

The Real Miracle of Chanukah

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Everybody knows the story of the miracle of Chanukah. Right? The evil Syrian-Greek King, Antiochus Epiphanes, decreed that idols be erected in the Jerusalem Temple. The Judean people rebelled, under the leadership of the Maccabees. When the Jews had brought the great Seleucid Dynasty to its knees, leading Antiochus to relent, they rededicated the Temple. “Chanukah” means dedication. The victors had only one problem: To kindle the eternal flame in the Temple, they needed specially blessed olive oil, with the seal of the High Priest. They found only a tiny jug, enough to last for one day. The real problem: the oil with that priestly seal had been secreted away, a four days’ journey each way. How could that tiny vial of oil last the eight days required to make the round trip? The miracle: That miniscule amount of oil kept the eternal light aflame for eight days. That was the miracle of Chanukah. Right?

Not so fast. Turns out that oil miracle first appears in the Talmud, written some 650 years after the Maccabean revolt. Contemporary accounts, written by Jews, don’t mention that miracle. In fact, they give an entirely different reason for an eight day celebration. In Ancient Israel, the highest annual Holy Day wasn’t Yom Kippur. It was Sukkot, the fall harvest festival at the beginning of Israel’s rainy season. For agricultural people, prayers for rain were critical to their livelihood, and the supplications offered on Sukkot were the most important of all. Sukkot is an eight day festival. The victorious Maccabees decreed that the rededication of the Temple be a delayed celebration of Sukkot, which they had been unable to observe when they were fighting the Syrian-Greeks. They further instructed that these eight days of delayed Sukkot be observed every year.

So what’s the miracle?

Perhaps it’s the victory of the few over the many, the weak over the strong. As the good song declares: “And Your word broke their sword when our own strength failed us.” God’s spirit, not the military might of the Maccabees, triumphed over the Syrian-Greek strength. Right?

Not so fast. Turns out that the Maccabean revolt was, at root, a civil war. Living under Greco-Syrian rule, many Judeans had adopted the ways of their rulers. They dressed like Greeks. They participated in Greek-styled athletic events. They schooled their children at the gymnasium. The one concession they would

not make was that Judeans continued to worship the one God of Israel, faithfully observing Torah. They were loyal to Judaism, while at the same time culturally assimilated with their neighbors. Sound familiar? And by the way, their rulers were fine with that compromise. One thing you can say for polytheists: They tend to be tolerant. If you're worshiping many gods, what's one more?

The trouble arose when the most elite group of Judeans, led by the High Priest himself, decided that the best way to integrate fully into their Empire would be to worship as their rulers did. That "top one per-cent" suggested that the King issue a decree that statues of Greek gods be erected in the Temple. Perhaps Antiochus was all too eager to comply. After all, the word "Epiphanes," the second part of his name, means, "appearance of god." In other words, Antiochus himself would be one of those gods worshiped in the Temple.

The decree – but even more, the contemptible hypocrisy of the High Priest – provoked a Judean elder named Mattathias, whose sons were renowned warriors, chief among them Judah. He was known as "Maccabee," possibly based on the Aramaic word meaning "hammer," but more likely a name of Greek derivation. Mattathias is a Greek version of a Hebrew name, indicating that he and his family were fully acculturated into their surroundings. Their loyalty to God, though, was strong. The rabbis would later say that "Maccabee" is an acronym, standing for *Mi Chamocha B'eilim Adonai*, "Who is like You, Adonai, among the gods [that are worshipped]." They weren't wrong: The Maccabees were indeed warriors for one God, against idolatry.

Still, the Maccabees' fight was mostly with their fellow Jews, those elite who sought to become even more privileged by abandoning their ancestral faith. Yes, some contingent of the Seleucid army was there to defend the King's decree. The guerilla war was intense. The Maccabees, though, were supported by the masses of Judea. More importantly, the Syrian-Greeks weren't motivated to fight. What did they care if the Judeans worshiped their own God, so long as they paid their taxes and kept quiet? The Seleucids had more important battles to fight on other fronts. No sooner had the Maccabees won a significant battle than Antiochus was convinced to retract the decree. The High Priest was deposed. Judea's new leaders, still under Seleucid rule, were Mattathias and his sons, known as the Hasmoneans – that is to say Hellenized Jews, "Hellenized" being a fancy word that means "Greekified."

So perhaps we aren't celebrating a miracle at all, at least not a miracle wrought by God. Instead, we rejoice in a miracle of faith, inspiring the Maccabees

to stand up against their own leaders, even when that elite was backed by the King's legions. We celebrate the miracle of a people so intent on observing their sacred festival that they celebrated for all eight days, albeit two months late.

But now let's go back to the Talmud and that tale about the oil. The rabbis told that story because they two big problems with Chanukah.

First, the rabbis had lived through the destruction of the Second Temple, only a couple hundred years after the original Chanukah events. Then, 65 years after that, the rabbis backed a doomed rebellion, resulting in the slaughter of countless Jews. Ballyhooing the victory of the few over the many, the weak over the strong, might encourage more crazy talk of revolt against the Romans. Not by God's spirit, but by might and power had the Jewish people been defeated in their own lives, and they weren't eager to celebrate a story that might inspire another futile rebellion at the inestimable expense of Jewish lives lost.

Second, that late celebration of Sukkot was no longer compelling. Folks were celebrating Sukkot in the fall, at its appointed season. Moreover, Sukkot was no longer the most significant annual festival for a people that was no longer dependent on an agricultural economy. Sound familiar?

Blessedly, the rabbis had at their disposal, somewhere in their treasure-trove of sacred writings, a story of a miracle by which an infinitesimally small cruse of oil inexplicably burned for eight days. Eight days! Just like Chanukah! The rabbis were then able to connect that miracle story to the well-known if misunderstood holiday. Voila, the miracle of Chanukah was born!

Who's to say, and certainly not I, that the miracle of the oil didn't happen. And yet, if it had happened in connection with the Maccabean revolt, the Jews who wrote the Book of Maccabees would have at least mentioned it! They didn't. So perhaps the miracle of Chanukah is that we still celebrate it. The rabbis gave new meaning to a holiday that no longer had resonance with the people who were commanded to observe it; and we've been kindling lights and eating foods cooked in oil for centuries ever after.

We live in a society that venerates this season with a sacred holiday that is not ours. We, like the Hasmoneans before us, have adopted the ways of the society in which we live, much to our joy. At the same time, we have not adopted its majority religion; but, much to our credit, remained true to our ancestral faith. That loyalty is most challenging at Christmas time, when we are called upon to

resist that most attractive of holidays, other than participating in the celebrations of our Christian family, friends, and neighbors.

Perhaps the real miracle of Chanukah, then, is that, convoluted though their methods might have been, the rabbis of the Talmud preserved Chanukah for us. Like the rabbis before us, we have reinvented the festival, adding a tradition of gift-giving, not at all native to the holiday.

The continuity of Judaism is itself the greatest miracle of all. Most ancient civilizations, when faced with a dilemma like that of ancient Judea, went along with decrees like that of Antiochus. Time and again, defeat after persecution after expulsion, our ancestors remained faithful.

So the next time somebody tells you to stop making such a big deal about Chanukah – it's a minor holiday, they will tell you – respond that you know they're right: Chanukah is not as important as Shabbat, as Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, Passover or Sukkot. And yet, in our day, just like the era of Mattathias and his sons, the miracles of Chanukah rekindle our faith.

Amen.