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What's New About Chanukah?, 1984.



What's New About Hanukah?

Daniel Jeremy Silver

December 16, 1984

That lovely version of Rock of Ages reminds us that in Hanukah, as in so much else in Jewish life, the familiar isn't always the old or the oldest. It's a very old Italian melody for Mawistsur which was familiar during the Renaissance and later in the synagogues of central and northern Italy. Let's start Hanukah with a quiz, true or false. On Hanukah we read a Megillah? Now, obviously we read the Megillah on Purim, the wonderful story of the beautiful Esther and the wicked Hayman and the shrewd but capable Mordecai. But there was a custom which was practiced in most of the communities of our people for well over 12 or 13 hundred years to read a megillah on Hanukah. Now, the word megillah simply means a scroll, a small scroll, and in the days when people still wrote books by hand, in the Middle East particularly, most small books were written in scroll form and so actually in the Bible we have five megillot, five scrolls, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations as well as Esther. The megillah which I am referring to is called the Megillah of Antiochus. It was written probably in the third or fourth century of this era, originally in Aramaic, quickly translated into Hebrew, and it is a scroll which, as the scroll of Esther, was read in the synagogue in order to provide historical background for the holiday so everybody would know the events of the day.

Now, I read to you earlier the history of Hanukah as it is told in the earliest source, the Book of Macabees which is written within 80 or a hundred years of the event, but this is the story of Hanukah as it was read in the synagogue from about the third or fourth century down to the deep Middle Ages. Notice how different this story is.

Long ago there ruled in Syria a great emperor by the name of Antiochus. His capital was named after him, Antiochia, it was by the sea. It's a great, great, powerful and rich city. Antiochus was a megalomaniac, a great conqueror. In 23 years of his reign he managed to conquer almost all of the known world. Only the Jews had tended to be restive and unhappy under his rule. And he came



to feel that it was only if he could destroy the world of the Jews that he would be able to conquer the world. And so he summoned to his palace at Antiochea a great general by the name of Nikanor and he equipped Nikanor with a powerful army and he sent Nikanor to Jerusalem with orders to create unrest, to prohibit the observance of the Jewish tradition, to incite riots in the city so he would have an excuse to put down the population and to have killed many of them and, ultimately, to undo the sense of pride and dignity which allowed the Jewish people to survive. And Nikanor went to Jerusalem and he carried out his mandate and he precipitated riots in the city and he put them down with bloodshed and he set up an idol to Zeus in the Temple of Jerusalem and he created great confusion and anger and he slew many of the teachers of our people. And finally, the son of one of the important priests of Jerusalem, a young man by the name of Jonathan, requested an audience of Nikanor. And Nikanor granted him that audience and Jonathan brought into the palace a sword under his cloak and when he came before the general, he slew Nikanor, and the Greeks, temporarily without leadership, fell into confusion and Jews, who were hidden here and there in the city, rose up and they slew the leaders of the Greeks and the rest of the Greek soldiers fled.

But Antiochus was not to be put off and he summoned yet another more powerful general by the name of Bargis and he gave him yet another more powerful army and he dispatched Bargis and his army to Jerusalem with orders to suppress the Judean rebellion. And Bargis proceeded to try and carry out his orders and he and the forces of Jonathan, notice Jonathan, not Judah, who is a senior brother and the most important hero; he and Jonathan fight a series of battles and ultimately Jonathan is killed. And then Judah appears for the first time and this brother proclaims a great fast and he proclaims a day of prayer for national deliverance and then he leads out the army again into battle, the Jews into battle, and this time they are able to defeat Bargis and his hosts. Again, Antiochus re-equips the army of his people and this time when the battle is met, Judah falls in battle and their father, Matathias, appears on the scene and Matathias leads the



Judeans to their great victory, and then Matathias comes to the Temple which has been polluted and it is he, not Judah the Maccabee, who cleanses the Temple. And when they search for oil they find the famous cruse of oil which, as you remember, had only enough oil in it to last for one day but lasts for the eight days of the feast of dedication. And that vial, according to the megillah *ANTI<sup>o</sup>chos*, is actually sealed with the seal of the first High Priest who served in the Temple of Solomon nearly 800 years before and there the scroll of Antiochus ends with a great praise to God for deliverance of the people.

Now, this is the story of Hanukah as it was known to most Jews down into the Middle Ages. How does it happen that the story has become so different than the story with which we are familiar? There lies an interesting tale, one of the tales that's new about Hanukah.

The Book of Maccabees was written sometime in the second century or early first century B.C.E. and there are any number of historians of the time who, in one way or another, referred to this event. And then at the end of the first century of the C.E. the well-known historian Josephus draws together all of these stories and he presents in The Wars of the Jews a rather rationalistic explanation of the battles between the High Priests seeking preference which led to the interference of the Syrians in the activities of Jerusalem, the frustration of Antiochus who had wanted to conquer Egypt but had been prevented by the new power, Rome, from doing so. He attempts to impose a loyalty oath on the Judeans by having them worship the patron god of Antiochus, Zeus Olympius, and all the events which happened subsequently. Now, this history was well known during the first two, three hundred years after the events, but it was not known to most of our ancestors after that time. Why not?

Well, we begin to unravel the story when we look at the Talmud. The Talmud is a great compendium of law and tradition and of observation. The Babylonian Talmud in its modern English translation runs to about forty volumes so it contains a great deal of material. And one would expect to find reference in



this material to Hanukah, to this holiday which is part of the annual cycle of the life of our people. Almost everything else in the life of our people was there, but there's no tractate in the Talmud called Hanukah. Indeed, if you look through this entire compendius literature which was drawn together around the fifth or sixth century but represents material from many centuries before, you find only one very brief paragraph, about an inch of type, which has to do with Hanukah. It comes in the middle of the tractate about Sabbath and the question it begins with is my Hanukah, what is Hanukah, as if these great sages didn't have the faintest idea of what the historical background of the holiday was. And they answered this way. What is Hanukah? Hanukah falls on the 25th of Kislev. It's a time in which there is not to be fasting and there is not to be lamentations. When the Syrian Greeks entered the Temple they despoiled it. When the Hasmoneans entered the Temple they purified it. They found there a cruse of oil, enough for only one day, a great miracle took place then. God caused the oil to be enough for eight days; therefore, we celebrate the Hanukah and we have to recite on Hanukah the Hallel psalms, the great Hallelujah psalms, which praise God. And that's all that the Talmud tells us about Hanukah. Now why? Were they ashamed of the history? Was there something unseemly or demeaning about Jews or Judaism behind the history of Hanukah? Not at all. It's a story of daring do and of courage and of conviction. Matathias's sons were fighting for the integrity of the faith against a tyrant who was determined to set up an altar to an idol in the great Temple against a tyrant who was determined to extricate ultimately the unique teachings of the Jewish tradition from off the face of the earth.

Why, then, did the rabbis of rabbinic times, the first, second, third, fourth century of our era, object to the retelling of the story of Hanukah? And the answer lies in the events of their day. When you go to visit Israel you're taken to Masada and you see there the great fortress in which the zealots held out for nearly three years against the army of Rome. The history of Masada is



presented to you as a great triumph of Jewish courage, persistence, commitment, but in the longer scheme of things if one takes an historical or a philosophic view of the events, the two great revolts against Rome, the revolt that began in 66 of the C.E. and lasted until 70 that ended with the destruction of the Temple; the revolt of Bar Kochba which began eighty years later in 132 of the C.E. and lasted until 135; these were two of the greatest tragedies ever to occur to the Jewish people bar none. They reduced Judaism to what it has been ever since, a minority faith whose people were few, whose impact was always through its impact on others rather than simply in its life on its own.

Before these two great revolts it is estimated that the Jews of the Roman Middle East, the Jews of the Eastern Roman Empire from Turkey through the Middle East to Egypt represented nearly 20 percent of the population of that part of the world. One in five was a Jew. After these revolts over a million were killed during the first revolt; another million and a half were killed during the second revolt, and there was a revolt in some of the provinces in Syria and in Syria in 112, 115 where another half a million Judeans seem to have been killed. Many more were crucified by the Romans as traitors and they were thrown into the arena to fight the gladiator fights. Many were simply forced into exile and were taken to the far corners of the empire. Jewish life was reduced to a fight for mean existence, and those who led the reconstruction of Jewish life after these two great revolts, those we know as the Pharisees, the rabbis, the creators of the Talmud, of rabbinic Judaism, were determined to root out as best they could that urge to rebel, that love of the sword, that conviction if there's a will there's a way, which had led those who were called zealots, another word might be fanatics, those who were liberation fighters, to force the community emotionally, psychologically, to take up arms in a battle that they could not have expected to win.

In origin, Hanukkah is the fourth of July. It's the great holiday of the Hasmoneans which celebrated independence, the victory of the troops against



other troops. And it was surely on the Hanukah that those who came together during Roman times to complain about Roman misrule and overtaxation, the iron-booted administration of Rome, that they came together and met and sang great martial songs and convinced themselves that now was the time to reach out and to fight and to struggle and ultimately to win. So Hanukah became a danger, a psychological and emotional danger to those who recognized that certainly now, after these two tragic defeats, to continue this war, this martial spirit, to encourage it, was to invite further disaster and so they kept Hanukah, but they blotted out, literally they blotted out the memory of the events which were behind it. And how did they do so? They did so by abandoning, in a sense by censoring, by silence, by inattention, the Book of the Maccabees, the Books of Josephus, all these were completely set aside. They disappeared from the shelves, from the curriculum, from study. And they did so by transforming Hanukah from the fourth of July into the festival of lights. The cruse of oil suddenly appears. There's nothing about this remarkable cruse of oil in the Book of the Maccabees. There's nothing about this remarkable cruse of oil in Josephus. It appears for the first time in the Talmud. It's part of a propaganda campaign, a miracle devised as the set piece of an advertising campaign to convince Jews that this holiday was not what it was and it ought to be seen as something entirely different.

Now, how is it that we recaptured the history of Hanukah? It's interesting. We owe the fact that the traditional synagogue for many centuries now has known and talked of the real history because we could come back to it once the danger was over to a man who is forever anonymous to us, not a great scholar, not one of the great rabbis of Israel, but a man who was apparently something of a reader. We think he may have lived in southern Italy, we're not sure. We think he may have lived around the seventh or eighth century, we're not sure about that either. We're sure he lived before the ninth century because he's quoted already in the ninth century, a man who apparently had a schooling which was more than rabbinic because he could read Latin, a man who had for some reason or other



access to the texts that were sacred to the church and a man who somehow, this Jew, read in the library of a church or a monastery a Latin version of Josephus. Josephus had written his history in Greek. And he found also in that monastery or library, wherever it may have been, a Latin translation of the Book of Maccabees. The church, interestingly, had preserved a great number of the texts of Biblical times which Jews had set aside, set aside because the Pharisees were determined to shape Judaism very specifically and to keep away anything which might raise up certain questions of their point of view. He found there the Apocrypha and in the text of the Apocrypha he found the Book of Maccabees and this unknown man, who is known as Josepon, the little Josephus, prepared in Hebrew a paraphrase of the wars of the Jews in which he transformed Josephus from what he had in fact been, the Jewish Benedict Arnold, the man who had been in command of the Judean forces in the Galilee in the early part of the first revolt who had seen the handwriting on the wall and had proven to be a traitor and had sold himself to Vespasian, the great Roman general, on the grounds that he was both a turncoat and a prophet. He came before Vespasian. He prophesied that Vespasian would become the great emperor of Rome and when in fact this turned out to be so Vespasian thought of this man as a holy man and he brought him to Rome and he set him up in a palace in Rome where he wrote his great histories. Josepon read these histories, paraphrased them into Hebrew, and his text became one of the most popular texts in the Middle Ages. It was the way in which Sagion and Rashi and Judah ha-Levy and Abraham ibn Ezra rediscovered the history of Jewish life in the second and first centuries B.C.E., a history which is not included in the Bible. He is quoted again and again and again and his text is really one of the most important texts that we have.

So at about the eleventh or twelfth century the Jews kept the reading of megillah Antiochos as part of the synagogue worship. Why not? It was a custom, they liked it. In it Antiochus was evil. Antiochus got his just desserts. His generals were defeated. He was so disturbed by the defeat that on the very day



that the Temple was rededicated he jumped off the walls of Antiochia into the sea and drowned himself. It was the proof of the power of God over the forces of evil. They kept reading the megillah Antiochos. You'll find it in the traditional mahzorim, the traditional liturgies, but at the same time they knew now of the history such as we tell it to our children and they began to reshape the history in ways which brought again the possibility of Jewish activity, Jewish action, self-defense, to the fore.

Now, I present to you this history of Josepon and the megillah Antiochos and of the first Book of Maccabees because it raises up the enigma which, for all of us, lies behind this holiday which in our day has become a children's holiday. It really is not. To what degree ought human beings to be impatient about achieving their goals for human society and human life? How much you can achieve by direct action, by simply bulling our way ahead, and how patient should we be? How trusting that God, somehow in His time, will see to it that redemption will take place? And obviously we can't come down on the one side or on the other. Those who insist there is no time but now court defeat. Some things can be achieved, some goals cannot be achieved. Those who fold their hands in prayer and wait patiently for the divine miracle will achieve little. Some things will happen inevitably and they say they happen because of God and some awful things will happen inevitably and they will ascribe those to God's punishment.

In modern Jewish life, ever since the 1940's certainly, we have tilted ourselves heavily on the side of direct action. We're going to take our fate into our hands and handle it. We're going to create the State of Israel. We're going to strengthen the State. We're going to prevent anybody ever again from doing to us what Hayman or Hitler or Antiochus set out to do. And obviously in those moments of extremis, those who fight, are doing all that should be done and can be done even if the fight is suicidal. But what of times where the situation is not quite so black and white? What of the times when it's not clear whether in fact we can throw out all the evil men and replace them with all good men and women?



Can we, in fact, force history to turn around and become exactly what we want it to become? Are there times when the rabbinic counsel, sit and do nothing, is more valuable than be strong, be active, be of good courage? Obviously, there are times for action and there are times for inaction and I don't intend this morning to lay out when those times should be and should not be, but, clearly, the spirit of Hanukah refracts all of that paradoxical problem of philosophy which is at the heart of our faith. Moses tells Joshua, be strong and of good courage and lead the people. The rabbi said, think of the cruse of oil, have some patience. And this balance between action, patience between frustration and insistence, is one that each of us, within the context of our private lives and within the context of our national lives and of our Jewish lives must somehow weigh and work out. If you can't weigh it and work it out, at least remember it's a problem.





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W. J. Leong

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