

Hanukkah Notes

1. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, a Hebrew word meaning “to dedicate,” is a minor Jewish festival with no Biblical source.
2. Hanukkah is a historical holiday that commemorates the Jewish defeat of the Seleucidite Syrian Greeks in 165 BCE by a priestly family called the Maccabees. These Maccabees sought to defeat not merely the Greek occupiers, but to defeat their Jewish acolytes, the so-called “Jewish Hellenizers.”
3. Our rabbinic sources have not preserved any legitimate historical information for us. But the rabbis do set out the legal requirement of the holiday, a single prescription to light candles for eight nights, in the Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud. This legal discussion, our only “official” Jewish source for the holiday, is in essence **appended** to a much larger discussion of the intricacies of lighting candles for the Sabbath.
4. Our historical source for the holiday is the apocryphal Book of Maccabees 4:52 ff. where we read of the Maccabean rededication of the Temple on 25 Kislev, the traditional date of Hanukkah.
5. The rabbis who canonized the Hebrew Scriptures at Yavneh circa 100 CE neglected to include the Book of Maccabees in their Bible. There are many ways that we might speculate on this excision of the Maccabees from the Masoretic Bible.
6. The rabbis saw the Hasmonean dynasty as usurpers to the Priestly offices in the Temple and the monarchy. The Hasmoneans were country priests who did not come from the Zadokite lineage and took it upon themselves to lead the rebellion against Antiochus and the Syrian Greeks. From the rabbinic point of view, whatever positive gains were gained by this defeat of the Seleucids was negated in the very strict literal sense of Jewish law regarding priestly succession as elucidated in the rabbinic sources.
7. We can then examine the Hasmonean lineage and its impact on the Jewish culture in Pharisaic and post-Pharisaic Judaism. The first Hasmoneans by and large stayed true to the Jewish legal traditions along the rabbinic model. But as the generations went on, the Hasmoneans continued to garner more and more power and forgot the traditions that stirred the rebellion in the first place. At the nadir of Hasmonean power, the usurpation of the throne by the Idumean pretender Herod, who was technically a member of the Hasmonean clan as he married into the family, capped off what was by then many decades of Hellenization by the Temple priests.
8. So it should be noted that the rabbis were less than thrilled with the physical specimens of the Hasmonean dynasty who populated the Temple precincts in their own day. It would then make sense for the rabbis to seek to expunge the historical

record of the Maccabean revolt and the reasons for the celebration of the Hanukkah holiday.

9. But the rabbis could not eliminate a holiday which had popular roots among both the Jewish masses and the priestly elite. Hence, they developed a hagiographic tale of a cruse of oil that was found amidst the Temple relics that was the only “pure” oil that could be used to light the Menorah, Hebrew candelabrum; according to the rabbis the oil, a one-day supply, lasted for the eight-day rededication ceremonies. It is curious to note that the Temple Menorah contained seven branches while the Hanukkah Menorah contains nine.
10. The story of the cruse of oil knowingly obscured the historical underpinnings of the holiday which, in addition to the Book of Maccabees sources, appears in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* Book 12, Chapter 7. Our historical sources tell us nothing about the cruse of oil but do tell us a good deal about the Maccabees and their war against the Syrians.
11. The rabbis, as is known, were split over their own thoughts and desires about Jewish national independence. There was a faction led by R. Akiba that continued to struggle for Jewish independence while another group, led by R. Yohanan Ben Zakkai, sought to make peace with the occupiers and develop a new Jewish national life based upon study and practice of the written and oral traditions of the Hebrew faith. According to this model the Jews would live at peace with the Romans in exchange for their religious freedom and communal autonomy.
12. The Hanukkah commemoration, a clearly nationalistic holiday, a holiday that was more political than spiritual, was muted within the rabbinic liturgical calendar. The rabbis were deeply concerned with the restoration by the Maccabees of Torah study rather than political independence. The rabbinic Hanukkah is a contemplative holiday that highlights the warmth of family ties and the freedom afforded by the Maccabean revolt for Jews to live in religious freedom.
13. With the dual emergence of new trends in the modern period; Jewish nationalism in the form of Zionism and the increased attention paid by Jews to Gentile-like behaviors and assimilation, the holiday of Hanukkah, a relatively minor part of the Jewish liturgical calendar as we have said, takes on a newly significant role.
14. For the Zionists, the Maccabean revolution was an alternative historical model to the standard narrative of the rabbis. In the Maccabees, the Zionists found a valid historical model on which to base their own Judean nationalism. Rather than maintaining the codes and beliefs of the Talmudic sages, the Zionists re-formed a “new” Jewish “nation” upon “invented traditions” that were deeply informed by the Maccabean paradigm.
15. In the Zionist narrative the Hellenizing Maccabees were expunged and the Nationalist Maccabees were valorized. The movement which led to Herod and the eventual

destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE was blanked out, as was the paradigm shift of R. Yohanan Ben Zakkai and the emergence of a new humanistic Judaism based upon the collection of the source traditions during this period of the written and oral traditions in the forms of the Masoretic Scriptures and the Mishnah, leading to the magnum opus of this rabbinic formalism, the Babylonian Talmud.

16. Zionism saw itself as heir to the Maccabean revolution and not to the rabbis. The quietism of the rabbis was eliminated in favor of a new aggressiveness that thought little of the religious and cultural implications of this realignment of Jewish life. Zionism was an attempt to restore national life to the Jews at the expense of the religious imperatives developed in the Diaspora by the Jewish Sages.
17. The increasing level of assimilation by Jews into Gentile society has made Hanukkah a holiday meant to match up against Christmas, a central Christian holiday that forms, with New Year's Day, the very core of Christian self-definition. Over the past century, Christmas has taken on mammoth proportions and has served to drive the engine of modern Western consumerism.
18. Thus, Jews who felt ill at ease with their own faith turned to Hanukkah as a "twin" holiday to stand up next to Christmas.
19. So, in summation, Hanukkah is a very minor Jewish holiday that has been obscured by the way in which Judaism has used the historical source materials and by the manner in which the Jewish rabbis sought to impress their own stamp upon the conceptualization of the holiday. Modern Jews have reframed the holiday and have given it new meanings not originally inherent in either the historical or the religious sense(s) of the commemoration transforming Hanukkah into a "major" Jewish holiday.

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Uncovering the Truth about Hanukkah

By: Malka Z. Simkovich

Introduction: The Absence of the Oil Miracle in Second Temple Literature

The holiday of Chanukah now commemorates two very different elements: the celebration of the stunning military victory by the Hasmoneans over the Syrian Greeks in 164 BCE, and the miracle of the menorah that was lit upon the Jewish restoration of their Temple, whose light lasted for eight days. Which of these two aspects of Chanuka lies at its core?

The Palestinian Talmud, also known as the Talmud Yerushalmi, does not offer a reason for celebrating Chanukah, but the Babylonian Talmud provides a brief explanation in tractate Shabbat 21b:

What is [the reason of] Chanuka? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Chanukah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.[1]

Upon reading this explanation, one would assume that the essence of Chanuka lies in the miracle of the oil. Yet this statement is actually the earliest surviving source to discuss the miracle of the oil, let alone putting it at the center of the holiday of Chanuka.[2]

The oldest and only eye-witness account to the story of Chanuka, the book of 1 Maccabees, preserves only the military victory. Likewise, the book of 2 Maccabees, which was probably written a few generations later, also focuses solely on the military achievements of the Maccabees. Many readers of these early sources are startled to find no mention of the miracle of the oil whatsoever in either of these two books. According to 1 and 2 Maccabees, the reason for celebrating the holiday of Chanuka in perpetuity is because the Hasmoneans enabled a Jewish reoccupation of the Jerusalem Temple and Jewish autonomy from the Syrian Greeks. 1 Maccabees 4:52-59 reads:

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Kislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of the burnt offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals... So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings... Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev.[3]

Similarly, 2 Maccabees, which is a more stylized and less historically accurate account of the story, makes no mention of the miracle of the oil as relating to the reason for celebration. 2 Maccabees 10:5-9 reads,

It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing...therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the

purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.[4]

Even the great first century historian Josephus makes no mention of the miracle of the oil, although he does refer to Chanukah as the Holiday of Lights, and confesses his consternation regarding this title. Antiquities of the Jews 12.7.323-326 reads:

Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days; and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon: but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them, by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights. I suppose the reason was, because this liberty beyond our hopes appeared to us; and that thence was the name given to that festival.[5]

Josephus' reference to Chanuka as the holiday of Lights, coupled with his lack of awareness regarding any sort of light-related miracle is striking, and it is likely that the title "Lights" had nothing to do with a miracle of oil. Perhaps the rabbis knew of this title, and it served as the basis of their understanding of the holiday's origin and significance. Alternatively, the practice of the rabbis may go back to an earlier period, reflecting an earlier tradition. In either case, the tradition of the miracle of the oil was not prominent enough that Josephus was aware of it. Given Josephus' intimate familiarity with Jewish tradition and culture, this absence is telling.

The Rabbinic Period: Chanuka Re-Branded

It is clear that the explanation provided for the celebration of Chanukah in the Babylonian Talmud marks a shift in how Jews in antiquity perceived the reason for celebrating this holiday; prior to this passage, there is no known source that places the miracle of the oil at holiday's center. Why the shift?

Here is one suggestion. I believe the rabbis may have been trying to distance themselves from the Hasmonean association, which has strong resonances with insurrectionist and militaristic periods in Judean history, especially the final great rebellion against Rome: The Bar Kochba revolt.[6] In this final attempt at forcing the Romans out of Judea, Bar Kochba and thousands of his loyalists led a massive revolt that devastated the Roman economy for years. Between 132-135 CE, Shimon Bar Kochba (whose real name was Shimon bar Kosiba; he likely changed his name to "Son of a Star" to give himself some messianic mystique)[7] brought major disaster upon the Jews living in Roman Palestine when his rebellion against Rome turned sour and scores of thousands of Jews were killed. In addition to the human carnage wreaked by Bar Kochba, the Romans razed the city of Jerusalem to the ground and banned Jews from entering it. They gave Jerusalem a Latin name, Aelia Capitolina, and built within it a temple dedicated to the god Jupiter, among others. The Jews of this region moved up north, to cities such as Caesaria, Sepphoris and

Tiberias, never to return to their beloved holy city. Jerusalem was not reestablished as a thriving Jewish city again until modern times.

The possibility that Kochba saw himself as an inheritor of the Maccabean tradition is strengthened by the images on his coinage, which included images of the temple and objects associated with the temple, such as trumpets, palm branches, and lyres, and had the coins inscribed with phrases such as “For the Freedom of Jerusalem.” These images on his own coin were a clear statement that he saw himself as a military figure protected by divine favor. Regardless of whether or not Bar Kochba saw himself as an inheritor of the Maccabean legacy, the association between the two and the consequent anti-imperial or anti-government imagery would have been something from which the powerless rabbis may well have wished to dissociate. Celebrating rebellion could both lead their followers astray and cause problems for Jews with their local governments.

Light in the Darkness

A careful reading of the Talmudic passage reveals that the military clash between the Jews and the Greeks is acknowledged but marginalized. The Talmud states:

For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them...

Apparently, the writer of this passage felt that mentioning the military victory was unavoidable in order to explain the context of the miracle of the oil. Yet he describes the clash in such a way as to make it clear that the Hasmoneans were on the defensive, and ultimately successfully “prevailed” against the Greeks. The rabbis did not deny the military victory, but removed it from being the central focus of celebration.

Understanding the history of the Jews living in Roman Palestine in the 4th-5th century helps us to appreciate why the Rabbis were so hesitant to associate themselves with a militaristic history during the centuries that Talmudic material was being arranged and recorded. During these centuries, the quality of life in this region plummeted. The legal code of the 5th century Christian Emperor Theodosius prohibited Jews from holding all governmental posts except for tax collectors. They were also prohibited from building new synagogues within the Empire.

Unrestrained anti-Jewish rhetoric on the part of 5th century Church fathers burgeoned during this period. The situation deteriorated further in the 6th century when the Christian Emperor Justinian wrote his own legal code, in which further restrictions were placed on Jews, such as the prohibition of publicly reading the Torah, and reading the Mishnah.[8] It is no surprise, therefore, that the Rabbis did not want to present themselves as supporters of a political uprising.

The phrase in b. Shabbat 21b that opens the passage, “our Rabbis taught,” “Tannu Rabanan,” indicates its probable origin as abaraita from the tannaitic period. Although our Talmudic source comes from the Babylonian Talmud, the introduction term points to

the probability that the baraita preserves an attitude that arose within the milieu of Palestinian Rabbis.[9]

Conclusion

Returning to this article's original question, what lies at the essence of the holiday of Chanuka? From a historical vantage point, there is no doubt that the origin of the holiday lies in the Hasmonean military victory. However, the rabbis effectively rebranded the holiday so that instead of glorifying Hasmonean military prowess, the holiday instead glorifies the unconditional and miraculous divine light that Jews can depend on, even in the gloomiest of darkness.

This message was no doubt profoundly meaningful to Jews living in Palestine at a time when Jerusalem was a Christian pilgrimage city, and when the reading of their own scriptures was prohibited by Justinian. It is also a message that has remained profoundly meaningful to Jews throughout the ages, which explains why Chanukah continues to be branded as a holiday of lights rather than a holiday of military victory.

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Notes

[1] Trans. Soncino.

[2] Megillat Taanit, which is generally dated to the 1st century, briefly lists and describes the nature of each celebratory day on the Jewish calendar. Vered Noam has shown that of the ancient versions of this commentary on Megillat Taanit known as the scholion, the Oxford manuscript has nothing about oil lasting eight days and the Parma manuscript, which includes a reference to finding oil which lasted eight days mentions no miracle. Only what she calls the "hybrid version" has the miracle of the oil, and this version, according to Noam, was composed in the 9th or 10th century at the earliest. Therefore, she argues, the tradition recounting the miracle of the oil, which modifies the story found in the Parma manuscript, was likely based upon the account in the Babylonian Talmud. See Vered Noam, "Megillat Taanit: The Scroll of Fasting", Chapter eight of *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al., 339-62. CRINT, Section 2: *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, 3a. Assen: Gorcum and Fortress Press, 2006, 355, and Vered Noam, *Megillat Taanit: HaNusachim, Pesharam, Toldotayhem*, Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2003, 268-276. Another interesting tradition that appears in the scholion, as well as in chapter two of *Pesikta deRabbati*, is that the Maccabees found eight spears upon reclaiming the Temple and lit these spears, which explains the tradition to light a menorah for eight nights.

[3] Trans. NRSV.

[4] Trans. NRSV.

[5] Trans. W. Whiston.

[6] This is my own suggestion. It should be noted that a number of scholars believe that the attempt to avoid the Hasmonean association had more to do with dislike of Herod or even of John Hyrcanus Jannaius Alexander and their Saduccean leanings.

[7] Messianic figures were associated with stars in the ancient world, perhaps building upon Balaam's speech in Numbers 24.17. See Testament of Judah 24.1 and Sibylline Oracle 5.155.

[8] See Jill Harries and Ian Wood, ed.s. *The Theodosian Code*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993 and Justinianus, *Codex cum Glossa* [microform]. Venice: Baptista de Tortis, 1496.

[9] Alternatively, this could be a "Babylonian baraita," which would mean that the Jews in Persia were the ones who wanted to demonstrate their loyalty. Although the extreme anti-Semitism referenced above would not then be relevant here, there would still be ample reason for the Persian Jewish community to avoid focusing on the rebellion. That said, I believe the Palestinian origin of the tradition to be the more likely possibility.

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Chanukah and the Politics Behind the Maccabean Revolt

By: Eric Orlin

Traditionalists Versus Assimilationists

The origin of Chanukah is described in *1* and *2 Maccabees*, which highlight a military conflict between the Judaeans and the Syrian king Antiochus, who attempted to force the Judaeans to abandon their religious practices. Many commentators have emphasized the conflict among the Jews themselves between "traditionalists" and "assimilationists," as an important backdrop to the accomplishment of the Maccabees.^[1]

Some parts of the texts appear to support this view. For instance, *1 Maccabees* records how some Judaeans adopted certain Greek customs, such as exercising naked in the gymnasium:

^{1:11} In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, "Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us." ^{1:12} This proposal pleased them, ^{1:13} and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. ^{1:14} So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, ^{1:15} and removed the marks of circumcision,^[2] and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil. (NRSV)

2 Maccabees makes a similar claim, though it blames this Hellenization on the accession of the new high priest Jason (more on him shortly):

4:10 When... Jason came to office, he at once shifted his compatriots over to the Greek way of life. 4:11 He set aside the existing royal concessions to the Jews... and he destroyed the lawful ways of living and introduced new customs contrary to the law. 4:12 He took delight in establishing a gymnasium right under the citadel, and he induced the noblest of the young men to wear the *petasos* [a Greek-style hat]. 4:13 There was such an extreme of Hellenization and increase in the adoption of foreign ways because of the surpassing wickedness of Jason, who was ungodly and no true high priest, 4:14 that the priests were no longer intent upon their service at the altar. Despising the sanctuary and neglecting the sacrifices, they hurried to take part in the unlawful proceedings in the wrestling arena after the signal for the discus-throwing, 4:15 disdaining the honors prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige. (NRSV)

Mattathias and his son Judah Maccabee are seen to represent the traditionalists, since they “forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel” (*1 Macc.* 2.45-47). In this view, the authors of these texts belong to the traditionalists, since they praise the Maccabees for using their military strength to enforce adherence to Judaeian customs on others. Yet this picture of internal religious dispute is not so certain.

What Is the Focus of 1 and 2 Maccabees?

Focusing on concerns about Hellenization, or even the revolt against the Syrian king’s effort to ban Judaeian religious practice, may miss the larger picture painted by *1* and *2 Maccabees*, incorrectly emphasizing a small number of verses at the expense of the larger story.^[3] Both texts barely focus on the issue of those who wanted to introduce Greek customs: both *1* and *2 Maccabees* devote only 11 verses each to this topic (*1 Macc* 1.11-15, 2.42-47; *2 Macc* 4.10-20) out of over 750 verses in each text.

Even the struggle against Antiochus IV Epiphanes can hardly be said to be the focus of the texts: *1 Maccabees* devotes only the first six of sixteen chapters to the subject, and *2 Maccabees* only chapters 5 through 10 (with one of those chapters occupied entirely by a martyrology of dubious historicity).^[4] Both texts also continue beyond the Syrian king’s death (in *1 Maccabees* case, well beyond). Similarly, the purification of the Temple, often seen as the main theme of the Chanukah story, receives even less space: it is told in 23 verses in *1 Maccabees* (4:37-59) and in only 8 in *2 Maccabees* (10:1-8), outside the introductory letters. So, what really occupied the attention of the authors of these texts?

The main theme of these two works is not Hellenization, but power: men from different families sought power in Judaea, and a conflict emerged between them and their followers, with charges of Hellenization as only one element in the campaign to discredit the one side and establish the legitimacy of the other.

This is not to deny the historicity of the Syrian persecution or of the desecration and rededication of the Temple that led to the creation of the Chanukah festival, but rather to suggest that the questions of politics occupied more of the attention of both the Judaeian

leaders and the authors of *1* and *2 Maccabees*. By over-emphasizing the role of Chanukah in these books, we misread them.

The Struggle over the High Priesthood

The issue of leadership revolved around the position of the High Priest, who functioned as the overseer of the Temple and its cult throughout the Second Temple period. The role of the High Priest remained essentially unchanged from shortly after the return from Babylonian exile under Persian rule through the conquest of Alexander the Great and the later establishment of the Seleucid rulers of Syria.^[5]

This situation changed shortly before the persecution of Antiochus. The innovations of Jason the High Priest described above, such as the establishment of a Greek gymnasium, represent the first moment where we can see the High Priest using his authority to institute changes to the civic life of the Judaeans.

This action of Jason seems to have heightened the conflict over the holder of the office of High Priest. Three years later, Jason sent a man named Menelaus to bring money to the Syrians. Menelaus was the brother of Simon, whose perfidy is described in detail in chapter 3. Having quarreled with the high priest Onias, Simon, in anger, sent word to the Seleucid king that the Temple was hiding revenue, prompting the Seleucid general Heliodorus to raid its coffers (though, according to the text, the raid was miraculously foiled by God).

According to *2 Maccabees*, despite his being sent by Jason, Menelaus outbid him and became High Priest in his stead, eventually conniving in the death of the earlier High Priest Onias. Jason then attempted to take the High Priesthood back by force, and it is at this point that Antiochus appears and begins his persecution, leading to the ensuing Maccabean revolt.

The Syrian Intervention in Judaea

In other words, the internal struggle over the office of the High Priest serves as the text's explanation for Syrian intervention in Judaeian affairs. *2 Maccabees* places the entire Chanukah story in the context of a power struggle among individual Judaeian aristocrats.

1 Maccabees skips this back story to the persecution of Antiochus and moves straight into the persecution itself in chapter 2. It focuses attention instead on the persecution and the triumphant struggle against Antiochus IV and the Seleucid kingdom.

But the broader political issue *does* appear later in the text. Chapter 6 describes the death of Antiochus IV, during a campaign in Persia, and the accession of his son, Antiochus V Eupater, as king. But the latter's rule is challenged by Antiochus IV's nephew, Demetrius I Soter. Naturally, each side looked for allies, including among the Judaeans. At one point, when Demetrius ascends the throne:

^{1 Macc 7:5} Then there came to him all the renegade and godless men of Israel; they were led by Alcimus, who wanted to be high priest. ^{7:6} They brought to the king this accusation against the people: “Judas and his brothers have destroyed all your Friends, and have driven us out of our land. ^{7:7} Now then send a man whom you trust; let him go and see all the ruin that Judas has brought on us and on the land of the king, and let him punish them and all who help them.”

Not only does this passage reveal the internal political struggle evident in *2 Maccabees*, but it also helps us understand who the text considers to be “renegade and godless”: not necessarily those who attempted to introduce Greek customs such as the gymnasium, or even those who didn’t follow the laws as the author understood them, but someone who opposed his preferred leader. This passage thus recalls *2 Maccabees*, which similarly calls Jason “vile” and accuses his supporters of wickedness.

***1 Maccabees* as a Political Tract**

It seems clear from the time that *1 Maccabees* spends on describing the political machinations of Judah Maccabee and his brothers that the author’s devotion to their cause was based more on support for their political and military success than on their supposed hard line towards foreign influences in Judaea.

For example, the text speaks approvingly of the Romans, even while acknowledging that the Romans had crushed and enslaved many other people, and Judah and then Jonathan form alliances with them and with the Spartans; it even reports how Jonathan claimed kinship between Judaeans and Spartans (8:1-31, 12:1-23).

More significantly, the author of *1 Maccabees* approved of the brothers accepting Greek and Syrian patronage when it was expedient, refuting any notion that he might have been anti-Greek. In fact, much of the book is focused on alliances made by the Hasmonean brothers with various contenders for the Seleucid throne, and its author writes approvingly of their political maneuverings.

This period—from the death of Antiochus IV in 164 B.C.E. until the Roman conquest of the area a century later—saw much intrigue in the Syrian kingdom, as different contenders for the throne sought to establish their authority. The Hasmonean brothers made use of this when the opportunity presented itself.

Betrayals, Pretenders, and Alliances

For example, Alexander Balas (known as Alexander Epiphanes to the Maccabean author), who claimed to be the son of Antiochus IV, and who took the throne from Demetrius I Soter in 150 B.C.E., offered the High Priesthood to Jonathan in exchange for the latter’s support. An alliance with Alexander Balas was of use to Jonathan since, after the death of Judah, the Syrian governor had “chose[n] the godless” i.e., allied himself with the non-Hasmonean faction, “and put them in charge of the country.” This left Jonathan in the position of a rebel against the established authority.

Jonathan accepted Alexander Balas' offer, assumed the role of High Priest, and continued fighting his Jewish opponents, now as an ally of one Syrian faction against the other.^[6] Later, after the death of Alexander Balas, Jonathan was captured and killed by the Syrian forces of Trypho, who was serving as regent for Alexander Balas' minor son, Antiochus VI (though Trypho himself soon took the throne in his own right, upon the early demise of the young king). Apparently, Trypho no longer saw the deal with Jonathan as profitable and cancelled it.

Upon Jonathan's death, his brother Simon succeeded him and approached Demetrius II Nicator, one of the contenders for the Syrian throne, for support. Demetrius II was son of Demetrius I, the man who had defeated and killed Judah,^[7] and the great-grandson of Antiochus IV, who had persecuted the Judaeans less than twenty-five years earlier. Yet, the author of *1 Maccabees* offers no criticism of Simon's action, presumably because Demetrius responded by granting independence to the Judaeans, namely, freedom from tribute and control of all the strongholds in their possession. As he wrote:

1 Macc 13:41 In the one hundred seventieth year [142 BCE] the yoke of the Gentiles was removed from Israel, ^{13:42} and the people began to write in their documents and contracts "In the first year of Simon the great high priest and commander and leader of the Jews"

The succeeding chapters recount praise for Simon before closing with his death and succession by his son, John (Hyrcanus).

Independent Judaea: The Culmination of 1 Maccabees

The grant of independence for the Judaeans marks the culmination of the narrative in 1 Maccabees, and the arc of the story makes clear the intent of the text: Simon's authority to rule, and indeed the entire independence of the Judaeian land, came from the same Seleucid ruling family that had been responsible for the desecration of the Temple. Such a situation was awkward at best, and complicated by the fact that the Hasmoneans could be portrayed as illegitimate holders of this position.

While the Maccabees were members of the priestly clan, they were not members of the Zadokite line, until then the line considered by many Jews to be the legitimate line for a High Priest. The author's concern therefore lay not with a traditionalist theology nor with accommodation to Greek or Roman ruling powers: his goal was to establish the legitimacy of the Hasmonean dynasty and of the independence of Judaea.

This reading is supported by the text's date and place of composition: Judaea in the late 2nd century B.C.E.^[8] A supporter of the Hasmoneans, living in Judaea while the Hasmoneans were ruling the land but not without challenges, had good reason to defend their legitimacy.^[9]

The Hasmoneans as Assimilationists

In the end, the Hasmonean dynasty facilitated the incorporation of foreign cultural influence into Judaea. By 134 B.C.E., the year in which *1 Maccabees* ends its account, Judaea looked awfully similar to other countries in this region: it was an autonomous entity ruled by a single man who combined both military and political authority.

The manner of rule might be different: the Ptolemies in Egypt had taken on the guise of a Pharaoh who was considered divine, and Hellenistic ruler cult offered divine honors to the Syrian kings, while the Hasmoneans combined the positions of ruler and High Priest into a single person.

Simon's successor John apparently took the surname Hyrcanus in imitation of the broader Hellenistic tradition of marking a military victory by using as a surname the name of a defeated people (in this case, Hyrcania, a territory on the south side of the Caspian Sea). John's successor Aristobulus even adopted the Greek title of *basileus* or king, according to Josephus (*A.J.* 13.301).

Moreover, the Hellenizing element was baked into the Hasmoneans from the start: as Eyal Regev has noted in his [“The Original Meaning of Chanukah,”](#) the original celebration of Chanukah drew for a model on Hellenistic antecedents such as the *Ptolemaia* in Egypt.^[10]

Considering the behavior of the Maccabees and the thinness of the evidence for conflict based on a theological rather than political basis, we may suspect that whatever conflict existed between traditionalists and assimilationists was relatively minor. The presence of martyrdom stories in *2 Maccabees* may suggest a concern with how the people should respond to outright persecution such as occurred under Antiochus, but for both authors the notion of a conflict between Judaizing and Hellenizing factions seems to have served primarily as a useful mechanism for their political agendas.

Implications for Chanukah

Many Jews today struggle with the Chanukah holiday despite its popularity because of the narrative that sees it as the triumph of fundamentalists over those who believe they can balance their commitment to the religious tradition with the modern world around them, rather than as a celebration of religious freedom.^[11] As we have seen however, that narrative ill fits the story provided by *1* and *2 Maccabees*, the two sources closest to the events commemorated by Chanukah, who suggest that even the Maccabees recognized and accepted that there are foreign customs that Judaeans could adopt without threatening their own identity .

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Notes

[1] Uriel Rappaport. “The Hellenization of the Hasmoneans,” in *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation, and Accommodation: Past Traditions, Current Issues, and Future Prospects* (ed., Menachem Mor; Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 1-13. Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

[2] This is likely referring to a process called epispasm, which attempts to make a circumcised member look as if it were uncircumcised.

[3] Cf. Erich Gruen, “Hellenism and the Hasmoneans,” in *Heritage and Hellenism: the reinvention of Jewish tradition* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 1-40.

[4] Editor’s note: For a discussion of this martyrology, see Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, [“2 and 4 Maccabees: Evolving Responses to Hellenism.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2018); Martin Lockshin, [“Chanukah: The Greek Influence of Martyrdom.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2017); Malka Simkovich, [“The Faith of the Martyred Mother and Her Seven Sons.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2015).

[5] For discussion of the history of the High Priest’s role, see Deborah Rooke, *Zadok’s heirs: The role and development of the High Priesthood in ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[6] According to *1 Macc.* 10.21, Jonathan “put on the sacred vestments in the seventh month of the one hundred sixtieth year [152 BCE] during Sukkot, and he recruited troops and equipped them with arms in abundance.”

[7] Demetrius I Soter sent multiple armies against Judah, finally defeating and killing him under General Bacchides in 160 B.C.E., in the battle of Elasa, after which, Judah’s brother Jonathan took his place as leader of the revolt.

[8] The text mentions John’s assumption of leadership and so must have been composed after 135 BCE, and speaks favorably of the Romans, and so was likely composed before Pompey the Great’s invasion of Judaea in 63 BCE and his trespassing into the Temple. And while the text we have is Greek, there are linguistic signs that the original text was composed in Hebrew, suggesting an origin in Judaea. See Uriel Rappaport, “1 Maccabees” in Martin Goodman, *The Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.)

[9] *2 Maccabees* offers a slightly different perspective; apparently written originally in Greek, it devotes significant space to martyr stories and ends with the military victory of

Judah Maccabee over Nicanor in 161 B.C.E. At this point the Hasmoneans did not yet hold the High Priesthood, so its aims can hardly be the legitimacy of the Hasmonean dynasty. *2 Maccabees* builds up the individual figure of Judah Maccabee, and Daniel Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), suggests that the primary purpose of the main text (apart from the letters that preface it) was to encourage celebration of “Nicanor’s Day” commemorating Judah’s final victory (*2 Macc* 15.36). See also, Zev Farber, [“Yom Nicanor – 13th of Adar.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2014).

[10] See also Yael Avrahami, [“Identifying the Building Blocks of Chanukah.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2014).

[11] See e.g. James Ponet, [“The Maccabees and the Hellenists.”](#) *Slate* (Dec. 14, 2009). Indeed, the rabbis of the 2nd century C.E. appear to have been sufficiently troubled by the triumphalist overtones of the holiday that they “rebranded” it as the miracle of light. See Malka Simkovich, [“Uncovering the Truth About Chanukah.”](#) *TheTorah.com* (2013).

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