

Chanukah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Chanukah celebrates the Jewish rebellion against the Syrian Greek Antiochus IV. He called himself Epiphanes, which means the wise or godlike. His subjects called him Epimanes—the crazy one. The rebellion was initiated by Mattityahu in 167 BCE and went on until his son Judah's death in 160 BCE. (Yes, UNESCO, there really were Jews in the Land of Israel in those days!) The events are recorded in two Books of the Maccabees, which became part of the Christian Apocrypha, and recorded by Josephus in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, written around 90 CE.

The revolt was initially a response to the Greek attempt to destroy Judaism. But it was also a civil war between what we would nowadays call the assimilationists and the traditionalists. Many of the priests then saw themselves more as Greeks than Jews. Just as nowadays in America it is probably true that numerically Jews are assimilated to a large degree and feel more American than Jewish.

The Talmud had little interest in the Maccabean side of things and was concerned. By their time, rebellions against the Roman Empire had led to too many deaths to be thought of as something to be encouraged. They emphasized the cleansing and rededication of the Temple, through the story of oil lasting for eight days. The Chanukah we have today has gone through several stages of development and interpretation.

The Maccabees established the last Jewish royal dynasty. With the possible exception of the one female monarch, Shlomzion or Salome, it was pretty much a disaster, both politically and religiously. The Maccabean kings resorted to violence and militarism, as well as forced conversions, to solidify their power within the Jewish state and beyond it. No wonder they ended with the notorious King Herod and his ineffectual offspring. He did at least refurbish the Temple, of which the present Western Wall is the only remnant. But that was no more an act of piety than those who give money nowadays to religious institutions to try to atone for their sins.

So, I wonder, why it is that some of us still pray for the restoration of the monarchy, when even at its Davidic best it was a dramatic failure both politically and religiously. You can count the number of good kings on the fingers of one hand. The rest were pagan-loving, incompetent, or venal.

Indeed, when talking about a king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the Bible itself warns about the likely abuses:

“If, when you come to the land that the LORD your God has given you, and take possession and settle in it, you may decide, “I want to appoint a king over me, like the nations around,” you may appoint a king over you, one chosen by God. But he must be one of

your own people; you may not appoint a foreigner. Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses... and he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor amass silver and gold to excess. When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of the Torah written for him on a scroll by the priests. To remain with him and to read from all his life, so that...he will not act haughtily toward his fellows nor deviate from its instructions."

It sounds very much as a reluctant concession than an ideal. Indeed that is precisely what the medieval Spanish scholar and diplomat, Abarbanel says in his commentary on this. After all, the Torah keeps on warning us not to try to imitate the nations around. So why allow appointing a king for that reason?

Then several hundred years later, in First Samuel 8:7-19, the people come to Samuel and ask for a king and again say that they want to be like the nations around them. Samuel consults God, Who replies, "You may listen to them, but know it is not you they have rejected, but me." You couldn't have a more ambivalent response!

And then warns them explicitly:

"This is how he will rule over you. He will take your sons to be his charioteers and horsemen...and to serve in his army. They will have to plough his fields, reap his harvest, make his weapons and equipment. He will take your daughters to make his perfumes, to cook and to bake. He will seize your fields, vineyards, olive groves, and give them to his favorites. He will take tithes of your produce and hand it to his courtiers. He will take your slaves, your animals to work for him, and you will become his slaves. But the people did not listen."

The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel, by Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, describes the challenges, pitfalls, and limitations of kingship as it emerged and developed from Saul through David. It charts the change from the initial pagan idea of "king as god" to the early biblical ideal, as expressed in the books of Judges and early Samuel, of "God as king". But this, perhaps under pressure from the outside to be like everyone else, led to a kind of hybrid. The king was a dynastic ruler but subject to the laws of God. Yet like any human, fallible and imperfect.

The authors, giving examples of how David struggled (often disastrously) to reconcile morality with establishing and preserving his reign, his dynasty, and succession, conclude:

"Whenever retaining hold on high office, rather than realizing an ideological vision or implementing a political program, becomes the dominant aim of politics, sovereign power becomes for its wielder

an end in itself, even while being publicly justified as a means for providing collective security. Although power is always justified to subjects as a means of repelling foreign conquest and attaining other collective goods, for the one who exercises it, sovereign power may easily turn into something desired for its own sake."

This inversion of a means into an end becomes an end in itself—all too common in modern governance, whether autocratic or democratic. Survival, short-term solutions, and avoiding difficult and unpopular decisions almost always rebound.

One may wonder why it was that the Torah offers so many conflicting models of leadership. There is Moses and Aaron, a combination of ruler and priest where the ruler is chosen by God for his personal qualities. But then the Torah also talks about judges, as well as priests and elders and princes. Not to mention prophets. There are aristocratic genetic leaders and meritocratic, almost democratic leaders. Males dominated the aristocracy, the priesthood, and elected office, while women could find leadership roles as charismatic, meritocratic judges and prophets.

I believe the Torah intentionally left government flexible and not prescribed. There is no single perfect form of government. Different times call for different solutions and models. Whereas morality and spirituality may be eternal values, systems of human governance are not and must change. But more importantly, the Bible seems to be saying that whereas you should not imitate the nations around on matters of religion and morality, you may learn other things from them—such as different methods and models of administration and governance.

The fact is that we have always adapted. That has been our great strength. For example, science and schools from Greece. We have got a lot right over the years and lot wrong, too. Just like other nations!

So when I say the words every day in the Amidah prayer, "May the descendants of the house of David flourish, and may his power return," I do not thereby pray for the restoration of a monarchy. Instead I treat it as a nostalgic and poetic reference to a time where a ruler, however imperfectly, tried to combine political power with religious commitment and the aspiration to morality. But the actual mechanics of government will depend on the times and the changing ideas of how best to run our human affairs.

For me, that is what Chanukah means. We need human government as well as Divine. Former and present paradigms were and are inadequate and unsatisfactory. But we must go on experimenting and looking for an ideal. And that ideal should be a combination of the spiritual and the material, the like of which we have not yet seen. Some, no doubt, associate that with the Messiah!

And I have to add a postscript: That the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel one week before Chanukah is milestone in the life of

Israel, and I am delighted. Every country has the right to name its own capital, and President Trump declaring for Jerusalem only reinforces the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to declare their parts of the city the capitals of their states. This may not solve the peace process. It is not as if it was quiet, peaceful, and amicable beforehand—so I can't see how it can have harmed it. Only pride is at stake here. And I am proud that this year when we celebrate Chanukah, and we say in our prayers that God enabled us to stand up for ourselves against those who wanted to destroy us, that we can thank God for a similar miracle that has happened this year, in our lifetime.