

## Hanukkah: Intermarriage and The Winning Side of Jewish History

### *Parashat Mikketz / Hanukkah*

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December 31, 2016

As we near the end of the beautiful Festival of Lights, as we ingest (and if you are lucky, digest) our last servings of latkes, as we spin the *draydel* once more for old-time's sake, I would like to return to the historical origins of this wonderful Holiday. I would like to take you back to Jerusalem, the epicenter of the story of Hanukkah and to the Maccabean Revolt. What was happening in Jerusalem at that time? And, what, exactly, were the Maccabees revolting against?

The villain of the story, as we tell it, is King Antiochus, the Syrian Greek King who, in the second century CE ruled over an empire which extended throughout the area we call today the Middle East. To understand Hanukkah and to understand the Maccabees, we must first understand Antiochus and the culture known as Hellenism. And to understand Hellenism, I turn to one who is, arguably, the greatest scholar of the Hellenist Age, Elias Bickerman:

Hellenism was a culture, not a religion. It was not bound by faith or creed, but had its source in education. One could become a "Hellene" through attending a Greek school, through the assimilation of Hellenic civilization. And this civilization, open to everyone, was that of the rulers of the world...Hellenism in its time was very much like "Western civilization" is today. Whether [Western Civilization] brings about penicillin or atomic bombs, the theory of relativity or the relativity in morals, [Western Civilization] today always stands for power and is indispensable to survival. (PP 110 – 111, The Jews: Their History, ed. Louis Finkelstein)

So it was with Hellenism in the ancient world. Hellenism was the pervasive culture, evident in all aspects of life. But there was a cost to Hellenism. The fee for entrance into the world of Hellenism was the abrogation of behaviors which were considered alienating and beliefs which did not conform to the rationalism of the contemporary world. This meant that uniquely Jewish observances were not welcomed in a Hellenist society. And it is here that the points of conflict emerged within the Jewish Community, between those in the willing to pay the price of Hellenism by rejecting Jewish traditions, laws and customs and those who refused to pay that price.

It is important to remember that the rabbis of the day understood Hellenism and saw its value. They could see how Hellenism could enhance Judaism's outlook. Indeed, the rabbis incorporated numerous Greek features into Judaism as a way of enriching and renewing Judaism. But there were also limits, points beyond which the rabbis would not go. To be sure, the rabbis could compromise on certain issues. But there were other practices which the rabbis could not disavow. Among these practices were some those behaviors which were the ones which alienated the Jews from the rest of society.

Our Dietary Laws, for example, made sharing meals with non-Jews difficult. But the rabbis would not renounce the Laws of Kashrut. Observance of the Sabbath, an observance which removed Jews from the flow of life once every seven days, was a cornerstone of Jewish Life. But there would be no Judaism, they believed, without Shabbat. Circumcision, daily prayer and purity rituals all became points of contention. In short, the question which the Rabbis and the Jews of the ancient world needed to answer was not: How can I avoid contact with the world around me? Rather, their question was: How can I and we assimilate into the modern, universalistic, Hellenist world while **preserving** our unique lifestyle and ancient traditions.

And, it is here that the story of Hanukkah begins. It begins with a question. That question is: How much? How much Hellenism could the traditionalists of that time allow to permeate Judaism while still maintaining and adhering to the unique practices and indispensable aspects of Jewish Life? And (this should not surprise you) there were among the Jewish People two answers given and two groups which emerged within the Jewish Community.

One group within the Jewish Community is identified as the Reformers (not to be confused with today's Reform Movement) who were most comfortable assimilating completely into Hellenist society. They were convinced that the maintenance of their peculiar and particularistic customs, such as our dietary laws and Shabbat observances, cut them off and separated them unnecessarily from the society they wanted to join.

Menelaus, a Reformer, was appointed as the High Priest. The Book of Maccabees records that Menelaus neglected sacrifices and hastened to the athletic games (for which, I presume, he had season tickets). He diminished the role of the Sabbath, acquiesced to the abrogation of the dietary laws and allowed Hellenists to perform sacrifices in the Jewish Temple. The King, of course, regarded the Reformers with favor, and their High Priest, Menelaus, as a partner.

In short, Menelaus and the Reformers came to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to follow the ancestral ways. For Judaism to survive it needed to become part of Hellenist society and the way to do that was to dispense with Shabbat, Kashrut, circumcision and other practices. The King codified the prohibition of these Jewish practices. Those who attempted to observe them would be arrested and punished.

It was against these prohibitions, accepted by the Reformers and enforced by Antiochus, that the Maccabees launched their revolt. In winning the battle for control of the Temple and with the execution of Menelaus, Antiochus cancelled the edict and, to the credit of the Maccabees, reestablished freedom of religions at the end of the year 164 BCE. It is **this** victory of the Maccabees which we celebrate on Hanukkah.

From a historical perspective, therefore, the Maccabees were fighting not only against Antiochus the King. The Maccabees fought against the reforms enacted by Menelaus and supported by the King. Or stated more directly, the Maccabees' fight was not against Hellenism. Rather it was against the abrogation of certain practices which the Maccabees felt were too fundamental to ignore. Shabbat, Kashrut and the rest were too important to the definition of Judaism to be left behind.

History, of course, is written by the victors. And, for that reason, Hanukkah belongs to the Maccabees. But the debate over the culture of the larger society and its impact on contemporary Jewish Life is one which each generation must answer for itself. Each generation must decide how best to preserve Jewish Life for the future, in the context of a society which conspires to entice us away from our ancestral roots. And this is the very question we have before us today.

Last week, one of my esteemed senior colleagues, formerly the rabbi of a major congregation in Philadelphia, (now retired), a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, the rabbinical organization for Conservative Rabbis to which I also belong, decided that it was time to make a change in his conduct as a rabbi. I have not spoken to him about this but have gleaned some insights from a number of articles written for various Jewish publications. This rabbi, defying the authority of the international Rabbinical Assembly, has started performing interfaith marriage ceremonies. And since then, articles have appeared and conversations, in Philadelphia and beyond, have been prompted. In that context have been asked by our congregants on several occasions what I think. Is this to be the future of the Conservative Movement? So I thought I would tell you what I think.

First, I want to say that I believe I understand the motivation behind this departure from traditional practice. This rabbi, like every other rabbi I know, is motivated by a desire to help the Jewish People. This rabbi, I and every other rabbi I know, wake early and stay late in order to plan, to speak, to teach, comfort, and listen, each and every day, on behalf of the Jewish People. It was with this motivation that this rabbi, my friend and colleague, has decided that it was necessary for him to change his practice, in defiance of the RA, because he believed deeply that this would strengthen the Jewish Community. And he is not the only rabbi who believes this.

The Reform Movement, years ago, gave its members the option to perform interfaith marriages. I understand their reasoning and am even sympathetic to their motivation. They believe that we need to engage interfaith couples as early as possible. They say that they want to be the first in welcoming the non-Jewish partner to the Jewish Community. Often, I am told that the non-Jewish partner is not too religious and does not feel deeply connected to a different faith tradition. Then the rabbi has a chance to engage this person in the hope is that the non-Jewish partner will feel embraced, welcomed, and will ultimately integrate into the Jewish Community. This is not an argument which can be ignored.

Moreover, the Jewish Community is well aware of the fact that we need numbers. We need more “Jews in the pews”. By embracing a couple at the moment they are married, my Reform colleagues claim that they will have the greatest opportunity to keep them affiliated and, ultimately, have a strong Jewish impact on their children.

Let me offer one further reason my Conservative colleague and many Reform colleagues perform interfaith marriages, a reason which is particularly powerful. We rabbis watch the children of our congregation grow. We know them for many years. Whether or not we are close with the family or the child, we know them and they know us. When a child is contemplating marriage, they want their rabbi to be there with them. That rabbi has probably been with them at every other moment in one’s Jewish life. They want their rabbi with them as they are married.

Their rabbi, they should know, wants to be there as well. And, when the child marries a person of a different faith, it is painful for a rabbi to absent himself/herself at such a crucial and important moment in the life of that family. These and other reasons can be used to create a convincing argument in favor of changing the guidelines of the RA to open to rabbis the possibility of performing these marriages.

In order to respond to these very good and salient points, I would like to return to the historical account of the Maccabees. As you will recall, the High Priest, Menelaus and his followers wanted what many in our society want: full access to the larger society. And this was not something with which the Maccabees disagreed. They too were Hellenist. They too wanted access. But they fought because they believed that what Menelaus and the Reformers were suggesting went too far. They believed that by giving up on certain standards of behavior, by eliminating the boundaries which exist between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, the Reformers would indeed have full and unfettered access to their society. But, the Maccabees believed, the price was too high, that the Reformers would ultimately give up Judaism completely.

You see, truth be told, this entire is about how much we can give up in order to live in two worlds, the world of the larger society and the world of Jewish Life and tradition. **Hanukkah is about where we draw the line.** Hanukkah is about the boundaries and limitations which are required to live a vibrant and full Jewish Life. At what point do the accommodations we make to enlarge the tent, the attempts we make to be more inclusive, the desire we have to extend ourselves beyond traditional boundaries, weaken rather than strengthen? And my answer is: I don't know. Nobody knows. Which innovations, what new practices can we bring to the Jewish Community today which will make us stronger in the next generation and which will lead to our demise? It is hard to say.

We know that the rate of interfaith marriage is very high, well over 50% in the non-Orthodox community. And communally there seems little we can do to stem that tide. I believe that those rabbis performing interfaith ceremonies believe that what they are doing will make a difference, if not statistically significant than individually significant. It will make a difference to those people standing under the *Huppah*.

But are the rabbis who are willing to perform these ceremonies following in the footsteps of the ancient Reformers or are they this generation's Maccabees? Are we, those of us who try to teach and enable our people to straddle the divide between the larger, universal society and the world of traditional Jewish practice, a foot in each world, the Maccabees of this moment?

I see the issue of interfaith marriage differently from the other matters on which our Movement has changed positions. The other changes endorsed by the Conservative Movement have extended Jewish Life, ritual and tradition to members of the Jewish Community who were formerly not fully engaged or included. Indeed, on occasion some have been actively discouraged from participation.

In our community, we have extended every right and privilege of Jewish life and participation to women. We have been designated as a safe and inclusive congregation for the LGBTQ Community. Reaching out and embracing Jews who stand at the periphery of the Jewish Community is something about which I, as a rabbi, feel an overriding sense of urgency and passion.

Let me also say that I feel a sense of passion even toward including and embracing non-Jews who may want to become Jews or want to become involved in the Jewish Community. As many of you know, over the years, I have always been deeply committed to reaching out and encouraging conversion to Judaism. In our community we have been in the forefront **nationally** in terms of extending full synagogue membership and privileges to families in which one spouse is not Jewish. I am convinced that the involvement of non-Jews in our community has made us stronger and richer as a community.

But, extending Jewish ritual, in the form of an interfaith wedding ceremony, seems to me will not will not encourage conversion or affiliation and, in fact, may send the opposite message. When full access to Jewish ritual and tradition is given at the most sacred moment of Jewish Life to Jew and non-Jew alike, the message conveyed is that one need not be Jewish in order to enjoy all of the benefits of a tradition preserved, kept and defended by the Jew People over the course of thousands of years.

And this brings us to the core of this issue: Will we continue to maintain that, in Judaism, there are boundaries? Yes, the boundaries can change, as we have seen. But the notion of boundaries remains. I believe that those who advocate for Judaism and its rabbis to sanctify interfaith marriages are saying that the new Judaism is one which does have boundaries. It is a Judaism in which rabbis, individually or collectively, can act and perform ceremonies without regard to the boundaries which previously defined that which is Jewish and that which is not.

To my colleagues, who I respect and who I think I understand, I would ask: Where is the bound today, your boundary, the point beyond which we should not go? Where is the line which represents the limits of that which we can call Jewish? Is there a boundary at all?

My Reform colleagues, most of whom perform interfaith marriages, are unsure themselves if and how performing interfaith weddings has strengthened the Reform Movement or the Jewish Community. Their numbers are up, to be sure, but are they stronger? Has the decision to perform those marriages strengthened or weakened us as a People? Neither I nor they can answer this question with total confidence.

I believe that I am right, but I may be wrong. For me, Judaism does require boundaries. Even if those boundaries must be moved and adjusted, there must still be a line. And, with regard to intermarriage, I believe that the line should be left where it is.

I view this sermon as a beginning of a dialogue. I am sure that some here would like to continue the discussion after services or at some other time. I look forward to that careful and respectful exchange whenever it occurs. In closing, what I can say is, that one lesson which is confirmed by the story of Hanukkah is that history is written by the victors and we all want to be on the side history and the side of a winning and strong Jewish Community.

To stand on the side of Jewish history, I believe, means to stand within the boundaries which have always defined and framed Jewish Life. Knowing where to draw the line, when to stand firm on adherence to tradition and when to bend and even move the boundary line when needed, is a secret we must work to discover. Whether one is right or wrong will only be revealed as Jewish history continues to unfold.

