

Judah who?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Why is Judah Maccabee not mentioned in the Talmud? There are all sorts of reasons suggested. The Maccabee dynasty, with the exception of the remarkable Queen Shlomzion (Salome Alexandra) was strongly anti-rabbinic. The dynasty came to identify itself with the rich Sadduceean aristocracy, rather than the poorer Phariseean populace, whose leadership came to dominate post-destruction Judaism. It was Judah who sent envoys to Rome asking for an alliance which led to Jewish subjugation. And the dynasty was identified with Herod, who killed just about every member of his family and thought that by paying vast sums to redecorate the Temple he could buy off public opinion and God.

The achievements of Judah and his brothers, significant as they were, in fact amounted to little more than guerrilla campaigns. The Syrian Greek armed forces had far more important issues to deal with at home and only sent secondary forces to deal with what they saw as a minor local disturbance. Indeed, a Syrian garrison remained in the fortress in Jerusalem throughout Judah's life and beyond, until final settlement with Simon. Only in the next generation John Hyrcanus was a really successful military commander. But what started off as a pious rural priestly family's stand against Antiochus, and indeed against assimilatory high priests in Jerusalem, soon became an example of how power corrupts.

Nevertheless, nothing can take away from Judah's achievement of regaining control of the Temple, purifying and rededicating it.

The Chanuka story is emblematic of the Jewish people, as always divided between rich and poor, nationalists and internationalists, idealists and pragmatists. Indeed, every Jew sees Chanuka through his or her own eyes and personal agenda. Rabbinic emphasis on the spiritual rather than the military is surely a reaction to the disempowerment of Jewish life under Roman and successive regimes. The emphasis on God fighting our battles is a classical Diaspora response to the loss of our land and exile.

But of course in our own era the different emphases abound. Physically robust secular Zionism saw Judah as its military hero, standing up to the enemy physically, unlike the Jews of the ghettos who were seen as cowards walking like lambs to the slaughter. The possibility that acceptance of Divine Will, with dignity and an awareness of life beyond this world, may have created spiritual heroes, simply could not have occurred to a generation of Jews more influenced by secular, socialist material values.

The counter myth that Mattityahu was a sort of Rosh Yeshiva and his family sat in Kolel studying Gemara all day and emerged only occasionally to waste good study time fighting the Greeks, is not only an anachronism but equally off the mark. We all invent our own heroes.

The irony of a materialist viewpoint is that it claims to redress the balance in favor of the masses but in practice lends itself to abuse and excesses. Russian Communism, Maoism in China, could not illustrate this better. The sad transformation of Israel from the idealist state I recall of the 1950's to its corrupt decadence of today is only a natural consequence of a society that dismissed or relegated spiritual values. The result has been a collapse of ideals. Similarly, capitalism gloried in its defeat of Marxism, threw caution and oversight to the winds, and precipitated the most serious recession in two generations.

The same can be said for religious society. The poverty and deprivation that characterized most of the very Orthodox world fifty years ago produced a generation of men determined to make money at almost any cost, legal or otherwise. Those who have risen out of poverty have gone overboard with material excess, as the conspicuous consumption on display at many Charedi weddings, airport lounges, or vacation watering spots illustrates. Officially, Charedi society worships its rebbes and the Greats. Unofficially, it worships the Gvirim, the rich ones.

I do not wish for one minute to suggest there is no more idealism in secular Israel, any more than in the religious world. But the time when the idealists were the elite is long past. Mammon rules everywhere in the Jewish and non-Jewish world.

It is only when we have the sorts of economic crises we are experiencing now, and heroes turn into villains, that we realize that those whose only criteria for success was money have failed by the very standard they wanted to be judged by. It is only then that they begin to consider that other values might be preferable, that teachers and social workers might be making a more important contribution to humanity than bankers and dealers.

Sadly, most humans cannot see beyond their immediate material needs and only a very few within religion and beyond genuinely aspire to the various degrees of authentic saintliness. Even rabbis nowadays are more often associated with amassing money in various ways, or selling indulgences, than Heavenly values.

The rabbis of the Talmud never spoke out against wealth per se, but that was because they always emphasized other more important values that were ends in themselves. Money was always only a means. If they downplayed Judah, it was because they wanted to downplay materialism and emphasize light, enlightenment, and the flame of spirit.

So whatever Chanuka means for you, please add a little light.