

The K.F. Stone Weekly

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CHANUKAH 101

Truth to tell, Chanukah - the Jewish "Festival of Light" or "Feast of Dedication" - is a very minor holiday. Although about as devoid of any religious or spiritual import as a holiday can be, it does tell a tale of miracles and derring-do suitable for an epic Hollywood movie. But of course, that tale - like most epic flicks - is largely mythic and begs for both a suspension of belief and what cinephiles refer to as [persistence of vision](#). And yet, Chanukah *does* possess, for those who have dug beneath its surface tale of a single cruse of oil lasting a miraculous eight days, important historic and political lessons which resonate until this very day. Both the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Shabbat* 21 A-B), and the *siddur* (prayer book) minimize - if not make invisible - the participation of the Maccabees, the historic heroes of the Chanukah story. Instead, these two



Victory of Judah Maccabee by Paul Gustave Doré

works choose to maximize the role God plays in the events surrounding this most secular of holidays. Indeed, the second of two candle prayers (there are three on the first night) flatly states that it was God " . . . who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days,

at this time of the year." And in the *siddur*, the Maccabees

(השמונים - *Khashmonaim*) are fleetingly mentioned only as a means of

establishing a period of reference - בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדל חשמונאי ובניו - "*In the days of Mattathias, son of Johanan the High Priest and his sons . . .*"). So why do the heroes of Chanukah get such short shrift? Why are they no more than a mere footnote in the religious record, despite having played a central role in the historic event?

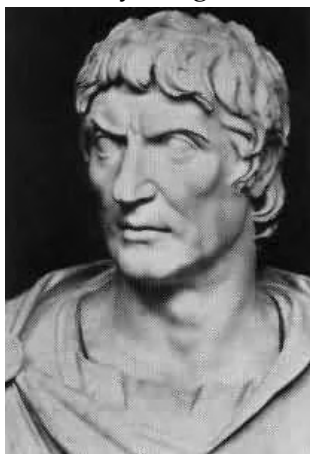
In order to understand - and to learn the true political significance of Chanukah - we must go back to the year 323 B.C.E, a full 165 years *before* the Maccabean revolt. For in that year, on the 10th or 11th of June, one of history's most momentous events took place: the death of a young man (a mere 32-years old) known to history as Alexander the Great. By the time of his death, Alexander, the son of the king of Macedon, Phillip, and his fourth wife, Olympias had conquered all the Greek states, all of Egypt, and the entire Persian Empire, including Syria and Palestine. He also invaded and conquered much of India and Russia. The Egyptians were so thrilled to be rid of Persian domination that they declared Alexander to be the son of their god *Ammon*, and dedicated a temple to him in his honor. The city of Alexandria, in northern Egypt, was also named after him as well as Kandahar in Afghanistan. Wherever Alexander went, wherever Alexander conquered, he brought with him Hellenic culture. He was also, for the most part, a decidedly benevolent and understanding ruler. As he lay dying of some idiopathic fever, his closest allies and advisers urged him to name his successor. History records that with virtually his last breath, he proclaimed, "*Who but a god should inherit from a god? I hereby leave my kingdom to . . . ZEUS!*" Now, while this proclamation certainly made for great drama and myth, the fact that Alexander did not name a successor, set in motion a disastrous chain of events which would change the face of history for generations to come.



Alexander the Great

Almost immediately upon his demise an intense struggle broke out among his many generals over who would control his vast empire. By 315 B.C.E., the empire was divided four ways among the top four generals. These four generals were known as the *Diadochoi* (Διάδοχοι), Greek for "Successors." Not surprisingly, the four generals (Ptolemy Lagi, Antigonus, Cassander and Lysimachus) and their successors spent the next century waging war (the six Syrian Wars) for supremacy in the region. Eventually, the field narrowed to two groups: the [Seleucid Empire](#) and the [Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt](#). Sadly, tragically - at least for the Jews - their paths crossed most frequently in Palestine - Judea. Some of the Ptolemies exercised wise and benevolent rule; others were intolerant

dictators. The same can be said of the Seleucids. Under some of these rulers, Jews were permitted to build synagogues and freely practice the religion of their ancestors. Under others, persecution and suppression were endemic. But regardless of who sat on the throne, a steep annual tribute had to be paid. Eventually, in 198 B.C.E. control over Judea came back into the hands of the Seleucids and a series of rulers named Antiochus. In 175 B.C.E., the fourth Antiochus, who called himself *Επιφανής* - (*Epiphanes*: "In the image of God") became the supreme ruler. He was a disaster for the Jews of the region, and completely insane. Indeed, the local folk, using a play on words, referred to him as *Εμμανής* - "The mad man." And indeed, mad he was. Almost immediately upon assuming the throne, he decided that what he wanted more than anything was to conquer Egypt. But in order to do that, he determined that



Antiochus IV Epiphanes

he would first have to stabilize his own country and consolidate political support by uniting the disparate cultural, social, and religious elements. Chief among these "religious elements" were the Jews. In quick succession, he replaced the High Priest Onias III with Onias' brother Joshua, who was loyal to Antiochus and the Greco-Assyrians. With Joshua's help, Jerusalem became a mini version of Antioch, replete with a gymnasium where the Jewish priests (the *Kohanim*) often played Greek sports in the nude. Meanwhile, King Antiochus had access to the Temple treasury to help underwrite his dream of conquering Egypt. In addition to raiding the treasury, Antiochus *Epiphanes* banned circumcision, burned copies of the Torah, and had pigs ritually slaughtered in the Holy Temple.

In 168 B.C.E., [Mattathias](#) a Priest from Mo'din (west of Jerusalem) and his five sons - Judah, Eleazar, Shimon, John and Jonathan - became so fed up with the debased, insane king, that they rose up against Antiochus and his army, convincing their impoverished coreligionists that rebellion was both righteous and essential. Outmanned by history's first professional army, Mattathias and his boys made several crucial - and historic - decisions. They ordained that fighting on the Sabbath was permissible; that the normal rules of war could be obviated; and that no one had the right to deny, abridge or abrogate religious freedom. Indeed, the so-called Maccabean revolt would become the first war in history that was fought over something completely intangible. Heretofore, wars had been fought over land and ports, treasury and spoils. In their quest to free Judea from the hands of "The madman," the Maccabees essentially invented guerrilla warfare, using their superior knowledge of the land and its people to hit and hide - to attack from behind rocks and from atop walls. History records that Judah picked up the name "Maccabee," which many believe came from the

Aramaic word *makava* ("מקבא" "the hammer") for the ferocious manner in which he and his comrades attacked the Greco-Assyrians. More likely, "Maccabee" is an acronym for "Who is like you Oh God? namely:

מי כמוך באלהים ה'

Regardless of its origin, the Maccabees beat back the forces of Antiochus and rededicated the temple. And this is where the story every Jewish child knows comes into the picture . . . the miracle about that single cruse of kosher oil which miraculously lasted a full eight days. Even the rabbis of the Talmud state this with a knowing wink. The likely reason for the eight days of Chanukah is one day for commemorating the victory and rededication of the Temple, and an additional week to make up for the seven days of *Pesach* they missed during the fighting.

But why is it that the story of the miracle of oil towers above the historically verifiable miracle of a small ragtag group of scholars, farmers, artisans and shopkeepers roundly defeating history's first professional army? Why aren't there blaring headlines about the fact that for the first time in history, the fuel for fighting was an intangible? History does record that as tenacious, courageous and valiant as the Hasmoneans were in executing the war, that is how very bad they were at running a government -- at administering a country. Like many of history's great revolutionary figures (Otto Von Bismarck comes to mind), war was the easy part; the challenges of peace far greater. America's venture into Iraq is another example of this truism: it's relatively easy to topple a bloodthirsty tyrant; far more difficult to turn slaves into free people. To be perfectly honest, the descendants of Mattathias and Judah were corrupt, venal, incompetent and unable to win the enduring consent of the governed. They appointed themselves kings (something forbidden to members of the priestly caste) and ran the country into the ground. And -- worst of all -- they called upon the Romans to assist them, thus planting the seeds for the utter destruction and dismemberment of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. Viewed in this light, is it any wonder that the myth of the oil supplanted the role of the Maccabees?

With every passing week, we are learning more and more about ISIS' inability to run a local government . . . let alone create a worldwide caliphate. That which I believe will ultimately bring them down is the anger of the people; the frustration of being taxed and tortured, of being denied basic civic services all the while being dragged back into the 9th century by a band of homicidal gangsters who claim to be God's chosen.

Indeed, Chanukah *does* celebrate and commemorate a miracle: that of liberation from oppression. But at the same time, it issues a stern warning across the

millennia: that those who rule by the sword will ultimately be relegated to the dusty pages of history.

May the miracles be ours . . .

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