

The Story of Hanukkah

From *Ten Turning Points in Jewish History* by Morris B. Margolies;
“*The Maccabean Revolt*.” Lecture Four; pp. 32-35.

Some miles northeast of Jerusalem, very close to the present Lydda, there was a little town called Modin. It was a tiny town. It never would have appeared on the map either of geography or history, were it not for the fact that out of this tiny town there emerged a colossal manifestation of the spirit of Judaism. When the missionizing messenger of the King arrived with his propaganda and his portable altar, and assembled the entire Jewish community of Modin which included the venerable Mattathias, an octogenarian priest and his five sons, who were in order of their ages: Simon, Jochanan, Judah, Jonathan and Eliezer, he insisted that they all bow down to the idol. No one would budge. He tried to persuade the elder statesman to bow. He said: “If you will do it, all the rest will follow.” Still, no one budged. Then he offered bribes of money, and a Jew who was much more money-conscious than God-conscious, approached the idol to offer the sacrifice. Mattathias could no longer control himself. Old man that he was, he rushed forward, drew his dagger and stabbed the Jew who was about to become an apostate and killed him. Then he rushed the king’s deputy and killed him too. He raised the banner of revolt as he proclaimed: “Whoever associates himself with God, let him join me.”

And that was the beginning. It was the beginning of a persistent period of guerilla warfare, it was the beginning of a fight of resistance in the mountains, it was the beginning of a demonstration on the part of the Jewish people that they would not go down without a fight. It was the first recorded instance in the history of the human race of a war conducted purely and solely in defense of religious freedom. Never before had any war been fought for that particular issue, the issue of religious freedom. At first the Greeks did not have a difficult time with the revolting Jews, the guerilla fighters who were led by the Hasmonean family of Modin, because they would not fight on the Sabbath. The Greeks patiently bided their time until the arrival of the Sabbath day and then they attacked and slaughtered at will. It was not long before the Hasmoneans sacrificed the Sabbath temporarily upon the altar of religious survival. Remarkable victories followed.

At a place called Beth Horo, outnumbered four to one, through strategy and courage Judah decisively defeated the enemies. 47,000 Greek-Syrian soldiers under the command of one of their leading generals, Gorgias, met Judah in battle at Emmaus in April, 165 BCE. An army of 47,000 Syrian-Greeks facing a hopelessly outnumbered, seemingly out-maneuvered, certainly out-armed Judaic army of 6,000! These six thousand inflicted a smashing defeat over the 47,000, led by the impressive, indomitable, unbelievable Judah the Maccabee. Antiochus was hard-pressed on other fronts by now, and he wanted to reach a settlement with this remarkable leader of the Jewish people. He realized that the business of Hellenizing Judea was improbable if not impossible, hardly worth the expense in money and in blood which he was investing into it. So on the 29th of March, 164 BCE, Antiochus was forced to eat crow and to rescind all of the anti-Torah and anti-Judaic laws that he had passed. Judah returned to the Temple, and the first thing that he did was to oust Meneluas, the Hellenizing High Priest who had bought the High Priesthood. Then the Jewish Loyalists, known as the Chassidim (that is what the word meant originally) cleansed, purified and rededicated the Temple. This took place in December, 164 BCE.

An eight-day festival ensued in which the re-dedication of the Temple was celebrated. It was originally called the “Succoth of the month of Kislev”, because Succoth is an eight-day holiday. Probably they could not celebrate Succoth that year because the Temple was still unclean, so they postponed Succoth until December, and that is why we have an eight-day Chanukah holiday. The legend about the little can of oil lasting for eight days? Well, you know it is unscientific and you know that it is improbable. What did happen of course is that the Jewish people later on were trying to find a reason as to why this festival lasted eight-days. The only eight-day festival in their ken was Succoth, and they could not make the association. Historically speaking, this is the probable answer: Succoth had to be postponed, so they celebrated Succoth which is, after a fashion, a Temple holiday, they celebrated Succoth during the Chanukah which became an eight-day holiday.

Judah was not satisfied. There in the heart of Jerusalem was a Greek bastion called the Aera – the word probably means bastion, the citadel of Jerusalem. Judah attacked that citadel, and he wanted to oust all Greek influences against Jerusalem. The great general of the Greek-Syrians, Lysias, marched against Judah. Judah retreated to a fortified Mt. Zion, and he would have been probably defeated then, because he was really overwhelmed this time, but fortunately for the Jews, an element of chance took place at this time, an excellent accident from the Jewish point of view. The Syrian general Lysias who was the acting Regent in Syria due to the recent death of Antiochus IV who started all the trouble, heard rumors that someone was trying to supplant him in Antioch, which was the capital of Syria. So he rushed back and thereby lifted the siege of Jerusalem, at the same time signing a hasty treaty with Judah, giving the Torah dominion over Judaism all over again, as in the days of Ezra. This took place in the year 162 BCE. It marked the completion of the victory for traditional Judaism and the end of the reform assimilationist party led by Menelaus, who was put to death by the order of the king himself.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I come to a very important point indeed. What were the Maccabees fighting for? What was the revolt of the Maccabees all about? Political sovereignty? No. Territorial expansion? No. Military ascendancy? No. Mattathias has risen to declare at the top of octogenarian voice: “Whosoever is on God’s side, come join me.” It was not power, it was not states’ rights, it was not military conquest and it was not political sovereignty, it was not territorial expansion and it was not national prestige that he had had in mind. It was religion, and religion only. But it is one of the sad commentaries of life that success can be devastating. Success went to the head of Judah Maccabee. Why, for heaven’s sake, in the year 162, Judah Maccabee had achieved gloriously what his father Mattathias had begun five years earlier, the complete emancipation of the Jewish people from dominance by the Hellenistic tyranny, the liberation of the soul of Judaism, the opportunity to worship God as the Jews knew and comprehended God! These were the ideals for which Judah the Maccabean had fought with his glorious brothers.

What was there to fight for now? Only power, national prestige and glory, expansion, militarism. In a word, the very things that Greek civilization represented and against which Judaism had originally revolted! This was the supreme irony of the last days of the life of Judah Maccabee. For Judah over-reached himself. He disapproved of the new High Priest that was appointed by the Syrian authority, a man named Alcimus, because Alcimus had been a collaborator with the enemy, or so Judah proclaimed. Judah rebelled and he went ahead and signed up an ally. This is so ironic that whenever I think of it, my heart literally

palpitates with pain. Judah was going to embark upon an avowed and open military battle against the Syrian regime. At that time, the Hellenic star was already descending, and a new power was rising in Italy, a power that was going to make The Roman eagle was beginning to spread his wings and soar aloft and it is with this Roman eagle that Judah the Maccabee signed a treaty of friendship, prior to his attack upon the Syrian Greeks. Why does my heart palpitate with pain? Because Judah Maccabee, not being a prophet, could not realize at that time that he was signing on the dotted line with a co-signer who was going to burn the Temple, destroy the people, erase a nation, and send Judeans into a 1,878 year exile. How could he know? Be that as it may, the treaty was signed.

22,000 soldiers under the Greek general Bacchides marched against Judah Maccabee's army of 3,000 which dwindled quickly before the showdown battle to 800. 800 fighting against 22,000 in a valley near Jerusalem. Judah fought valiantly as he always had, through all his five years of campaigning. He rushed into the foray with appetite. He killed many, but the Angel of Death this time had him zeroed in. He fell on the field of battle in the year 161 BCE. His corpse lay with almost 800 other corpses, representing a futile attempt to win military glory. In the dead night, his brothers Jonathan and Simon came on to the battlefield, picked up the dead body of the hero Judas Maccabeus and marched without interruption for twenty miles, until they reached Modin where he was buried in the grave beside Mattathias.

Judah Maccabee, unquestionably one of the glorious heroes of Jewish history, adheres to the distinction between Jewish history and other histories. No hero of Jewish history is pure hero. We said that in the case of David, did we not? Judah Maccabee, though he was glorious in battle, though he was brave and powerful, though he was heroic and epic in many senses, was a weak man in the final analysis. Because having achieved his great original purpose, he pursued purposes which were alien to the Maccabean spirit in the first place. And he was doomed to failure.

This does not take away from the fact, as the great Protestant theologian, Emil Schurer, put it, that the Christian world ought to be eminently thankful for Judah Maccabee, for had there been no Judas Maccabeus, there would have been no Christianity. Had there been no Maccabean spirit, Hellenism would have engulfed Judea just as it did Egypt and Syria and Babylonia and the Ionian Islands. Had there been no Hasmonean revolt, the work of Ezra and Nehemiah which we discussed two weeks ago would have ultimately been wiped out. Because the Jew insisted that the words of the prophet Zechariah were not only a slogan, but his way of life, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts" – because of this insistence, Judaism survived.

Because Judaism survived, there was to be born from its womb that religion called Christianity, whose son will be discussed two weeks hence, that son of Judaism who gave birth, perhaps unintentionally to Christianity. Else his career never would have happened. That a boy named Joshua might have been born to Mary, or Miriam and Joseph in Nazareth about the year 3 or 4 BCE is entirely conceivable, but it is more than probable that that boy would have continued be a carpenter for the rest of his life, just as his father was a carpenter. But Jesus was not to become a carpenter. But Jesus was completely intoxicated with the spirit of Judaism, and he had prophetic visions of the glory to which he thought Judaism could rise above and beyond the glory it had already achieved. Jesus set out to sublimate Judaism to an even higher point of morality and ethics than it had achieved to his time period, or so he

believed. Now his career was only possible because there was a Judaism from which he was able to suck as a baby at its mother's breast. Had that breast run dry, as it almost did under the impact of the Jasons and the Menelauses and the Antiochuses, under the impact of Hellenic-Greek civilization, that would have been the end.

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