

Chanukah Then and Now

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The story of Chanukah we hear year in and year out is about the triumph of the gallant few Maccabee rebels against the might of the Syrian Greek Empire. There's a political narrative and a religious narrative that seems as vivid, as relevant, and as disturbing now as it was then.

The political narrative includes several elements. A small determined group of ideologically motivated activists can overcome superior forces and unfavorable odds. People fighting to protect their land are more dedicated than professional soldiers sent in to do a job. Afghanistan comes to mind. Yet the fact was that the Maccabee success was as much due to divisions, distractions, and rivalries within the Syrian camp that prevented a sustained and all-out assault as it was due to Maccabee military success. Indeed, Judah Maccabee himself fell in battle when the Syrians finally sent in a serious army. In the Middle East, to Israel's great benefit, rivalries and sectarian conflict amongst its antagonists have consistently prevented them from uniting against her.

When the Maccabees did consolidate power, they turned into a nasty cruel dynasty. Power corrupted. Judah had sent his army to rescue Jews besieged in Greek cities where there was always commercial and social rivalry and whoever got the upper hand ended up massacring the other side. But then John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus went further and forced conversion on a raft of tribes and peoples. The effect on the Jews themselves was debilitating in many ways and the archetypal product of such a policy was the grotesque King Herod.

Political alliances were crucial. When the Syrians invaded in force, Judah made a treaty with Rome that came too late to save him, but was the basis of Roman sovereignty. And Roman authority was fine until parts of the Jewish population rebelled against it and descended into internecine conflict and criminality. Then the full force of Roman military power more or less destroyed the Jewish settlement in Judea. Treaties were good only when both parties took them seriously and respected each other.

The official Jewish community lived predominantly in Judea, as the state and area was actually called two thousand years ago. The Roman province of Palaestina referred to parts of Lebanon and Syria and was only extended to cover Judea after the Emperor Hadrian (76-138) determined to wipe Jews off the map of the Middle East in retaliation for the Bar Kochba revolution.

So much for the politics. But it is the religious narrative that intrigues me more. The community in Judea was led officially by the High Priests. Ezra had tried very hard to impress on the priesthood its religious responsibilities. But as with any aristocracy, they soon became more interested in power and wealth than their spiritual and moral obligations. Growing wealthy on the tithes the Bible awarded them and their share of sacrifices, as well as the vast sums of money sent from the Diaspora to support the Temple, they soon

found themselves more in tune with Graeco-Roman tastes, fashions, and way of life than with their own and began to spend more and more time in Roman society.

Adopting Greek names, it was the priesthood under Onias, Alcimus, Menelaus, and Lysimachus who became the proponents of Hellenism. They competed for power, sending huge bribes to Antioch to secure the top position and undermine each other. They introduced the circus, theater, and games into Jerusalem. The fact was that the Hellenist Priestly party, the Sadducees (the Tzadukim, named after the Tzadok dynasty) ended up disappearing. The mighty priesthood disintegrated and became irrelevant.

They were like the secular lay leadership that came to dominate the Jewish world in the last century whose interest in anything religious was negative and incidental. I recall the shock my father experienced when he visited the USA in 1952 to discover that none of the heads and senior administration of the major communal and philanthropic organizations had any interest in the Jewish religion. This applied throughout much of Jewish world. Organizations like the Alliance Francaise, the Federations in the USA, Hadassah, ORT, HIAS, welfare of all kinds, all did good and vital work. But their culture was more non-Jewish than Jewish in the religious sense. They were closer to the priests of old. Only in recent years has the pendulum begun to swing.

The biggest criticism I have of religious life today is that it has become so snobbishly restrictive and exclusionary, more concerned with keeping people out than welcoming them in. Orthodoxy puts too much emphasis on being "holier than thou". It is one thing to make more demands of oneself. It is quite another to expect everyone else to come up to those standards (or to make them unreasonably expensive). Chanukah should remind us of how interdependent we are. It took all sorts and shades to ensure we survived.

We are fortunate nowadays that, in most of the Free World, we no longer need to apologize for our religion and culture. We may still have our enemies, but we no longer slink quietly in the shadows or try to disguise ourselves. That is what Chanukah signifies to me. The custom we have of placing the menorah in the window is our way of declaring our pride and identity (though there is no law I have ever discovered of needing to put it in the marketplace).

We Jews are too often our own worst critics, and it's no bad thing to see and admit our faults. But we should try to avoid letting the negative detract from our immense achievements and contributions. Keeping the light aflame is what Chanukah really means. Survival is only of use if you have something positive to offer.