



Learning the Lessons of Hanukkah

Then and Now

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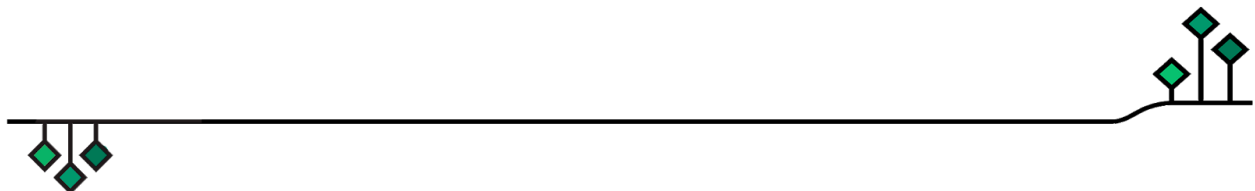
Parashat Mikeitz 5781

NOTE: The weekly portion of Mikeitz is frequently read on Shabbat Hanukkah (although not this year), so this Dvar Torah will center on the holiday instead of the Torah portion.

The greatest challenge facing Diaspora Jewry today is the steady advance of a universal culture (modernity/post-modernity) to which more and more Jews are voluntarily assimilating. This is reminiscent of Maccabean times, when many Jews assimilated to Hellenism, threatening the continuity of the Jewish way of life. True, the competitive culture then turned violent and domineering, which has not happened in our time—yet. Perhaps a reanalysis of the successful religio-political response then that led to the triumph of Hanukkah, even though fleeting, can inform our strategy going forward.¹

Greek culture came to the Orient on the back of Alexander the Great's military conquest of the Middle East and Asia. In mixing and incorporating Eastern religious conceptions, Greek

¹ A more comprehensive treatment of the Hanukkah story—but less developed conceptually—can be found in my book, I. Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (Touchstone, 1992) in the chapter on Hanukkah. I am indebted for the historical background and analysis to Jonathan Goldstein's brilliant commentary on I Maccabees and II Maccabees in *The Anchor Bible* (Doubleday, 1976; 1983).



civilization morphed into Hellenistic culture, a powerful and attractive mix of universal ideas, pagan religious motifs, philosophy, science, culture, and arts. Since the rewards of fraternization and integration with the Hellenistic rulers were government connections and admittance to high positions, the Jewish elites—as other local elites—became increasingly assimilated. King Antiochus IV of the Seleucid dynasty (which took over the section of the Greek Empire in which the Land of Israel was located) took the power to appoint the High Priest. He appointed people who paid the highest sum, as was fairly typical in Hellenistic and later Roman culture. These appointees were typically more assimilated than average in order to obtain their high positions. When traditional Jews resisted the encroachment of the assimilationists and their pagan practices, Antiochus authorized the Hellenizers to impose the practices. He then backed the assimilationists with force. As a result, the Maccabean revolt turned into a civil war in which the bulk of the fighters on both sides were Jews.

The first intense resistance to the pagan rites came from a group referred to in our sources as “Hasidim.” They were traditional Jews, many from the countryside and small towns, who had little contact with Greek culture. Scandalized by the Hellenizing Jews’ behavior—including exhibiting nakedness in gymnasiums, eating with Greeks, dining on non-kosher food, and tolerating and participating in pig sacrifices and Zeus worship—they were determinedly faithful to the old ways. As pietists, they simply refused to go along. In their theological worldview, however, one could not revolt against the King. The King was imposed by God. An oppressive King is simply the “rod of God’s anger.”² Jews must accept their fate. If they repented, God would redeem them. Only God could change a ruler. In the interim, they bowed their heads and accepted martyrdom rather than perform sinful rites, as told in II Maccabees.

² Compare Isaiah’s description of Assyria as the rod with which God is beating Israel in Isaiah 10:5.



One might say that in deepening their commitment to Jewish tradition, the Hasidim's theology harked back to the biblical era, a time marked by a higher level of divine control of history, when the human covenantal partner was relatively passive. Humans' major expression of commitment to covenant was through obeying God's dicta and winning God's favor. The Lord in turn would give Israel victory over their enemies. The consequence of this focus was a kind of political irresponsibility: One did not challenge the bad status quo but left it to God to change. The Maccabees were evolving toward greater human initiative in the covenant which came to fruition in the emergence of the Rabbinic tradition in the coming centuries. The Rabbis taught that God was self-limiting in order to call the human partner to greater authority and responsibility for policies carrying out the covenant. Human activity was essential to make—or change—history.

The actual revolt against forced Hellenization was started by Mattathias and his sons of the Hasmonean family. The Hasmoneans were priests, but not from Jerusalem. Their provenance is suggestive because the Jerusalem priesthood was penetrated by Hellenizers. Seleucid King Antiochus IV interpreted the Jews' internal conflicts (which started between rival hellenized High Priests) as a revolt against him. He re-installed his favorite, Menelaus, a layman, and issued a set of decrees prohibiting traditional practices. As punishment, Antiochus ransacked the Holy Temple, placed a statue of Zeus in it, and allowed sacred prostitution on Temple grounds. Monthly sacrifices to the gods began—including pigs. The Hellenizers then attempted to use force to bring these practices to the hinterlands.

In the city of Modiin, Mattathias and his sons struck the first armed blow of resistance against a Jew who was willing to perform the Greek sacrifices, but they did not have wide backing in the population. They had to retreat to the hills where they began a guerilla war, a series of hit



and run battles. They could not confront the Hellenizers in straight military combat because the Greek supported army was larger and stronger. After Mattathias died, Judah Maccabee took over leadership.

Who manned the ongoing Maccabean revolts? A fraction of the Pietists were so outraged by developments that they harassed or attacked Hellenizers and went over to join the rebels. Most of the Maccabean fighters were patriotic Jews who had some exposure to Greek culture but retained their primary loyalty to Judaism. I submit that these rebels were shifted by the encounter with Hellenism into a less pious, fatalistic belief than that displayed by the Hasidim. Today we would call them acculturated Jews—not Hellenized to the point of switching sides but affected enough to conceive that humans should take on a more activist role, including rejecting the King. Perhaps they also learned military tactics from the better armed, more trained Greek soldiers. In any event, they gradually wore down the Greek and Hellenist army. Increasingly, Jews who might have eventually assimilated under peaceful conditions had to make a choice as the tit-for-tat guerilla fighting grew bloody. Many came over to the Maccabean side. What started as resistance by fundamentalists turned into a coalition of pietists, moderate Hellenizers, and those who put Jewish loyalty first.

The Book of I Maccabees tells a classic story distinguishing the Hasmoneans and the Hasidim. A group of Hasidim hiding in a cave were surrounded on Shabbat by a Greek armed force. They were called upon to surrender and accept the King's decrees and their lives would be spared. The Hasidim refused to fight because they would not violate the Shabbat laws, but they would also not accept the King's decree to violate the other laws of the Torah. They accepted martyrdom and were destroyed by the Greeks.³

³ I Maccabees 2:30-41.



The Maccabees—and after them the Rabbis—concluded that saving lives overrules the laws of Shabbat and so decided to fight when the Hasidim would not.⁴ It seems that the Hasidim, in their uninflected faith, weighed all commandments as equally from God and therefore of equal weight. They could not violate Shabbat for another purpose, so out of their loyalty to Torah, they chose martyrdom. Thus they proved their devotion to God, even unto death. The Maccabees and the Rabbis after them could develop a hierarchy of value—i.e. life has priority overall—because of their exposure to philosophical thinking and rhetorical analysis which they learned from Hellenistic culture. They chose to risk or give their lives to protect life.

The differences showed up again after the Hanukkah victory. Over several years, Judah defeated the Seleucid armies because the Syrian imperial government was preoccupied with other wars. By 165 BCE, Judah had cut off Jerusalem. At that point, the Seleucids sent a major Syrian army to meet the challenge. Judah opted to negotiate a settlement rather than risk being destroyed. The agreement reached was a triumph for the Maccabees. The King gave amnesty to the rebels and granted the Jews the right to use their own food and observe laws as of old. Judah now had the power to cleanse the Temple and restore the traditional rites. This was in the month of Tishrei. The Maccabees wanted a dedication celebration for eight days after Sukkot, following the model of Solomon's dedication of the First Temple.⁵ However, the Hasidim objected. They insisted that a new Temple would descend from Heaven miraculously and nothing should be done to jeopardize the coming miracle.

At the insistence of the Hasidim, the Maccabees waited for a full month for the miraculous Temple to appear. Then they waited a second month. When nothing happened, Judah and

⁴ I Maccabees 2:42ff; Talmud Yoma 83b.

⁵ See I Kings 8, especially verses 65 ff. The Temple dedication was tacked on to the Sukkot holiday celebration.



the Maccabees went ahead with a rededication celebration for eight days, starting on the 25th of Kislev, the anniversary of the Greek takeover and desecration of the Temple. The polluting Greek installations were removed and the Temple rededicated.

The Maccabees had the courage to go ahead with creating a new holiday in the absence of some miraculous divine sign. The celebration focused on lighting the *menorah* and its lights. The holiday became known as Hag ha-Urim (the Holiday of Lights).⁶ The Maccabees also marched around the Temple, singing hymns of praise and bearing *lulavim* and *etrogim*. The strong association of the rededication holiday with Sukkot (eight days, harvest fruits, temple rituals, that it initially was going to be celebrated in conjunction with Sukkot in Tishrei) led some to call the new holiday “the Days of Sukkot in the month of Kislev.” The Maccabees decreed that the holiday would be celebrated every year in an ongoing way. This was a particularly courageous decision because the Hasmonean wars were far from over. The Hellenizers counterattacked with help from Seleucid armed forces. Within two years, Judah was killed and the Maccabees returned to guerilla warfare.

In 152 BCE, the Seleucid government in Syria broke up in a war over succession for the Kingship. Both rivals needed soldiers. They turned to Jonathan, Judah’s brother and successor, for military aid. In return, they offered the Maccabees restored rule over Jerusalem and Judea. For many years after, Judah’s brothers Jonathan and Simon maintained Jewish independence by playing politics back and forth between reigning kings and contenders for the Seleucid throne.

⁶ The earliest example of this is the Jewish historian Josephus who calls Hanukkah by this name in Greek, in *Antiquities* 12.7.6-7.



The Hasmoneans combined priesthood and kingly rule—a break with the past separation of powers. The Pharisaic elements in the coalition opposed this combination but stayed to fight from within.⁷ The Hasidim withdrew from political life, fearing that the government would need to deal with Hellenizers and would be influenced by Hellenistic culture. The committed Jewish majority saw that some moral and religious compromises were inescapable in the process of government and struggle for survival. But the purity option, dropping out, was the worst alternative because, without a state and some acculturation, the Jewish people—and eventually Judaism—would be suppressed.

The Hasmonean kings provided a Jewish government under whose cover the Pharisees and their spiritual successors, the Rabbis, developed and ultimately won the internal cultural and religious battle. The Hasmonean rulers actually maintained some wider margin of self-rule by the Jews until, a century later, a fight for succession between two brothers led to inviting the rising Roman power to intervene. Eventually, the Jewish Kingdom fell under Roman control.

So is the Hanukkah holiday “fake news”? Is it a celebration of a victory that was never complete and led to no lasting independence? I say: No. Had the revolt not taken place, the combination of Hellenistic cultural imperialism with political backing might have overwhelmed Judaism. Thanks to the uprising, the basic rule of Torah was assured. Hellenization continued.⁸ However, a strengthened Judaism possessed the inner capacity to assimilate some new elements yet remain a vital religion. The temporary respite won by the

⁷ The Pharisaic critique of the Hasmonean rulers boiled over into outright persecution of the Pharisees under King Alexander Janneus (104-76 BCE). Nonetheless, the Pharisee engagement with governance as well as with the cultural struggle enabled them to mature and develop a vital, more participatory, more dynamic tradition. I believe that the conflict explains why the Talmud pays little attention to Hanukkah and focuses the holiday not on the incredible military political victories but on the miracle of the little vial of pure oil.

⁸ As evidenced by the Greek names of many Hasmonean rulers, such as Alexander Janneus.



Hasmoneans enabled the eventual triumph of the Pharisees and their outgrowth, the Rabbis, and the emergence of rabbinic Judaism.

Some takeaways from the Hanukkah story for today are:

- 1) Hasidim then—as now—defined religious intensity as giving all the power to God and showing devotion even at the cost of losing their lives and not participating in building a viable society. The Maccabees then—as the Jewish majority now—defined commitment as a devotion to God’s covenant and taking responsibility to build a viable society. They chose to give their lives, if necessary, to protect the covenantal community.
- 2) Acculturation that allows for inner development of the tradition is a more viable option than preserving its purity through exclusion of the general culture. Despite the risks, acculturation will win out over the strategy of withdrawal.
- 3) The Maccabee success in forging a broad coalition for their side enabled the bulk of the Jewish people to stay with the tradition. This policy worked better than the alternative: losing the majority and assuring continuity through a pure fundamentalist faction, separated from the rest of the people and the general culture..
- 4) The Hasmonean rulers were corrupted in the course of exercising power. But these negatives were offset by the development of a vital internal renewal movement which enabled Judaism to function and thrive even as it interacted with a high level general culture. Today’s leadership in America and Israel does have many flaws also. Nevertheless, developing an analogous renaissance is the key to a successful strategy of continuity in our time.

