separation of church and state? Is *public* menorah lighting somehow endorsing Judaism as an official state religion?

The First amendment says:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

-Are the two halves in contradiction?

-If I sit next to my own giant menorah on public land, is this allowed because of my own freedom of speech, or disallowed because religion in a public place might imply government endorsement?

Challenge: Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) vs ACLU (ACLU protested both crèche and menorah).

Decision: Supreme Court, 1989:

-Crèche displayed alone not allowed (5-4).

-Menorah allowed next to Christmas tree as part of a secular decorations (because conveys a general message of religious freedom meaningful to all) (6-3).

Four justices wanted to allow both crèche and menorah.

Three justices wanted to disallow both.

Two wanted to disallow the crèche, if alone, but allow the menorah alongside a Christmas tree.

Arguments in favor of religious displays in public places:

-We do allow some religion in public:

-Prayers before and after legislative meetings.

-Pledge of Allegiance (since 1954) says US is "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

-On dollar bill: "In God We Trust".

-Washington proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving to God, still observed.

-The dominant religion surrounds us with its symbols. Children are affected. Why should we not do the same?

-Those who cannot share in a public celebration feel like outsiders, tolerated minorities.

- Jewish children must feel pride about their holiday, when their non-Jewish friends do the same.
- Assimilated American Jews have been positively affected, drawn back into the fold.

Arguments against religious displays in public places:

- Menorah is a religious symbol, unlike Christmas tree (secular with pagan origins). So permitting only secular displays on public land excludes the menorah.
- Might turn city hall grounds into museums of religion if all faiths put up display. Muslims, Bahai, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, Shintos, Wiccans, other pagan-like sects, will all want a part. Conveys message that all religions are equal. Leads to assimilation. And who gets choice position?

Alternatives

1-Allow only secular items associated with a religion

Effect: Christmas trees, Santa Clauses, elves, reindeer, etc., are OK, but not menorah.

Put menorah alongside secular items?

-With dreidels? (But dreidels are religious: They say "A great miracle happened there").

-With Star of David? (But it also symbolizes another state, Israel, and might elicit charges of dual loyalty.)

2-Allow both religious and secular items associated with a religion

Effect: Hanukiot displayed together with crèches, virgin mothers, crosses, crucifixes, Jesus rising from the dead, etc. Do we want the association?

3-Allow neither religious nor secular items associated with a religion

Effect: The main benefit to Jews is that it confines the religion of the majority, Christianity, to private property.

-Many (most) communities are exclusively Christian. Christian displays on public land encounter no challenge or competition. This promotes "Christian country" mentality, which must be fought.

-Jews can put giant hanukiot on private property, to be seen by all. You can put one on the lawn of your house.

-Put all religious symbols on private property. Why must they be on public land?

Story of the mother and her seven sons

Best-known part of 2 Maccabees. Antiochus Epiphanes forbade Jewish observance. Possession of a Torah scroll meant death. Circumcision, kosher food, Shabbat, were all outlawed. Mother later called “Hannah” due to association with Samuel’s mother Hannah

[1Samuel 2:5: “The barren has borne seven”.]

It came to pass also, that seven brothers with their mother were taken, and compelled by the king to taste the flesh of swine, which is against [Jewish] law, and were tormented with scourges and whips. But one of them, who spoke first, said thus: What do you ask of us? We are ready to die, rather than transgress the laws of our forefathers.

Then the king, in a rage, ordered that pans and cauldrons be heated, and commanded that the tongue of the one who spoke first be cut out, that he be scalped, and that the extremities of his body be cut off, with his brothers and his mother looking on. Now when he was thus maimed, he commanded that he be brought to the fire and fried. As the vapor of the pan spread, they exhorted one another with the mother to die nobly, saying: The Lord God looks upon us, and truly relents toward us, as Moses in his song...

So when the first one was dead in this manner, they brought the second one to be mocked, and they tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, Will you eat, or have your body punished limb by limb? But he answered in his own language, and said, No. So he was also tortured as the first one. And when he was at the last gasp, he said, You take us out of this present life like a fury, but the King of the world shall raise us up, because we have died for his laws, unto everlasting life.

After him the third was mocked, and put out his tongue when told, then held forth his hands manfully, and said courageously: These I got from heaven; and for God’s laws I disregard them; and from him I hope to receive them back again. The king and his followers marveled at the young man’s courage, because he made light of his suffering.

Now when this man was dead also, they tormented and mangled the fourth one in like manner. When he was ready to die he said: It is good, when being put to death by men, to look for hope from God to be raised up again by him. As for you, you shall have no resurrection to life.

Afterward they brought the fifth also, and mangled him. He looked to the king, and said: You have power over men, you art corruptible, you do what you want; yet do not think that our nation is forsaken by God. Abide a

while, and behold his great power, see how he will torment you and your seed.

After him also they brought the sixth, who, at the point of death, said: Do not be deceived: We suffer these things for ourselves, because we sinned against our God, so these things are done to us. But do not think you will go unpunished for having attempted to fight against God.

But the mother was marvelous above all, and worthy of honorable memory: for when she saw her seven sons slain within the space of one day, she bore it with good courage, because of her hope in the Lord. She exhorted every one of them in her own language, for she was filled with courageous spirits; and stirred her woman's heart with manly stomach, and said to them: I cannot tell how you came into my womb: for I neither gave you breath nor life, neither was it I who formed the members of every one of you. But doubtless the Creator of the world, who formed the human race, and generated all things, will also of his own mercy give you breath and life again, as you now do not worry about yourselves for the sake of his laws.

Now Antiochus, thinking himself despised, and suspecting it to be a reproachful speech, while the youngest was still alive, did not only exhort him by words, but also assured him with oaths, that he would make him both a rich and a happy man, if he would turn away from the laws of his forefathers; and that also he would take him for his friend, and entrust him with office. When the young man did not hearken to him, the king called his mother, and exhorted her to counsel the young man to save his life.

And when he had exhorted her with many words, she promised him that she would counsel her son. She bent over him, mocking the cruel tyrant, and said in her own language: O my son, have pity upon me who bore you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and nourished you, and brought you up to this age, and endured the troubles of education. I beseech you, my son, look upon the heaven and the earth, and all that is therein, and consider that God made them of things that were not; and so was mankind made likewise. Fear not this tormentor, but, being worthy of your brothers, take your death so that I may receive you again in mercy with your brothers.

Before she could finish, the young man said, What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I will obey the commandment of the law that was given to our forefathers by Moses. And you, author of all mischief against the Hebrews, will not escape the hands of God. For we suffer because of our sins. And though the living Lord is angry with us a little while for our chastening and correction, yet he shall be at one again with his servants. But you, O godless and most wicked man, do not be

lifted up or puffed up with uncertain hopes, by lifting up your hand against the servants of God. For you have not yet escaped the judgment of Almighty God, who sees all things. For our brethren, who now have suffered a short pain, are dead under God's covenant of everlasting life: but you, through the judgment of God, shall receive just punishment for your pride. But I, as my brothers, offer up my body and life for the laws of our forefathers, beseeching God that he would speedily be merciful to our nation; and that you, by torments and plagues, may confess, that he alone is God; and that in me and my brethren the wrath of the Almighty, which is justly brought upon our nation, may cease.

The king was infuriated and treated him worse than all the rest, embittered at his mockery. So this man died undefiled, and put his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, after the sons, the mother died. [2Mac 7:1-7:41]

Note: One may eat pork to save one's life, but no commandment may be broken in public when one is forced to do so by those who wish to make Jews betray Judaism.

Similar story in both Midrash and Talmud [Lam. R. 1:50; also Gittin 57b], where the persecutors try to force the sons to commit idolatry, and which ends with the question:

All the peoples of the world cried out and said, "What does the God of these [people] do for them, that they are [willing to be] killed for His sake at all times? ..." [Lam. R. 1:50]

The "Emperor" in that story was Hadrian [Tanna DeVei Eliyahu Rabbah, a Midrash]. He ruled 117-138 CE, quashed the second Jewish revolt, banned all teaching and practice of Judaism, and killed many rabbis, many of whom are commemorated on Yom Kippur.

It is related of Miriam, the daughter of the baker, that she was captured [by the Romans] with her seven sons... He had the eldest son brought and said to him, "Prostrate yourself before [this] idol." He answered, "*Chas v'shalom* -- Heaven forbid! I will not bow before an idol."... [The Emperor] immediately had him taken out and killed. [Likewise], he had the second son brought... [and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth, and the sixth] and [they all refused to bow before the idol, and he had them killed.] He had the seventh son brought, who was the youngest of them all...

The Emperor begins by trying to bribe him:

The Emperor said to him, "[My son,] your brothers, [who were older than you,] had their fill of years and of life and had experienced the pleasure of this world. But you are still young, you have not had your fill of years and

life and have not yet experienced the pleasure of this world. Prostrate yourself before the idol and I will bestow favors upon you.”

The child replied, “It is written in our Torah:

The Lord shall reign forever and ever. [Ex. 15:18]

[...How much are your offers worth, when] you and your kingdom shall cease to exist? You are only flesh and blood, alive today and dead tomorrow, wealthy today and destitute tomorrow. But the Holy One, blessed be He, lives and endures for all eternity.”

The Emperor is now afraid of losing face before his people, so he offers a compromise: Just pretend to bow down:

The Emperor said to him, “See, your brothers are dead before you! Look, I will throw my ring to the ground in front of the idol. Pick it up, so everybody will think you have obeyed my command.”

He answered, “A curse on you, O Emperor! If you are afraid of human beings who are the same as yourself, shall I not fear the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, the God of the universe!”

The Emperor now tries to argue theology with him:

[The Emperor] asked him, “But is there truly a God in the world?”

He replied, “Woe unto you, O Emperor! Do you see that the world is abandoned?” [Clearly, there is a Power behind it.]...

The Emperor said, “If your God has all these attributes, why does He not rescue you from my hands...?”

He answered, “...You [are able to kill us only because] we have been condemned to death by Heaven. [In fact,] if you do not kill us, God has many other executioners [who can do so]... But ultimately the Holy One, blessed be He, will exact payment from you for our blood.”

The king immediately ordered him put to death.

The child's mother said to him, “...O Emperor, give me my son that I may embrace and kiss him [before you kill him]... Kill ME first and then kill him.”

The emperor now has the gall to quote Torah to HER!

He answered her, “I will not, because it is written in your Torah:

You shall not slaughter an ox, a sheep, or a goat, and his offspring, on the same day.” [Lev. 22:28]

The woman answers him appropriately:

“...You great fool! Have you already fulfilled all [of God's] commandments, and is this one is the only one you have left to fulfill?

He [again] ordered [that the child be] put to death immediately. The mother threw herself upon her child, embraced him and kissed him.

She then instructs her son to tell the patriarch Abraham that his travails were nothing compared to what she had to endure!

She said to him, "My son, go before your father Abraham and tell him, 'My mother says, '[Abraham,] do not feel too proud [about your righteousness] by saying 'I built an altar and offered up my son, Isaac.'" [My] mother built seven altars and offered up seven sons in a single day. [And] yours was only a test, but mine was actually done."

While she was embracing and kissing him, the king gave an order and they killed him in her arms... A few days later, she went mad, fell from a roof and died... and the Holy Spirit cried out:

Al elleh ani vokiya. For these things I weep. [Lam. 1:16]

And the passage concludes with our quote:

At that time, all the peoples of the world cried out and said, "What does the God of these [people] do for them, that they are [willing to be] killed for His sake at all times? ..."

Why not seven days of Hanukkah?

If the oil was supposed to last for one day, but lasted 8 days, then only 7 days are “exceptional”. So why do we celebrate 8 days rather than 7? There are many possible explanations:

- The Maccabees knew they only had enough oil for 1 day, so they used only 1/8 the oil they had each night. But the oil burned all night each time!
- The Greeks cleaned out Jerusalem so well that even the one cruse of oil that was found was a miracle, and should be celebrated also.
- Hanukkah also celebrates a military victory against all odds. An extra day is needed to celebrate it.
- After the Maccabees poured the oil from the cruse to the menorah cup on the first day, the cruse was still full -- a miracle even on the first day!

Why is Hanukkah celebrated less festively than Purim?

- The more people a miracle benefits, the greater its commemoration. King Achashverosh reigned over all the Jews, but only some of the Jews lived under Antiochus.
- The events of Hanukkah occurred in Israel when the Temple stood. The merit of the Land and the Temple make the miracle less surprising.
- Antiochus was against God's commandments, not the Jews per se. It was expected that God would “defend Himself”. Haman was only against the Jews themselves, so God's action against him was a greater miracle.
- The Purim miracle was greater in that it caused the king (Ahashverosh) to act against his own free will (he was also an antisemite) by allowing the Jews to defend themselves.

[Rabbi Azariah Figo, 17th-century Italy, Binah La'ittim: Drush Sheni L'Hanukkah]

Why groggers and dreidels?

On Purim we make noise with groggers and on Hanukkah we spin dreidels. Why these particular objects? One explanation:

- The grogger is held from below, indicating that the Jews were saved on Purim through their own efforts: Esther pleading with king Ahashverosh and Mordechai's behind-the-scenes plans. The Book of Esther does not even mention God.
- The dreidel is held from above, indicating the miraculous character of the Maccabees' upset victory over the Greeks. The spinning motion of the dreidel also reminds us that it is God who makes the world go round.

Why did the oil last for exactly eight days?

This is how long it took to have new oil pressed and made available.

The gematria of Hanukkah

The Gematria, or Jewish numerology, of Hanukkah:

-The Torah portion read on the week of Hanukkah [Miketz, or Genesis 41:1-44:17] has 2,025 letters. Now, the light of Hanukkah (in Hebrew, “*ner*”) has the numerical value of 250 (*nun* is 50 and *resh* is 200). Multiply this number by 8 (the days of Hanukkah), and you get 2000. Add 25 (because Hanukkah begins on the 25th of Kislev), and you get ... 2,025!

-In the story of creation [Genesis 1:3] God says: “Let there be light!” The Hebrew word for “Let there be” (“*yehi*”) has the numerical value of 25 and the word “light” (“*or*”) is the 25th word in the Torah. And Hanukkah begins on the 25th of Kislev!

Why “Maccabee”?

Four reasons proposed:

- The word “Maccabee” means “hammer”. Judah was called that because he was a good warrior.
- The word “Maccabee” (*mem kuf bet yod*) has the same letters as the initials of the phrase “*Mi chamocha ba-elim, Hashem?*” (“Who is like unto You, O God, among the gods that are worshipped?”) [Exodus 15:11].
- The word “Maccabee” has the same letters as the name of the man who started the revolt of the Jews: Matityahu Kohen Ben Yochanan, the father of Judah and his four brothers.
- The word “Maccabee” has the same last letters as the names of the patriarchs: *AbrahaM, YitzhaK, YaakoB/Israel*.

The 36 righteous individuals

According to Jewish tradition, in every generation there are 36 righteous individuals who sustain the world by their faith and character. Nobody knows who they are, even themselves. They are called the “*lamed vav*” (after the Hebrew for 36).

They are also represented by the 36 lights of Hanukkah:

$$36 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8$$

(not counting the 8 shamash lights that light the others).

Relatively speaking

From the **Washington Post** "My Turn" column, December 10, 1988

On Dec. 3, you referred to Hanukkah as a "movable feast falling sometime in December" ["A Hanukkah Synagogue Dedication", Religion]. Funny, that's how we Jews have always felt about Christmas. You see, without fail, Hanukkah begins on the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev. But Christmas? Oy vey, what a mess. This year it's on the 17th of Tevet. Last year it was on the fourth of Tevet, and Lord only knows when it's going to fall next year. As my Uncle Al was fond of saying, "Everything is relative."

-Maurice M. Mizrahi

"Hanukkah bush"

Why do so many Jews (some even not intermarried) put up a Christmas tree in their home?

All Israel are equal during Hanukkah and Purim

Torah festivals were given without us having deserved them. Not so Hanukkah and Purim: We prayed and fought for them, while under duress. So they are not observed for one extra day, like Torah festivals, because all Jews, inside Israel and out, are alike in that regard.

Special Purim topics

Should you get drunk on Purim?

On Purim, we Jews remember and celebrate our narrow escape from annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman in ancient Persia. We hear the Megillah being read, we shake our groggers and stomp our feet when we hear the name of Haman, we watch a Purim spiel, we exchange *mishloach manot*, we wear colorful costumes, and we eat a *seudah*, a festive meal that includes delicious hamentashen pastries, usually with prune, apricot, or poppy seed filling. (My favorite filling is bitter orange marmalade, but that's just me.)

There is another tradition on Purim, and that is to drink so much alcohol that you no longer know the difference between “Blessed be Mordechai” and “Cursed be Haman”. In Hebrew, “Until you no longer know” is “*adloyada*”. Every year on Purim, Israel has a funny parade in the streets, called “*Adloyada*”, with a carnival atmosphere befitting drunkenness.

Does the Jewish tradition really enjoin us to get drunk on that day? Is it really a commandment, given that Judaism generally frowns on drinking too much? Let's explore the matter in detail.

The injunction is found in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah. This is what it actually says:

Rava said: “A man must get so drunk on Purim that he no longer knows the difference between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordechai”.
[Megillah 7b]

The rest of the passage is quite surprising:

Rabbah and Rabbi Zera got together for the Purim feast. They got drunk and Rabbah slaughtered Rabbi Zera. The next day, Rabbah prayed and revived Rabbi Zera. The next year, Rabbah invited Rabbi Zera again for the Purim feast. But Rabbi Zera replied, “[No, thanks,] a miracle may not happen every time”. [Megillah 7b]

So, is getting drunk a commandment, or is the murder story that comes right after it meant to cancel it and warn against the dangers of drunkenness? Let's hear what our commentators said on the

matter. It is clear that most of them are uncomfortable with the literal interpretation of the Talmudic injunction and try to soften it.

Some report the injunction to get drunk without elaboration. Examples are the Rif, from 11th-century Morocco [on Megillah 3b]; the Rosh, from 13th-century Germany; Tur [on Orach Chaim 695:2]; and even Yosef Caro, from 17th-century Israel, in his authoritative Shulchan Aruch, or Code of Jewish law. Yet, interestingly, the same Rabbi Caro, in his *Beit Yosef* commentary, rejects the literal interpretation and concludes that one should merely drink a tad more than usual.

Some simply ignored the injunction. Works from the Gaonic period (~500-1000 CE) do not mention this passage at all, perhaps implying it may be disregarded. [Shimon Kayara, Halakhot Gedolot, ed. Venice 40b-41a; Halakhot Ketuvot, ed. Margalit, pp 85-87]

Some believe the murder story was meant to cancel the injunction to get drunk, considering that the story comes right after the injunction. Among them are Rabbenu Ephraim of Kala Hamad, a student of the Rif's; Abraham ben Yitzhaq of Narbonne, from 12th-century Provence, [Sefer ha-Eshkol]; and the Bakh, from 17th-century Central Europe [on Orach Chayyim 695].

Others, such as the Tosafot and the Meiri, say the injunction refers to a popular song with a lot of verses such as: "Blessed be Mordechai", "Cursed be Haman", "Cursed be Zeresh [Haman's wife]", "Blessed be Esther", "Cursed be all the evil doers", "Blessed be all the Jews", etc. They conclude that, because there are so many verses, it does not require much drinking to begin to get the verses wrong. [Tosafot and Me'iri cite Jerusalem Talmud; song is in Machzor Vitry, p 217; also Sefer Abudraham Hashalem p 209.]

Why get drunk on wine in particular? Some say that that is because the miracle of Purim was achieved with wine. Drunkenness allowed King Ahashverosh to be swayed by Esther. [Magen David, Orach Chayyim 695:1, Abudraham and Chayyei Adam]

Maimonides, from 12th-century Egypt, says:

How does one fulfill the obligation of the Purim feast? One eats meat and prepares a beautiful meal as best he can afford, and drinks wine until he becomes drunk and falls asleep. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Megillah 2:15]

The Rema, from 16th-century Poland, interprets that to mean that there is no need to become very drunk. One simply drinks just beyond what he is accustomed to, and fall asleep. Asleep, he can obviously no longer distinguish between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordechai”! [Glosses on Shulhan Arukh, Orach Chayyim 695:2]
Rabbi Yehiel Epstein, from 19th-century Russia, agrees in his authoritative Arukh HaShulchan. [Arukh Hashulchan OH 695:3]

More generally, Maimonides warns:

When one eats, drinks and rejoices on a festival, he should not drink too much wine or engage in levity or lightheadedness and say he is doing this to obey the commandment to rejoice. Drunkenness, excessive laughter, and lightheadedness are not rejoicing, but rather debauchery and foolishness.” [Hilchot Yom Tov 6:20]

Others say that one must not drink if it will interfere with the proper performance of commandments, which takes priority:

If one believes that drinking on Purim will interfere with his performing any mitzvah, such as reciting the Birkat Hamazon, Mincha, or Maariv, or that he will behave in a boorish manner, it is preferable that he not drink at all, so as not to become inebriated. [Biur Halacha on OH 692:2]

Still others say that “until” really means “up to that point”. It is merely an upper limit on drinking. You may therefore not drink at all, or drink only up to that point, but no further. [Sefer ha-Meorot on Megillah 7b; Korban Netanel to the Rosh on Megillah 33b]

Some say it means drinking until one can no longer add up the gematria of “Arur Haman” and “Baruch Mordechai” in his head. (They are both equal to 502, by the way!) [Darkhei Moshe, OC 695:1] For many math-challenged people, this may mean not drinking at all!

Some even say that the injunction is just a Purim joke, as befits the holiday! It reads like a Purim spiel. A rabbi cutting the throat of a friend and colleague whom he invited to dinner? A miracle restoring him to life? A disingenuous invitation for the next year as if nothing had happened? All this is surely a joke.

Some say only those who enjoy getting drunk and are used to it must follow the injunction, but not those who know drinking will hurt them.

[Yosef ben Moshe, Germany ~1470, in Leket Yosher, ed Freimann, OH 156); Kaf Hachayyim to OH 695,16]

Some even get personal and say that Rava, the rabbi who issued the injunction to get drunk, may have required getting drunk because it helped his business. Indeed, the Talmud informs us that he was a vintner [Bava Metzia 73a], that he traded in wine [Berakhot 56a], and that he liked to drink wine even on Pessah eve [Pesachim 107b].

Others say it means until you can't decide which is the greater miracle: The defeat of Haman or the victory of Mordechai [Biur HaGr"a; Yad Efraim; Aruch Hashulchan; Mishna Berura]

Others say you must get drunk just enough to no longer be able to thank God for the salvation of Purim. [Taz on OH 695:1; Mishna Berura]

Some borrow a saying from the Talmud:

You may do much or you may do little. It is all one, provided you direct your heart to heaven. [Menachot 110a; Berachot 17a, 5b]

They say it implies that he who drinks a lot and he who drinks a little are equal as long as they direct their hearts to heaven. [Kaf Hachayyim]

At any rate, all commentators agree that no one should ever drink beyond the level permitted by health and proper behavior.

Issue of intermarriage

Did Esther violate the commandment against intermarriage by marrying an idolatrous king? Talmud lets her off the hook:

Rabbi Dimi said: ...If there is a royal decree [forbidding the practice of Judaism], one must incur martyrdom rather than break even a minor commandment... in public... And how many [witnesses] make it public? ...At least ten...

But did Esther not transgress publicly [by marrying a Gentile]?

Abaye answered: Esther was merely passive.

Rava added: When [the persecutors] demand [sex] for their personal pleasure, it is [not religious persecution]... If a Gentile said to a Jew [before ten witnesses]: "Cut grass on Shabbat for the cattle, or I will kill you", he should refuse even at the cost of his life. Why so? Because [the Gentile's] intention is to force him to violate his religion [in public].

[Sanhedrin 74a-b]

So the situation here is akin to rape. Esther had no choice. To refuse meant death.

To complicate matters, the Talmud tells us that Mordechai and Esther were husband and wife! [Meg. 13a] When Esther resolves to go to the king to plead for the Jews, in part by seducing him, she tells Mordechai:

Until now [I have submitted to Ahashverosh] under compulsion, but now I will do so of my own will. And if I perish, I perish. As I am lost to my father's house so I shall be lost to you. [Meg. 15a]

The commentators explain that "I shall be lost to you" means that she will not be able to have intercourse with her husband Mordechai after submitting voluntarily to Ahashverosh.

Vashti, a feminist icon?

Vashti is King Ahashverosh's queen.

He asks her to come to him, so he can show her off to his guests.

She refuses, so he sacks her and makes Esther queen instead.

She has long been viewed as a feminist icon:

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, 19th-century American abolitionist and author called her action "the first stand for woman's rights."

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 19th-century American suffragist and social activist, said she "added new glory to [her] day and generation...by her disobedience; for 'Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.'"

- Michelle Landsberg, contemporary (b. 1939) Canadian Jewish feminist and social activist, writes:

Saving the Jewish people was important, but at the same time [Esther's] whole submissive, secretive way... was the absolute archetype of 1950s womanhood. It repelled me... Vashti [on the other hand] ... had dignity. She had self-respect. She said: "I'm not going to dance for you and your pals."

So, is Vashti a feminist role model? Is Esther just another docile woman who slept her way to the top as an obedient and subservient wife, whose strategy for saving Israel involved just praying and fasting, getting the king drunk and arousing his jealousy?

Let's examine first what the Bible says about Vashti:

And Vashti, the queen, made a banquet for the women in the royal palace which belonged to king Ahashverosh...

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded [his] seven eunuchs... to bring Vashti, the queen, before [him] with the royal crown, to show the people and the princes her beauty, for she was beautiful to look on.

But Queen Vashti refused to come... and the king was very angry...

And the king said to the wise men... "What shall we do to the queen, Vashti, according to law...?"

Memucan answered... in the presence of the king and the princes:

"Vashti, the queen, has wronged not only the king, but also... all the people... for [now]... women will despise their husbands when [they shall learn] that the king... commanded... the queen to be brought to his presence, but she did not come. All the ladies of Persia and Media will do likewise... and there shall arise too much contempt and wrath... [So let] the king... command... that Vashti's position [be given to] another [woman] who is better than she. And when the king's decree... is proclaimed... all the wives shall honor their husbands..."

And the king did accordingly... [Then he ordered his officials]... to bring all the young virgins... of Shushan, the capital, to the harem... so he could

[pick a queen] instead of Vashti... Mordechai... brought up Esther, his uncle's daughter, [whom he had] adopted... and [she] pleased [the king], and won his favor [and he made her queen]. [Esther 1:9-2:9]

Now, what does the Talmud say about Vashti?

-The wicked Vashti [was] the [descendant] of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar who burnt the ceiling of the House of the Lord. [Meg. 10b]

(Vashti was the great-granddaughter of King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, the granddaughter of King Amel-Marduk and the daughter of King Belshazzar. After her father's murder, King Darius of Persia gave her in marriage to his son, Ahashverosh.)

-The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world: Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther. According to the one who says that Esther was fallow, Vashti should be inserted in place of Esther. [Meg. 15a]

-[The Bible says:]

On the seventh day, where the king's heart was merry with wine.
[Esther 1:10]

Was then his heart not merry with wine until then?

Rav said: The seventh day was Shabbat, when Israel eat and drink. They begin with discourse on the Torah and with words of thanksgiving [to God]. But the nations of the world, the idolaters, when they eat and drink, they only begin with words of frivolity. And so it was at the feast of that wicked one. Some [guests] said, "The Median women are the most beautiful", and others said, "The Persian women are the most beautiful". So [King] Ahashverosh said to them, "The vessel that I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see her?" They said, "Yes, but she must be naked."

... [This was] measure for measure, for the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on Shabbat...

And the queen Vashti refused. Let us see. She was immodest, as the Master said above, and both of them had an immoral purpose. Why then would she not come? Rabbi Yosei ben Hanina said:... She contracted leprosy. In a Baraita, it was taught that [the angel] Gabriel came and put [an unsightly] tail on her.

-[The Bible says:]

And the king was very angry. [Est. 1:12]

Why was he so enraged? Rava said: She sent him back [the following] answer: You son of my father's steward [Ahashverosh was the steward of Belshazzar, father of Vashti], my father drank wine in the presence of a thousand [Dan. 5:1] and did not get drunk, and that man has become senseless with his wine. Straightaway, his wrath burnt within him.

-[The Bible says:]

And the king said to the wise men. [Est. 1:13]

Who are the wise men? The rabbis...

He said to them: Put her on trial for me.

They said [to themselves]: What shall we do? If we tell him to put her to death, tomorrow he will become sober again and he will ask for her from us. Shall we tell him to let her go? She will lose all her respect for royalty. So they said to him: From the day when the Temple was destroyed and we were exiled from our land, counsel has been taken from us and we do not know how to judge capital cases.

Go to Ammon and Moab who have remained in their places...

[Meg. 12b]

What does the Midrash say about Vashti?

-[The Bible says:]

To bring Vashti the queen before [him] with the royal crown. [Est. 1:11]

Rabbi Evu said: What makes atonement for Israel is that when the Jews eat and drink and are joyous, they bless, praise and exalt the Holy One, blessed be He. But when the [idolatrous] nations eat and drink, they occupy themselves with indecent matters.

So here, one said, "The Median women are the most beautiful", and the other said, "The Persian women are the most beautiful". That fool [King Ahashverosh] said to them: "The vessel I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see it?"

They replied, "Yes, but she must be naked [so we can judge her without adornments]."

He said to them: "Very well, let her be naked."...

She asked permission to wear at least as much as a girdle, like a harlot, but they would not allow her. He said to her: "You must be naked."

She said, "I will come in without a crown."

[He replied]: "If you do, they will say: 'She is [just] a maidservant.'"

[Esther R. 3:13]

-[The Bible says:]

But the queen, Vashti, refused. [Est. 1:12]

She remonstrated with him very forcibly, saying:

"If they consider me beautiful, they will want to enjoy me themselves and kill you; and if they consider me plain, I shall bring disgrace on you." But he was blind to her hints and insensitive to her slings.

She then sent [another] message to him: "You used to be [just] the stable-boy of my father's house, and you were used to bringing naked harlots, and now that you have ascended the throne you have not abandoned your evil habits." He was still blind to her hints and insensitive to her slings.

She then sent [a third] message to him: “Even those condemned by my forefather's house were not punished naked, as it says:

Then these men [Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah] were bound in their cloaks, their pants, [their robes,] etc. [before being thrown in the fiery furnace.] [Dan. 3:21]”...

[Esther R. 3:14]

-Rabbi Yochanan said: All the years from the time when Vashti was killed till Esther became queen, the wrath of Ahashverosh did not subside...

When did it subside? When Haman was hanged. [Because Haman, who was none other than Memucan, [Meg. 12b] had ordered Vashti's punishment, and the king was mourning for her.]

[Esther R. 3:15]

-The wicked [Ahashverosh] said to [the wise men]: “I ordered Vashti to appear before me naked and she refused. What is to be her punishment?” They replied: “Your Majesty, when we were in our own land, we used to inquire of the Urim and Thumim, but now we are exiles [so we lost our ability to judge].” [Esther R. 4:1]

-[The Bible says:]

What shall we do... according to law? [Est. 1:15]

Rabbi Yitzhaq said: [To think that] that swine [Vashti] is treated according to law, and a holy nation [such as Israel] not according to law, but with cruelty! [Ahashverosh condemned all the Jews to destruction without bothering with any laws.] [Esther R. 4:5]

-[Ahashverosh] gave the order and they brought in [Vashti's] head on a platter. [Esther R. 4:11]

-[The Bible says:]

And he sent letters to all the king's provinces... that every man should rule in his own house, and that it should be proclaimed according to the language of every people. [Est. 1:22]

Rabbi Huna said: Ahashverosh was utterly devoid of sense. [In decreeing that every man should rule in his own house, an utter impossibility.] If a man wants to eat lentils and his wife wants to eat beans, can he force her? Surely she does as she likes.

Rabbi Pinchas said: And not only that, but he made himself a laughingstock. If a Median marries a Persian woman, is she to speak Median? If a Persian marries a Median woman, is she to speak Persian? [Of course not! The man will learn to speak her language.] [Esther R. 4:12]

-Wine separated Ahashverosh from Vashti... , as it is said:

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine... [Est. 1:10]

The result of that was that he became enraged with her and killed her.
[Esther R. 5:1]

-[The Bible says:]

[King Ahashverosh...] remembered Vashti [and what she had done,
and what was decreed against her.] [Est. 2:1]

To wit, [he remembered] that he ordered her to come before him naked,
that she refused, that he had been enraged with her, and that he killed her.
Later he began to feel remorse, because he realized that she had acted
properly... Why [then] did she suffer this fate? Because she would not
allow Ahashverosh to give permission for the building of the Holy Temple,
and she said to him: "Do you seek to rebuild what my ancestors
destroyed?" [Esther R. 5:2]

To bow or not to bow?

Did Mordechai act properly by refusing to bow before Haman, thereby endangering all the Jews?

You may have been told: Jews bow only to God. This is false.

Bowing to people as a gesture of respect, honor, love, fear is allowed:

-Abraham bowed to his guests:

And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing beside him, and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. [Genesis 18:2].

-Abraham bowed to the people from whom he was buying a burial plot for Sarah:

And Abraham stood up, and bowed to the people of the land, to the Hittites. [Genesis 23:7]

-Jacob bowed to his brother Esau seven times:

And [Jacob] bowed to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother... Then the maidservants came with their children, and they bowed down. Then Leah came with her children came and they bowed down. Then Joseph came with Rachel and they bowed down. [Gen. 33:3-7]

-Joseph's brothers bowed to him:

Now Joseph was the ruler over the land and Joseph's brothers came and prostrated themselves to him, with their faces to the ground. [Genesis 42:6].

-Moses bowed to his father-in-law:

So Moses went out toward Jethro, prostrated himself and kissed him. [Exodus 18:7]

- The prophet Nathan bowed to King David:

And they told the king: Behold: Nathan the prophet. And when he came before the king, he bowed before the king with his face to the ground. [1Kings 1:23]

However, a Jew may not bow before an idol. Halacha forbids engaging in idolatry even to save a life.

Now, the Talmud tells us:

The wicked Haman put himself up as an object of worship. [Meg. 10b, 19a]

The Midrash explains:

[Mordechai] declared the uniqueness of the name of the Holy One in the face of all the inhabitants of the world. Thus, it is written:

But Mordechai did not bow down and would not prostrate himself before [Haman]. [Est. 3:2].

Now, was Mordechai a troublemaker, that he should [gratuitously] disobey the king's command? [No.] The fact is that when Ahashverosh ordered

that all should bow down to Haman, Haman engraved an idol over his breast, to make everybody bow down to an idol. When Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to it, he was filled with wrath. Mordechai said to him: "There is a Master who is exalted above all who are exalted. How can I abandon Him and bow down to an idol?" [Esther R. 6:2]

That is why Mordechai refused to bow to Haman.

The Midrash adds that Haman believed he himself was a god, and discussed the matter with Mordechai:

What did Mordechai say to those who asked him why [he would transgress the king's order to bow before Haman]? Rabbi Levi said: He said to them: "Our master Moses admonished us in the Torah saying:

Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image. [Deut. 27:15]

and this wretch sets himself up as a deity!..."

Haman [responded]...: "Did his ancestor [Jacob] not prostrate himself before my ancestor [Esau]?" (*)

Mordechai replied: "Benjamin [my ancestor] was not yet born." [Esther R. 7:8]

(*) Haman is a descendant of King Agag of Amalek (the Megilla refers to Haman as an "Agagite") and Amalek is the grandson of Esau.

On the other hand, some argue that flexibility is sometimes best.

Talmud:

Abaye said... [The Torah] taught us:

[You shall not make for you any engraved image...] You shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them. [Ex. 20:4-5]

You may not bow down to THEM, but you may bow down to a human being like yourself. One might think that this applies even to [a human being] who is worshipped, like Haman... Rava, however, explains it as follows: like Haman, but not altogether so. [To bow down to one] like Haman [is forbidden], since he set himself up as a divinity; but not altogether so, for Haman was worshipped through fear, while the prohibition [in the Torah] applies only to a voluntary action. [Sanhedrin 61b]

Sforno: If the Zealots defending the Second Temple against the Romans had swallowed their pride and followed the example of Jacob, the Temple would not have been destroyed*. [Sforno on Gen. 33:4]

*Talmud:

The rabbis said to [the Zealots]: Let us go out and make peace with [the Romans]. They would not let them, but on the contrary said, Let us go out and fight them. The rabbis said: You will not succeed. [Gittin 56a]

Another opinion has Mordechai showing deep insight into God's ways. Haman tries to convince the king to allow him to kill all the Jews. The king is skeptical because the Jews are protected by God. Midrash:

Resh Lakish said: When the wicked Haman said to Ahashverosh: "Come, let us exterminate Israel", Ahashverosh replied: "You cannot prevail against them, since their God will not entirely forsake them. See what he did to the kings who preceded us and who laid hands upon them and who were much mightier and more powerful than we are. Whoever comes against them to destroy them and whoever schemes against them is wiped out... How much more so then we, who are not equal to those others. Let me hear no more of this..." [Est. R. 7:13]

So Haman reasons: If I can get Israel to sin, God will abandon them and I can then kill them with impunity:

Haman said to Ahashverosh: "The God of these men hates lewdness. Make a feast for them and set harlots before them, and order them that they should all come and eat and drink and do as they please... When Mordechai saw this, he rose and issued a proclamation saying, "Do not go to partake of the feast of Ahashverosh, since he has invited you only in order to [set the stage] to lodge a complaint against you, so that the Attribute of Justice should have an excuse for accusing you before the Holy One, blessed be He. But they did not listen to Mordechai and they all went to the feast. Rabbi Ishmael said: 18,500 [Jews] went to the banquet and ate and drank and became drunk and misbehaved. [Est. R. 7:13]

Mordechai concludes that God *will* allow the extermination as punishment, unless the Jews repent sincerely. He precipitates events by refusing to bow down to Haman, and the king signs the decree to have the Jews killed, which he would have done anyway. The Jews respond with despair and repentance:

And in every province... there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. [Esther 4:3]

This was Mordechai's plan and this is what saved the Jews!

Were Haman's ten sons hanged?

The Book of Esther does say:

Then Esther said: If it pleases the king... let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. And the king commanded it so to be done... and they hanged Haman's ten sons. [Esther 9:13-14]

But this quote is usually taken out of context. It leads to the false conclusion that Haman's 10 sons (babes in arms for all we know) were killed on account of their father's actions. In reality, Haman's 10 sons had already died in battle fighting the Jews. Esther just wanted to have their bodies hung. This is made clear in an earlier quote:

-The Jews struck all their enemies with the stroke of the sword... and did what they would to those who hated them... [Esther 9:5]

-The ten sons of Haman..., the enemy of the Jews, they slew [in battle], but on the plunder they did not lay their hand. [Esther 9:10]

Yom Ki-Purim

Why is the Day of Atonement known in the Torah as "Yom Ki-Purim" (יום הכּפּוּרִים), which can be translated as "a day that is like Purim"? Because on both days Jews like to masquerade. On Purim they masquerade as characters in the story, and on the Day of Atonement they masquerade as observant Jews. ☺

Trump the rabbi

A Russian rabbi was preaching the importance of learning the language of the land. He said: "The miracle of Purim was possible only because Mordechai heard Bigthan and Teresh plot to kill the king, and reported it to Queen Esther. If Mordechai hadn't known Persian, the Jews of Persia would have been destroyed."

"Not so fast", replied a congregant. "The Bible proves that most Persian Jews did *not* understand Persian. That is why the plotters did not hesitate to speak within earshot of a Jew: they didn't think he could understand them. So maybe it's better for us not to learn Russian." ☺

The Hamans of our day

October 16, 1946: Ten Nazi officials are hanged at Nuremberg, Germany, for crimes against humanity. They are the ten sons of the

Haman of our day. An American eyewitness correspondent reports that, when the foremost of these antisemites, Julius Streicher, was led to the scaffold, he shouted: "Purim Feast 1946".

Hurrah!

On Purim 1953, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was asked to bless the Jews of the Soviet Union, who were in great danger because of Stalin's antisemitism. He told his people to chant "Hurrah!", thinking in Hebrew. In Hebrew, "*hu-ra*" means "He is evil"! They had Stalin in mind. That night, Stalin had a stroke and died a few days later.

Purim letters, words and names

-None of the names mentioned in the Book of Esther has been found in the records of Persia. (Few are available anyway.)

-The name Mordechai derives from the god Marduk and the name Esther from the goddess Ishtar. They are not Jewish names.

-Some historians (e.g., Graetz) believe the story of Esther was invented at the time of the Maccabean revolt to lift the morale of the Jews. It's plausible because earliest mention of Purim is 2nd-century BCE, when Judah Maccabee won battle against Syrian general Nicanor (13 Adar 161 BCE). Many scholars, however, insist that the events of Purim did occur.

-The Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that contains the following words:

-Tevet, the tenth Hebrew month [Esther 2:16]

-Kasher, meaning "fit" [Esther 8:5]

-Pur, a Persian word meaning "lot" [Esther 3:7, 9:24]

-All the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are found in Esther 3:13.

-The Hebrew word *mishteh* (banquet) occurs 20 times in the Book of Esther and 20 times in the whole rest of the Bible.

-The longest verse in the Bible is Esther 8:9. It has 43 Hebrew words (and 90 English words).

-Gematria (numerical equivalents): The Talmudic injunction that on Purim one should get so drunk that one cannot tell the difference between the words “Baruch Mordechai” (Blessed be Mordechai) and “Arur Haman” (Cursed be Haman) is contained in the words themselves: Both phrases have the numerical equivalent 502!

-Gematria: The king (*hammelech*) and Haman are on the same level, because the numerical equivalent of both is 95! (Talmud: Ahashverosh was just as antisemitic as Haman.)

-There is an Esther, Louisiana; an Esther, Missouri; a Mary Esther, Florida; an Estherville, Iowa; and an Estherwood, Louisiana. There is an Esther Lake in both Minnesota and Nebraska.

Mordechai and Esther are righteous

-As myrrh (*mor*) is the foremost of spices, so MORdechai was the foremost of the righteous in his generation. [Midrash, Esther Rabbah 6:3]

-Esther was cut off from intercourse with Jews, and she was in danger of forgetting when Shabbat came. She therefore adopted the device of giving her seven attendants peculiar names, to keep in mind the passage of time:

- The first one she called HULTA, “workaday”, and she was in attendance upon Esther on Sundays.

- On Mondays, she was served by ROK'ITA, to remind her of rek'ia, “firmament”, which was created on the second day of the world.

- Tuesday's maid she called GENUNITA, “Garden”, the third day of creation having seen plants produced in the world.

- On Wednesday, she reminded herself by NEHORITA's name, the “luminous”, that it was the day on which God had made the luminaries, to shed their light in the sky;

- On Thursday by RUHSHITA, “movement”, for on the fifth day the first animated beings were created;

- On Friday, the day on which the beasts came into being, by HURFITA, “little ewelamb”;

- On Shabbat her bidding was done by REGO'ITA, “rest”. Thus she was sure to remember Shabbat week after week.

[Midrash, I Targum 2.9]

Latkes–Hamantaschen Debate

-Funny mock “debate” about the merits of each. Origin: University of Chicago, 1946. Latkes usually “win”.

-Notable arguments:

- Latkes are seven times more popular than hamantaschen. A Google search gives 1,420,000 returns for “latkes”, but only 216,000 for “hamantaschen”.

- Hamantaschen symbolize eating the enemy, a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

- Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva is secretly a Latke-Hamantasch Collider.

- The Supreme Court recognized latkes, but not hamantaschen. The majority opinion written by Justice Blackmun in the case *County of Allegheny v. ACLU* says: “It is also a custom to serve potato pancakes or other fried foods on Hanukkah because the oil in which they are fried is, by tradition, a reminder of the miracle of Hanukkah.” No Supreme Court decision ever mentioned hamantaschen.

- Latkes increase our dependence on foreign oil.

- From a standpoint of energy efficiency, the latke is eight times more fuel efficient than the hamantasch.

- Kepler discovered that the orbits of the planets around the sun are ellipses by contemplating a well-cooked latke.

- Hamantaschen are Republican: They're doughy.

- Oh, yeah? Well, latkes are Democratic: They are greasy and slimy.