**Hanukkah in the Jewish Tradition**

As Hanukkah approaches each year, we revisit the Talmudic sages’ famous question: “What is Hanukkah?” This puzzlement—What, in fact, is Hanukkah?—appears as though en passant in Tractate Shabbat amid discussion of altogether different matters. This, in the opinion of several historians, shows us that the Hanukkah festival, marking the events of the Maccabee uprising and the establishment of the Hasm onaean dynasty in the second century BCE—had fragile status in the Sages’ eyes.

Answering their question, the Talmudic Sages stated that eulogies and fasting are forbidden during the eight days of Hanukkah due to the miracle of the flask of oil: “When the Greeks entered the sanctuary, they defiled all the oil in the sanctuary, and when the House of the Hasmonaean rose up and defeated them, they searched and found only one flask of oil [...] containing only enough to light [the Temple menorah] for one day. A miracle occurred with this oil and they used it to light [the menorah] for eight days [...]” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b). It is a simple fact, however, that this story—the miracle of the flask of oil—is altogether absent in Maccabees I and II, the Jewish books that documented the uprising and the ascendancy of the Hasmonaean dynasty in historical detail, which was subsequently preserved in the bosom of the Christian Church of all places, and not in the Jewish cultural tradition.

Some say that by resuscitating the flask-of-oil story and making it central, the Sages wished to deprive Judah Maccabee and his brothers of their central and leading role in the uprising. Their intent is said to have traced to struggles between the Pharisee sages and the great Hasmonaean kings Johanan Horkanos I and Jannai, and the fact of the Hasmonaean kings’ rapprochement with Hellenic culture. Another explanation, not necessarily contradicting the previous one, is that in certain periods the Sages wished to underemphasize stories about manifestations of Jewish military force in order to discourage Jewish elements that wished to promote violent rebellion against the Roman authorities.

Other historians deny this. The Sages, they say, considered Hanukkah an important festival and were not all that hostile to the Hasmonaean dynasty. Instead, it is a natural tendency in rabbinical literature not to deal with history; what is more, Hanukkah is not the only festival that did not merit its own tractate in the Talmud.

This leaves the question about the Sages’ attitude toward Hanukkah and the Hasmonaeans unanswered. It is important to explain, however, that were it not for Maccabees I and II, we would know very little about the Maccabee uprising today. The Sages, in their legends, simply did not present concrete information about it.

Be this as it may, and even though it was not privileged with a tractate of its own, Hanukkah found a warm welcome among the Jews of Eretz Israel and the Diaspora as early as the Second Temple era and has enjoyed much grassroots popularity ever since. The world of halakha and Jewish custom that have come about down over the generations found ways of their own to commemorate Hanukkah by explaining in detail how to light the menorah, prescribing special prayers and blessings, and, of course, preserving certain foods and rituals that accompany the moment of lighting the menorah.

An interesting development in regard to remembrance of the events of the Maccabee uprising took place in a number of medieval Jewish locations. Several Jewish communities in the Islamic lands, Italy, and Germany in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, the great researcher David Flusser shows, took keen interest in the Jews’ feats of heroism, finding particular favor in the valor of Judah Maccabee—a medieval knight of the Jews, so to speak, equal to the Greek and Roman heroes whom the classical literature memorializes and to the heroes of the European peoples of the time. Thus appeared the *Scroll of Antiochus* in Syria and the *Scroll of the Hasmonaeans* and *Josippon* in Italy—all three packed with tales of the Maccabees’ heroism.

The modern era pulled World Jewry in odd and sundry social and intellectual directions. In the specific context of dealing with Hanukkah, each group seemed to use the festival to address its exigencies. Jews who aspired to integrate into the modern societies around them, as in Germany and later in the United States, turned their attention to the proximity of Hanukkah to Christmas. Thus it seems, to a large extent, that lighting colorful Hanukkah candles (going as far as to turn the menorah into a “Jewish Christmas tree”) and giving gifts to the children (“Hanukkah gelt”) are mere adoptions and imitations of the world surrounding the Jews. Today, Hanukkah appears to have taken an interesting turn in these Jewish circles: no longer a festival representing a people’s struggle for its religious and national freedom but an abstract universal symbol of sorts, in which the light of the menorah symbolizes the luminescence of the multicultural experiencing of freedom.

Conversely, modern Jewish literature offers a wealth of examples in which the encounter with Hanukkah and, more so, with the menorah, may mark the moment when an assimilated Jew suddenly ponders the question of his or her identity. Two cases in point are I.L. Peretz’ story “The Hanukkah Menorah” and Theodor Herzl’s “The Menorah.” There are many others. The tales of the Chabad Hasidim reserve a special place for reporting on those moments when Jewish prisoners in the Communist gulag light the menorah at great personal risk. Often, too, one of the cruel jailers is reminded of his Jewish identity just as he catches the inmates red-handed.

Especially touching is the testimony of the historian Saul Friedländer, who recalled the moment in his childhood, in December 1941, as he fled with his parents from Prague to France to escape the terror of the Nazi occupation. One evening, his father told him the story of Hanukkah:

He explained to me how people had tried to force the Jews to deny their faith, and how the Maccabees had taken arms against their oppressors, broken the yoke of Antiochus Epiphanes' tyranny, and delivered Jerusalem. . […] More than one Jew suddenly discovered, like my father in his total distress, some tiny detail that brought him closer to the collective past. […] When crises occur, one searches the depths of one's memory to discover some vestige of the past, not the past of the individual, faltering and ephemeral, but rather that of the community, which, though left behind, nonetheless represents that which is permanent and lasting.

*When Memory Comes* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979).

For almost all shades of the Zionist Movement, Hanukkah commands prime importance, of course. In Zionist eyes, in a total reversal of the use of Hanukkah by assimilated Jews, the festival symbolizes the long-ago national existence of Jews who had physical power, courage, military prowess, political enterprise, and a close relation with their historical homeland—Eretz Israel.

Among some Zionists, the miracle of the flask of oil has been crowded out by physical and human heroism. Zionist education systems and the world of Zionist literature, art, and theatre have been imparting this message in innumerable ways for more than a century.

In this context of the importance of Hanukkah in the Zionist historical consciousness, it is fascinating to note the vast importance that great Zionist historians have bestowed on this festival, not only as a national event but also as a fateful one for all of human history! Here, a national occurrence is grasped as a matter of universal importance. The following passages that demonstrate this point, in my opinion, should be quoted in full.

The historian Joseph Klausner wrote:

**It was the first time in world history** thatan entire people was persecuted for its faith and suffered terribly for its beliefs and views. Many did not withstand the ordeal of course. […] However, most of the nation, men and women, old and young […] endured all manner of torments. […] Multitudes of thousands rose up, spiritual heroes who could not be compelled by any torture in the world and any threat of gruesome death to betray the teachings of their God. […] There was an intuitive feeling that along with betraying their God they would also betray their people, and if the Torah of Israel were to be lost so would the People Israel. […] They were martyrs—the first among Israel and, perhaps, among all the nations—who surrendered their souls for the sanctification of God. The nation, however, was not saved by martyrs alone. To save it, its God, and its Torah, passive resistance would not suffice. When the pot of afflictions and violence boiled over, active resistance had to arise. In the martyrs' stead, heroes had to come—the great rebels and warriors of the House of Hashmonai: Matityahu son of Yohanan the Hasmonaean and his five sons, who with their blood attained freedom of religion and the freedom of the homeland alike.

Joseph Klausner, *History of the Second Temple, B.,* Jerusalem, 1952, pp. 199–200 (Hebrew).

The historian Cecil Roth had the following to say:

It was one of the decisive events in human history. Never before had men been convinced, as they were then, that an Idea was something to fight for and to die for; and the success of the revolt saved for mankind the ethical monotheism which lies at the basis not only of Judaism but also of Christianity and Islam, as yet unborn, and of Western civilization in its true sense.

*The History of the Jews in Italy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), p. 2.

The historian Yitzhak Baer wrote:

**The Hasmonaean uprising should be seen as one of the decisive events in all of human history,** as one of the definitive chapters in humankind's progress toward freedom […] It was the first time in history that people fought and died for their faith as the most precious value among the assets of their souls.

This passage is available in an English edition that I was not able to access, so I translated it from the Hebrew—the translator. The English edition is *Peoples of Israel: Studies in the History of the Second Temple Period of the Mishna, the Foundations of Law and Faith* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955).

And the historian Menahem Stern:

The Jewish masses' passionate and uncompromising devotion to their faith was a deeply rooted phenomenon. Already in previous generations the Jews had proved that they would not hesitate to offer up their lives for the precepts of their religion. This time, however, an episode of martyrdom on a massive scale unfolded **for the first time in human history**. The steadfastness of the martyrs and the pious in those times of decrees against the faith served as an example and a paragon for Jews and non-Jews in all subsequent generations.

"The Second Temple Era," in Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson ed. *Jewish History in Antiquity* (Tel Aviv: 1969, p. 196) (Hebrew).

I allow myself a personal remark: In contemporary Israel, too, students may be quite surprised to encounter such an impressive presentation of the Maccabee uprising as the first event of its kind in all of human history.

So, as we move across the yearly cycle and again reach the days of Hanukkah, we are again called upon to contemplate the great transformations that this festival has undergone in its millennia of existence, and again we may wonder what speaks to us more: the real historical account in Maccabees I; the Sages' emphasis on the miracle of the flask of oil; adherence to the festival's halakhic minutiae; viewing Judah Maccabee as a Jewish King Arthur of sorts; seeing Hanukkah as a Jewish iteration of Christmas of equal worth or as a symbol of the light of multiculturalism; construing the menorah as an object that can awaken old memories of a nearly lost identity, and, perhaps—viewing Hanukkah as a dramatic event of supreme importance in human history: a source of inspiration to be willing to fight to the death for national freedom and religious and cultural liberty.

In our times as in all generations, and perhaps more so, our attitude toward Hanukkah may yield a very bright reflection of where we stand in this world.