

# Chanuka, My Way

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is the evergreen myth that Chanukah records the magnificent victory of Judah Maccabee over Antiochus Epiphanes of Greek Syria in 165 BCE. The truth is not so simple, and it is not without justification that the rabbis of the Talmud focused on the miracle of the oil. It is true that by the time of the compilation of the liturgy, the Al HaNissim prayer in the Amidah or the Grace After Meals, refers proudly to Matityahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons, and indeed says they overthrew the mighty, the arrogant, and the impure.

The facts are these. After Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE, his empire was divided up between his generals. The Jews of Israel fell under the changing authority of either the Ptolemies, based in Egypt, or the Seleucids of Syria. As a rule they all followed the Alexandrian policy of allowing subject nations religious independence so long as they towed the political line. The Jews were represented by their High Priest. The High Priesthood was a political as much as a religious position and whoever bribed more was likely to get it. Wealthy and aristocratic, most of the priesthood was pro-Greek and eager to imitate them. It was the priests who introduced the circus and theatres to Jerusalem and who spent their time cultivating Greek potentates, manners, and ideas.

The truth is that the Jews might well have assimilated altogether had it not been for Antiochus IV. He had been kept as hostage in Rome after his father had backed the wrong horse. You might say it was like being sent to a Spartan boarding school at a very young age, enough to disturb the sanest of men. He took the title Epiphanes, "the glorious", but his nickname was Epimanes, "the idiot". If only he'd have left the Jews alone to assimilate he'd have got his way in the end. But he insisted on trying to force the issue.

In 167, having looted the Temple, he ordered a statue of Zeus to be erected and banned the practice of Jewish Law. Hellenizers, like High Priest Jason, sided with the Greeks. Others, like Onias, came out in opposition. But it was Mattityahu, a country priest, and his five sons who started the rebellion by killing a Greek officer who was trying to enforce the king's orders. They fled to the hills and launched a guerrilla campaign against far superior forces. Matityahu died in 166 and it was left to his son Judah, who acquired the name Maccabee, "the hammer". (Reminds me of Edwards I of England who became known as the "Hammerer of the Scots". That was after he had expelled his Jews, of course.)

Judah's strategy enabled him to win a string of modest victories. At the battle of Nahal Haramiah he defeated a small Syrian force under the command of Apollonius, governor of Samaria, who was killed. After this first victory, recruits flocked to the Jewish cause. Then Judah ambushed a small force commanded by a local general, Seron, near Bet Choron. Then at Emmaus, Judah blocked the pass and forced the Seleucid forces, led by captains Nicanor and

Gorgias, to retreat to wait for reinforcements. Top General Lysias, was on his way to sort things out, but he was called back home immediately to support the king, leaving Gorgias to try and find Judah's guerrillas. While Gorgias was searching for him in the mountains, Judah made a surprise attack upon the Seleucid camp forcing the commander to withdraw to the coast.

Back he came, via a different route, and marched on Judeah from the south. Once again, Judah succeeded in blocking their advance at Beth Zur. This victory allowed Judah to enter Jerusalem, and he purified the Temple on the 25th of Kislev, 164 BCE. But there still remained a Syrian garrison in Jerusalem.

To his credit, it must be said that Judah then set about protecting Jews wherever they were attacked by the local Greeks, from Transjordan down to the Ashdod on the coast. But when he laid siege to the Syrian garrison in its fortress of Jerusalem, Lysias got serious. He came with a serious army, defeated Judah, and Beth-Zur was compelled to surrender. Lysias went on to Jerusalem. However, just as capitulation seemed imminent, he had to withdraw once again to Antioch because of political intrigue. So he decided to propose a peaceful settlement, which was concluded at the end of 163 BCE. Lysias restored religious freedom and officially ceded the Temple to the Jews. Sure it was an achievement for Judah, but it was hardly comprehensive victory.

Judah was now free to deal with his local Jewish enemies (things never change). He turned on the Hellenizing priests. They appealed to the Syrians to come back, but there was more chaos in Antioch. Antiochus was removed. The new king, Demetrius, sent reinforcements led by Bacchides to support his candidate for High Priest. He too had to withdraw because of politics at home, and a smaller force led by Nicanor was left behind. Judah managed to surround him, and Nicanor was killed (and Nicanor's Day became a national holiday).

But it was only a matter of time before the main army would return, so Judah made a treaty with Rome in 161. This in fact signed away independence to the Romans, which certainly did not endear him to later Jewish freedom fighters. Anyway, it failed to stop Demetrius. This time the Syrian forces of 20,000 men were numerically so superior that most of Judah's men fled, and Judah was killed at Elasa. His body was taken by his brothers from the battlefield and buried in the family tomb at Modi'in.

After several additional years of war under the leadership of two of Matitياهو's other sons (Yonathan and Shimon), the Jews achieved qualified independence when Shimon was accepted as the High Priest. But only his son, John Hyrcanus, finally acquired the title of king. All this was no mean achievement, but good fortune and trouble home in Syria played as much a part as fighting prowess. Little wonder then that the rabbis preferred God to Judah, given the deterioration in the Hasmonean dynasty with Herod and his family, and the increasing Roman interference. Besides, the main sources we have for the glorious Maccabee campaigns are the books of the Maccabees, that are not part of the Jewish Biblical canon, and Josephus, who was a dirty rotten traitor! It's clear whose side the rabbis were on. Judah doesn't even get one mention in the Talmud. There's a peace agenda for you!

Nowadays Chanukah owes almost as much of its flavor to others. It is from Xmas that we get the current custom of wasting needed money on presents. From Rome we get the custom of gambling, because that was what they used to do December time at Saturnalia. And who knows, maybe even our Chanuka parties come from celebrations of the Winter Solstice. Still, it is nice to have a "contender", as well as a High Priest, for an ancestor.

Everyone takes from the story what he wants to. Some take it as a story of the tough Judean underdogs winning the Cup against a bigger team. For others the Almighty ensures our flames don't go out if only we tend them properly. Some West Bank settlers believe the message is about never giving up and if you are lily livered liberal like me who thinks negotiation might be a better idea it reminds one that the main body of rabbis two thousand years ago thought the same way. So delight in the experience, the nostalgia and the spirit, and celebrate still being around despite everything.