

# Chanukah Mixed Messages

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Chanukah story is a good example of how a religious culture can develop over time and why.

It is, in fact, based on historically documented events, corroborated by several sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The bare bones of the narrative are that after Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE his empire was carved up amongst rival generals. The Syrian successors to Alexander, the Seleucids, won control over Judea from the Egyptian Ptolemies. At first they continued Alexander's policy of allowing different religions autonomy so long as they accepted Syrian authority and kept the peace. Unfortunately, as we know, the Jews have always been an argumentative and divided lot! High Priests played politics, bought their positions, and the Syrians soon lost patience with the Jewish political and religious infighting. Antiochus the 4th tried persuasion first, but then stupidly tried to force the Greek religion on the Jews.

Actually much of the upper classes, including the priests, had already largely assimilated. They were the ones who introduced the theater and circus into Jerusalem. Had he left them alone, there's a good chance they might all have abandoned their religion, as they often did during the periods of the judges and kings. But you know, the moment you try telling Jews what not to do, they jolly well go and do the opposite! In 168 BCE he took over the Temple and desecrated it. The more pious of the Jews rose up in rebellion, initiated by Matityahu but led by his son Judah.

A series of Syrian commanders were sent with relatively small armies to suppress the rebellion. Internal political strife and invasions from the North and East kept the main Syrian armies occupied. And as for those who did come ready to fight, on several occasions a crisis back home called them back. Judah certainly won some battles, and on the 25th of Kislev 165 Judah regained the Temple, even though a Syrian garrison remained in the Citadel. The rededication of the Temple took eight days (as in Solomon's original ceremony), and that turned into the eight-day festival we call Chanukah, which literally means "dedication".

The oldest sources we have are the Books of the Maccabees, written originally in Hebrew. They were excluded from the Jewish canon and preserved in their Greek translation by the Church. The other source was Josephus, a Jew who defected to Rome during the Jewish Wars. There he received a pension and wrote histories of the Jews—*The Antiquities of the Jew*, *The Wars of the Jews*—and defended Judaism against the anti-Jewish propaganda of Apion (doubtless an NGO delegate to the UN).

None of these sources refer to the miracle of the oil. That makes its appearance in rabbinic literature hundreds of years later. The popular Talmudic source is in Shabbat 21b: "When the Greeks entered the Temple, they desecrated all the oils. So when the Hasmonean dynasty overcame them, they

could only find one jar of oil with the High Priest's seal, with enough to last for one day. A miracle happened, and it lasted for eight, and they fixed these days as a festival with Hallel and Thanksgiving." Now, many religious scholars have sought to reconcile the miracle with eight days, when of course the first day was no miracle. But when we deal with what we might call a religious agenda, such details are irrelevant, because the issue is one of the message rather than the facts.

It is natural that the spiritual leadership will want to focus on religious messages, whereas those of a more historical bent will be more interested in verifiable facts. The narrative of the oil is an example of a spiritual message of survival, continuity, and Jewish values as opposed to Greek ones. After all, what could be more Greek than fighting?

Both Josephus and the Maccabees talk about how the Jews in Judea had refused to fight on Shabbat, and this had led to a series of massacres. It was Matityahu who gave the order to fight on Shabbat. This seems to have been an example of rabbinic innovation. But then, according to rabbinic law one may desecrate Shabbat to save one's life. I always thought this part of the narrative sounded like a Samaritan problem, because they were the ones at that time who tended to take the Torah at face value without interpretation. So too did the Sadducees, the priestly caste. Matityahu spanned both, a priest and a member of the rabbinic camp. So in truth the story line seems confused at best.

And there's another issue. Some argue that the emphasis on lights was a response to Zoroastrianism, which worshipped fire and often forbade Jews from lighting fires in synagogues, whereas in homes it was another matter. Then of course Christianity was keen on lighting up too, particularly during the winter solstice. Chanukah has become a Jewish Christmas for many. The story of Chanukah combines two very different ideas. The lights can be seen as representing soul, spirit, and reconciliation. Whereas the emphasis on defeating the Syrian Greeks is emblematic of conquest.

All of this underlines the differences that have always existed in Judaism on political and spiritual levels. Nothing much has changed. Today these very same disagreements tear us apart. Should we fight to protect ourselves or sit and pray? Should we try to find some accommodation with other cultures or refuse to engage? It seems to me that a narrative, regardless of its origins, can represent religious creativity and innovation. It can add an important dimension to the physical. Life is a holistic issue in which we try to reconcile disparate narratives and messages and try to find a balance.