

Who keeps the Chanukah flame alive?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What is Chanukah? Thus the Talmud asks, in its only reference to the story of Chanukah. And it answers:

“On the 25th of Kislev are the eight days of Chanukah. We do not mourn or fast then. Because the Greeks entered the Temple and desecrated all the oil there, and when the Hasmonean dynasty overcame them, they checked and only found one container of oil that still had the seal of the High Priest. It only had enough to last for one day and a miracle happened and it lasted for eight. The following year they fixed these days and kept them for praise and thanks.”

The Talmud goes on to mention the lights and the debate as to whether you start with one flame and add another daily till you reach the eight or whether you start with eight and reduce each day. And we accept Bet Hillel’s opinion that we rise instead of falling.

This Talmudic text is challenging. Why no mention of Judah? Was it because despite his heroics he did not in fact achieve official recognition of Israel as an independent state? Judah’s brother Jonathan was appointed High Priest by Syria. But it wasn’t until the youngest brother, Simon, in 142 BCE that the Jewish state finally achieved independence from the Syrian Greeks. But why then does it not focus on the theme of spiritual revival, the cultural war between the Greek way of life and the Jewish?

The majority of the priesthood at the time was in fact pro-Greek. High Priest Onias (yes, they had Greek names too) introduced the circus and the theater to Jerusalem. They hobnobbed with Greek aristocrats and thought their own people a bunch of primitive peasants. Had Antiochus not tried to force the Jews to abandon their religion, they would probably have assimilated over time on their own. Perhaps the Hasmonean rebellion was simply one over political power. Is that why the rabbis focused on the miracle exclusively, because they had doubts about motives? The miracle was that the light of the people did not go out altogether. This was what Chanukah really was to represent.

There are still conflicting narratives. The two books of the Maccabees were written initially in Hebrew as a record of the Maccabean triumphs and disasters. But they were excluded from the Jewish canon and preserved for a long time only because Catholics included the Greek version of the books in the Apocrypha. In them, Judah Maccabee is presented as the conquering hero. Hence the famous Handel Oratoria “Judas Maccabaeus” with its popular anthem, “See, the conquering hero comes”, which in our family we sang to the words of “Hanerot Halalu” as we lit the lights.

The priestly political party, the Sadducees, wanted to extol the Maccabees as heroes because they were priests, aristocrats, and pro-Roman. The party of the rabbis, the Pharisees, on the other hand was always critical of priestly hypocrisy and political machinations. As traditionalists, they couldn't deny the role of the priesthood in Jewish life, but they stressed the spiritual role rather than the political. Who was right? Perhaps both were right and wrong.

Judah made the political alliance with Rome that opened the way for them to take over the Jewish State. This is precisely why I believe the Talmud glosses over Judah's role in the revolt. The later anti-Roman rebellions brought passing victories and passing defeats. What survived was the culture, the religion, the moral message. All this was incorporated into the prayer "Al Hanissim" that entered our liturgy after the Talmud. Most scholars would agree that the survival of Judaism was in no small part because the rabbis incorporated civil aspects of Greek culture instead of refusing to adapt. Much as today we adopt technology while retaining our ancient rituals.

Objective analysis of the historical data shows how during the Chanukah era religion was used to promote self-interest as much as ideology. This has continued. Nowhere is this plainer nowadays than in sectors of our own modern-day zealots.

There is a court case going on in New York against a Satmarer Chasid who is accused of sexually abusing a teen girl sent to him for counseling. For years the Brooklyn District Attorney ignored abuse in the Chasidic community for fear of their power and votes. Finally he has acted. Naturally the sect has rallied round; some have attacked the victims and their families, and others as always claim it is anti-Semitism. A few months ago four Chasidim were convicted of trying to buy off the victims. Last week in court another four were charged with taking photographs with their smartphones of the accuser with intent to intimidate.

Despite the Rebbe's ban on such phones, the faithful succeeded in posting the photos on Twitter. The four charged were Joseph Fried, Yona Weisman, Abraham Zupnick and, wait for it, Lemon Juice! Yes, that's right—you can check it out on page A29 of the New York Times, November 30th. Not only do these outstanding examples of Chassidic manhood try bullying victims and ignoring the rules of the court, but one of them tried the old "Mickey Mouse" ruse in the hope of evading prosecution. What does this tell me? That it is fine in his eyes to have no respect for the court, no respect for the law of the land, and no fear of subverting "goyishe" justice. The sad fact is that for such a person usually there is no Yiddish justice either. If such people are keeping our flame alive, frankly I'd rather light a different one.

Was it the zealots, the messianists, the religious fanatics who kept us alive? Not a bit of it. They were all too busy arguing amongst themselves and trying to make a monkey out of each other's systems! "Lemon Juice" is typical of what is sick in our house. Chanukah reminds me that if we want to fight for our independence, if we want our values to survive, we had better set a moral example; otherwise we will go the way of all the other Jewish sects that disappeared off the face of the earth.