

Nicanor Day

It's the festival you might never have heard of, Nicanor Day, the 13th of Adar, the day before Purim. Two thousand years ago it was more widely celebrated than Purim. Yet it ended up being replaced by the Fast of Esther. How come we turned a happy day of celebration into a sad one?

Nicanor was a general in the army of the Seleucid monarchs. They were one of two dynasties of the successors of Alexander the Great in the Middle East. It was the Seleucid Antiochus 4th (215-164 BCE) who invaded Judea in 168 BCE and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. Possibly out of pique on his way home with his tail between his legs after having been whipped by Ptolemy of Egypt. The Judean revolt led by Judah Maccabee who waged a guerrilla campaign managed to defeat a series of small Syrian armies sent against him and regained the Temple. But still, the Syrians held on to the main fortresses.

Amongst the generals sent to quell the rebellion was one called Nicanor. There are three different sources for what we know about Nicanor. But in brief, he was at first defeated by Judah Maccabee at the battle of Emmaus in 166 BCE. Nicanor was recalled and was packed off to Cyprus. Antiochus was succeeded by Demetrius (reigned 161-150 BCE) and Nicanor was ordered back as governor of Judea. Nicanor proved to be an evil man who oppressed the Judeans, ravished their daughters, and sold large numbers into slavery. He provoked a new outbreak of violence. Nicanor is reported to have proclaimed that "If you do not hand over Judah to me as a prisoner, I will level this precinct of God to the ground and tear down the altar and build here a notable temple to Dionysus!" (2 Maccabees 14:33).

Once again Judah defeated Nicanor killing him at the battle of Adasa on the 13th of Adar in 161 BCE. And Judah proclaimed a great national celebration that was recorded as "The Day of Nicanor" as an annual festival the day before "The Day of Mordechai." The joy was short-lived. The main Syrian army was sent down and Judah was defeated and killed in the battle of Elasa in 160 BCE.

If Nicanor Day was fixed on the 13th of Adar as a celebration, what about the Fast of Esther which is also on Adar 13th? But there is no mention in the sources of a Fast of Esther at this moment in time although the events preceded Nicanor Day. Does this mean that it was a much later addition to the Jewish calendar, perhaps after the Destruction of the Temple to commemorate those who were killed or even later at the time of the Crusades? Or was it just suspended?

Perhaps since the Fast of Esther was referring to events that happened in Babylonia (Persia), Nicanor's day was seen as a festival specific to the Holy Land, and that took priority. The Jews of Babylonia and those of Judea, like Sephardim and Ashkenazim had different customs and this may be why the Megillah of Esther ends by saying that "most Jews accepted Esther's decrees to celebrate Purim."

During the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods, the Jewish calendar had many more holidays than it does now. These were listed in a text called *The Scroll of Fasts* a euphemism that ironically (or perhaps intentionally) recorded all the Happy Days. Sometime during the Rabbinic Period, this list was canceled, and many minor holidays were allowed to lapse.

But the Talmud records Nicanor Day as one on which one should not fast (*Taanit* 18b). Clearly, it was still being celebrated long after the Destruction. Yet sometime later, as Jews suffered in exile and under oppressive regimes, Nicanor Day lapsed. To add insult to injury, instead, the custom we have today developed to fast on the day before Purim (*Ta'anit Esther*). To complicate matters further the Talmud also mentions Nicanor's Gate in the Temple which seems to have nothing to do with a nasty Syrian general but was probably donated by a High Priest with a Greek name.

Purim records the threat of genocide in exile. Chanukah is about the escape from persecution in Israel. In both of these holidays, the Jews were coming from a position of weakness. When Nicanor threatened the Temple, however, Judah Maccabee had an army and had defeated the Syrian Greeks in battle only a few years earlier. Nicanor Day celebrated a time when the Jews stood their ground as they continued to do against other invaders and persecutors. Perhaps Nicanor Day disappeared because we did not want to be reminded of those false hopes that were dashed for nearly two thousand years.

So many customs have been lost or discontinued and others added during times of persecution. On the other hand, we have triumphed in many ways culminating in our powerful position today with a State of our own. Is there a case to resurrect *Nicanor Day*? Why not another happy day on our Calendar? Frankly, I cannot see any major religious authority agreeing to remove the Fast of Esther. But more than that, fasting linked to celebrating reminds us of the need to balance the happy and the sad. For all our triumphs and achievements, we are seeing an incremental rise in Jew hatred all over the world. Which is a good enough reason to balance the joy of Purim with the introspection of the Fast of Esther.

So, my theory, and it is only a shot in the dark, is that Nicanor Day, which was a festival only relevant to the struggle against the Seleucids in the Land of Israel, was merged with Purim because it shares the idea of defeating our enemies both at home and abroad. The Fast of Esther was substituted by the rabbis to emphasize that we should not rejoice when our enemies are overcome (Proverbs 24:17) even if we have an obligation to try to defeat them.

A Sad PostScript

This leads me to add my voice to all those who have condemned the murderous retaliation against a whole town for the killing of two young Israeli men. Whatever the crime, extra-judicial retaliation, and the assault on those who were not involved is a moral crime and a desecration of Jewish values. I am utterly ashamed to be associated with such barbarity. It cannot be justified even by the crimes of the other side. We must not sink to the lowest level of humanity but try and get others to rise above it. The failings of the rest of

the so-called civilized world are no justification. We were not taken out of Egypt to be like the Canaanites.

Furthermore, bringing back the death penalty (which most civilized countries except the USA have stopped) will only lower Israel further in the eyes of the so-called civilized world.

Let us celebrate Purim this week knowing that even then, we only attacked those individuals who actually attacked us first.