

Forced Conversions

As we come to the end of Chanukah, apart from the heroics, there is another side to the Hasmoneans I am not particularly proud of. To be specific, it is their propensity for forced circumcision and conversion.

In those days, two and a half thousand years ago, victorious armies, in addition to massacring defeated people, sometimes branded the losing army and the civilian population. The Persian king Xerxes did this to the Greek army of Leonidas after the Battle of Thermopylae (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.233.2). Ptolemy IV is accused of branding Jews with the ivy leaf sign of Dionysus (3 *Maccabees* 2:29).

But why did the Hasmoneans want to circumcise other people? Actually, in Egypt at that time only the elite were circumcised. It might even have seemed a compliment to offer it to ordinary people! And indeed, that is one reason given for its significance in Judaism being circumcised elevated everyone to priestly status (a nation of priests). Just as in many Christian societies, circumcision was a sign of royal status and much later as being beneficial to health. To this day it is an integral part of Islam (though not on the eighth day).

But forced conversion was something new then. Cyrus of Persia wasn't interested in conversion. Neither was Alexander Great. Conversion altogether was not an issue in Biblical times. One simply adopted the practices and rules of the society one chose to live in. Its compulsive element started when Antiochus IV set about trying to convert the Jews of Israel to Hellenism and Jews were forbidden to circumcise their children or be killed (*1Maccabees* 1:48). In response, the Hasmonean emphasis on circumcision was, initially, aimed only at Jews who had reversed their circumcisions to assimilate into Greek society.

The campaigns of Judah and Jonathan against other communities were to defend Jews who had been attacked by Greek and Ammonite rivals. It was John Hyrcanus, of the next generation who it was claimed initiated forced conversion on the Idumean enemy as an alternative to obliteration. His son Aristobulus I conquered the Galilee and Golan regions and forced the local Iturean population to circumcise and become Jews (*1 Maccabees* 13.11.3). Alexander Jannaeus continued the expansion of the Hasmonean realm and he too offered circumcision and conversion as an alternative to destruction (*1 Maccabees* 13.15.4)."

There are different versions of what happened. Ptolemy the Alexandrian historian wrote, "The Idumaeans, were not originally Jews, but having been subjugated by the Jews were forced to undergo circumcision, to be counted among the Jewish nation (*Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* 1:146)." The Greek Strabo on the other hand, said "The Idumæans are Nabatæans when driven from their own country voluntarily adopted Jewish customs (*Strabo Geography* 16.2.34)."

Josephus said that "Upon conquering the region, John Hyrcanus permitted the Idumeans of Dora and Marisa to remain in their cities on condition that they are circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life. The defeated population, "so desirous of living in the country of their forefathers," submitted to Hyrcanus' demands (Josephus Antiquities XIII.XX).

Why did Second Temple-era Jewish leaders coerce a foreign population to adopt Judaism? There was no Biblical precedent for coercion. Genesis (17:13) talking about the covenant of Abraham, only says that slaves purchased or born into the house of an Israelite should be circumcised. And the Biblical tale of the mass circumcision of the inhabitants of Shechem, by two of Jacob's sons, was to avenge the rape of Dinah and was condemned by Jacob. The Septuagint alone comments on those Persians who were described in the Book of Esther as *mityahadim*, as converting out of fear of the Jews (*Esther 8:17*).

Some historians argue that the stories of forced circumcision are not historical and reflected anti-Hasmonean propaganda that depicted the Jewish kings as religiously intolerant tyrants.

The Talmud is absolutely clear that conversion to Judaism should be voluntary and motivated by sincere conviction (*TB Yevamot 24b*). It questioned the Jewishness of those who converted out of fear (*TB Kidushin 75b*). The Talmud also says a rabbinical court can convert a reluctant adult (*TB Ketubot 11a*). Yet two thousand years ago most Jewish authorities welcomed converts who sometimes rose to the top of rabbinic authority. If in general conversion was discouraged later, it was only because both Christianity and Islam forbade Jews to convert or be put to death. Unlike other religions, Judaism was not evangelical and did not believe that only by becoming a Jew could you be a good human being through the one true path to God.

This issue of conversion remains a huge area of conflict in Judaism today between those who think that it should only be an act of sincere commitment to a Jewish way of life and those who believe it should be a way of retaining minimal Jewish identity even by those who have no interest in the Jewish religion. But certainly, no one believes in forced conversion and absolutely not in compelling circumcision.

Today converts often refer to themselves as "Jews by choice" which in a way is a higher level than "Jews by Birth." The spread of religion by the sword is a moral evil. It has victimized Jews too many times over the millennia, and it is a stain on religion's claims to improve mankind morally. And maybe this is why the Talmud distances itself from the military dynasty of the Hasmoneans as opposed to the miracle of spiritual and national survival.

Happy Chanukah