

Rabbi's Reflections:        Hanukkah: The Real Story

We call Hanukkah the first fight for religious freedom, but the story is complicated. The origins begin not in 143/2 B.C.E. when Simeon finally arranges true independence, nor in 161 B.C.E. when Judah Maccabee allies with Rome, nor in 164 B.C.E. with the Temple's rededication, nor in 167/6 B.C.E. when Mattathias (a small town priest and not the high priest we often call him) starts the rebellion and dies, nor in 175 B.C.E. when Antiochus IV Epiphanies starts his rule, nor in 275 B.C.E. when Alexander the Great's kingdom settles into its parts, but in 333-331 B.C.E. when Alexander the Great brings Hellenism into the Middle East. In 586 B.C.E. with the destruction of the First Temple, Jeremiah (29:5-7) tells the Jews to build lives in, and become good citizens of, the diaspora country in which they live. They follow his advice until Mattathias rebels with the battle-cry, "Whoever is for God, follow me!" (1 Maccabees 2:27 reads: "Let everyone who is zealous for the Law, and would maintain the covenant, follow me.")

We have felt the tension of interacting with the world around us since Alexander brings us Hellenism. In the third century B.C.E., with Egypt ruling Judea, Joseph ben Tobias, who was of noble ancestry and related to the high priest, took advantage of his relative's anti-Egyptian sentiments, and, knowing that the Egyptian ruler needed money, arranged to be appointed tax collector. He and his descendants, the Tobiades, supported by the Egyptian army, economically ruled Syria (including Palestine), earned the region's Jews' and non-Jews' hatred, and turned Jerusalem into a foreign rulers' money source. In 198 B.C.E., the Seleucids (proper name for Syrian rule) ruled Judea. Under the Tobiades, and the advantages of the Greek way of life, some, especially city, Jews, determined to bring the economic, social, and self-government advantages of a *polis*, a true Greek city, to Jerusalem and other cities, but the city needed to be more Greek. They gained Seleucid attention by mentioning high priest Onias III's anti-Seleucid and pro-Egyptian sympathies, and the Temple money. They failed, but a second try with money, and the promise of a Greek constitution for Jerusalem, led to Jason's appointment as high priest and the new city name of Antioch. Antiochus IV Epiphanes needed the money and the loyalty of his varied subjects to conquer Egypt. After three years, the Hellenizers wanted their own man, Menelaus, as high priest even though he was not of the legitimate blood line, and promised Antiochus more money. A civil war started. Menelaus won. When Onias III emerged from hiding, Menelaus had him assassinated. By these actions, Menelaus required Seleucid army support to stay in power. With a rumor that Antiochus died on his Egyptian campaign, and Menelaus not a true high priest who used some Temple gold ritual items to pay Antiochus, Jason, with help including the Hasidim (no relation to today's named group), overthrew Menelaus. Antiochus returned home, and restored Menelaus. At the urging of his Jewish supporters, he passed laws against Sabbath observance, circumcision, and dietary restrictions, and for idol worship (including, presumably, himself). This context of wanting to unite his kingdom and his Egyptian campaign led to the anti-Jewish reform suggested by the Jews who wanted to win the civil war. The local non-Jews also supported Antiochus's efforts.

We can still say it was a war for religious freedom because the Hasidim and others abandoned the fight with the rededicated Temple. The Maccabees arranged to force a new war, and non-Jews attacking Jews provided the final impetus to renew the fight for independence. Judah dies in 160 B.C.E. His brother, Jonathan, also pursues many treaties, which further exacerbates intra-Jewish tensions, and only as we approach 140 B.C.E. is Judea independent, though not for long. The Seleucids arrange for Simeon's murder, and John Hyrcanus becomes king in 134. He offers some Seleucid loyalty, but achieves final independence with Antiochus VII death in 129.

At no point did the Hasmoneans have full Jewish support. Some Hellenizers always opposed them. For only brief periods did more traditional observers, never interested in political independence for its own sake because of Jeremiah, support them. First the Pharisees and later the rabbis downplayed the military elements, and emphasized God and the eternal—immortality and martyrdom play a role (see e.g the Book of Daniel, and the story of Hannah and her seven sons). They even reject the ultra-pietist model and introduce innovation—the Seleucids realize that if they wait for the Sabbath, the Jews will not fight and they can kill them, so Mattathias says better to violate Sabbath now so they can live and celebrate more of them. Ever since, we have weighed the issues: of assimilation, and rejected both the extremes of the assimilationist and the closed-minded religious, focusing instead on God and life; of this world versus the world-to-come, and here too rejected both the extremes of the political-military and hedonism of the worldly, and the ultra-pious-ascetic-legalistic other-worldly. Ultimately, we keep our religion involved in this world and look to the next in the hopes that we make this one better, understanding that only God keeps these extreme tensions in check. This really does make Hanukkah a fight for religious freedom. Happy Hanukkah.

----- Rabbi Michael Rascoe