

The Maccabees
166 B.C.
The Agrarian Wars

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Jews fight a war against tremendous odds and save themselves from pagans.

This age, called the Maccabean Era was as significant for the Jews as the Era of the American Revolution was for America. These are the events that led to our celebration of Chanukah and the miracle of the light that burned for eight days when the temple in Jerusalem was cleansed of paganism and rededicated to God.

It has always bothered me that we don't go deeper into the actual struggle of a few against many. What do we know about those heroic glorious brothers, the Maccabees, who fought for survival?

Our religion frowns on war and teaches us not to glorify war. It makes sense up to a point. History does show that great powerful nations, who glorified war and lived to conquer and subdue their neighbors, have finally destroyed themselves as well, and disappeared. "If you live by the sword, you die by the sword." Our sages tell us that our survival depends on our common belief and our commitment to a merciful God, that we stress our belief in the brotherhood of man and live by the Ten Commandments. The true essence of our Torah, as Rabbi Hillel taught is, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This, and not war, has sustained us as a people through these thousands of years of persecution. However, a distinction has to be made. When we raise the sword for defense, it is altogether different than raising the sword for aggression. Time has changed our thinking. We now look at those heroic men, women, and even children, the "freedom fighters" of the Warsaw Ghetto, as heroes who fought back and went down fighting those beasts who were trying to destroy all Jews. They will forever live in our hearts. We look with great pride at the young men and women of the Israeli army and there are tears in our eyes for

those that fell in four wars. They died for all Jews and Judaism. They are the present day “Maccabees”.

It is the Maccabees who I want to talk about. In my opinion, their struggle against such overwhelming odds and their victories are the true miracle ... More than the burning of a little bit of oil for eight days.

Let me back up a little.

In the year 334 BCE, a young King of Macedonia, a part of Northern Greece, known as “Alexander the Great,” succeeded in conquering the whole of the Middle East, including Egypt, and of course, Judea. Suddenly, the Jews realized that they were surrounded by a new world and many of them were tremendously impressed with Greek Culture and the Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

Alexander showed special favor to the Jews and granted them self-government. He respected their religion and didn’t compel young men to join their army where they would have to violate the Sabbath and dietary laws. No sooner had Alexander died (he was only 33), that his generals began to quarrel amongst themselves over control of the lands he had conquered.

One hundred and fifty years later, a Greek by the name of Antiochus, sat on the throne of Syria. He wanted very much to conquer Egypt, but Judea was in his way. He gave himself the surname Epiphanes, which means “visible God” signifying that he and Jupiter were identical. He acted as if that was really the case, with the result that the people began to call him “Epimanes, The Madman”.

His plan was to Hellenize the Jews, that is to make Greeks out of them. Orders were given prohibiting the observance of the Sabbath and circumcision. A statue of Jupiter, resembling Antiochus, was dragged into the Jewish Holy Temple, and as sacrifices, the animal most detested by Jews, the pig, was slaughtered at the Holy Altar. It left the Jews desolate. Judaism was declared illegal. Thousands of men, women and children let themselves be slaughtered rather than violate Judaism. In Hebrew, it is known as “kiddush hashem”.

Worse even than the Greeks were the Jews who had gone over to the Hellenizers. These were wealthy and aristocratic Jews who accepted the Greek customs and dress and changed their name to Greek names. They sent their children to Greek universities where

they took part in Greek games in the nude and even had operations performed to sew on new foreskins to hide their circumcisions.

These were the Jews that pointed out the Chassidic Jews and had them murdered by the hundreds. Also, they served in the Syrian-Greek army against the “Maccabees”.

These then were the conditions that led to the great revolt. Fortunately, for the future of Judaism, the hour of greatest need brought forth the necessary leadership.

About a day’s walk north from Jerusalem was a little town called Modin. These were poor, peaceful farmers, but staunch Jews. There lived a family of respected Kohanim by the name of Hasmonai or Hasmoneans. The head of the family was the priestly leader of the town called Mattathias who had five sons, Simon, Eliezer, Judah, Jonanan and Jonathan.

The day came when the Greek and Syrian soldiers entered their synagogue and dragged in a pig and told Mattathias, (in fact ordered him) to sacrifice the pig to Jupiter in honor of Antiochus.

Mattathias did not move. From out of the crowd stepped a fancy dressed Hellenized Jew and asked permission of the captain to perform the sacrifice. The Jews knew full well what would happen next. They would be asked to eat the meat and those that refused would be killed.

Suddenly, the whole scene changed.

Old Mattathias snatched the sword from the captain’s hand and ran it through the body of the traitor. At the same time, he also killed the captain. The five sons moved forward to aid their father and attacked and disarmed the soldiers. The other Jews ran to the aid of the Hasmoneans and in no time the soldiers were killed and the altar demolished.

The war was on!

The people of Modin were compelled to leave their homes because they knew that a larger force from Syria would be coming to avenge the death of the first group. They took to the hills. The five sons went secretly to all the villages to recruit men willing to fight. They made up groups of 100, with one captain in charge of each group. They had very little armaments to stand up against the Syrian-Greek army. The call of old

Mattathias, “whoever is for God let him come on to me” echoed across the Judean hills and they answered by the hundreds. It was a fight for survival.

The strain of living in the hills was too much for old Mattathias. Before the year was up, he died.

The leadership fell on Judah. Judah acquired the surname of “Maccabee”. Some think it is derived from “Makkebet,” Hebrew for “The Hammer”. Theory holds that Judah was the “Hammer” with which God smote the Syrians and the Hellenized Jews.

For a while, they only dared attack small groups of soldiers. As they gained confidence and more arms, they won more volunteers and, with each and every victory, more courage.

Syria was sending larger and larger legions after each defeat. Antiochus realized he had a full-scale rebellion to deal with. He had a real “Vietnam” on his hands. His treasury was depleting to the point of bankruptcy.

The Maccabees never gave these legions a moment’s peace. They kept up a constant rain of arrows from hills overlooking the roads that compelled the Syrians to march with their shields over their heads and still the arrows found their mark and soldiers were constantly dropping in their tracks. They never gave them a peaceful night. They raided them in the dead of night, slaughtered them and that way acquired an enormous amount of arms.

They did one more thing. In the name of defense, a special dispensation was made for the first time in Jewish history. They would now fight on the Sabbath.

Fortunately, for the Jews, at this time, the Parthians in the north rebelled against Antiochus and he hurried off with the bulk of his army to crush that rebellion. He left a general by the name of Lysias in charge, who also underestimated the strength of the Maccabees and lost the next battle of Emmaus, which now opened the road to Jerusalem.

Now the Hellenized Jews and the pagans had to flee Jerusalem, just as the pious Jews did three years before.

Arriving in Jerusalem the Maccabean soldiers, simple peasants, who for the love of freedom turned soldiers, now dropped their swords and began to clean the Temple of every sign of paganism. They ground the statues of Antiochus into dust and rededicated

the Temple to the worship of God. This was the 25th of Kislev, 165 BCE and they rejoiced for eight days. This was the feast of Chanukah.

This was the miracle of the oil we always hear about, but it was not the only miracle. It was equally miraculous that the strong were conquered by the weak and strengthened the hearts and the hands from that time forward of every small group who struggled against oppression and injustice.

This is not the end of the story.

The neighboring people, who gladly helped the Syrians with soldiers and money started to attack Jews living in their countries and cities. The Pagans of Jaffa drowned 200 Jews. Other cities committed similar atrocities. Everywhere Jews, outside of Judea, lived in constant fear and danger.

Judah sent punitive expeditions to punish those cities that mistreated their Jewish inhabitants. Most of them made terms with the Maccabees and promised to better behave. Judah had no intentions of annexing territory to Judea.

Soon, news reached the Jews that a new Syrian army, under the leadership of Lysias, was coming to destroy them.

Judah went forward to meet his superior, well-trained army. The battle was not far from Jerusalem. The Maccabees fought heroically. This time they faced a new menace. Elephants! This was like foot soldiers being attacked by armored tanks. They watched with heavy hearts and terrible odds against them. Eliezer, one of Judah's brothers, hacked his way through the ranks getting himself underneath one of the elephants. He sank his sword into the beast's belly. The elephant fell and crushed Eliezer. (The last time I was in Israel, I stood on the very same hill where Eliezer fell. A shrine commemorates that episode.)

By the end of the day, the Maccabees had to retreat to Jerusalem and be protected by the walls of the city.

No sooner had Lysias lay siege to the city when the word reached him that a large army was attacking Antioch, the capital of Syria. Anxious to hurry north, he made the Jews an offender of peace. He promised the withdrawal of all the laws against the observance of Judaism and that Judah and his officers in the rebellion would not be punished. On the other hand, the walls around Jerusalem must come down. The Jewish

council believed him and they were ready to lay down their arms. All were tired of the sacrifices that they had been making for five years. Now, they thought they would have what they fought for, religious freedom.

Judah did not believe the Syrians. He lost his debate with the council and left the city along with some of his followers.

It took no time at all to prove that Judah had been right. The Syrians led by Lysias began rounding up the Jewish council putting them to death.

Many of Judah's former followers came to him to ask for his help because a large Syrian army was on the way. Judah was again victorious.

This was his last victory.

The more moderate Chassidim were willing to compromise politically as long as religious freedom was granted.

Judah was again left with a small poorly supported group. He was himself deserted, his cause abandoned by those for whom he fought.

With only 800 men, Judah went to meet another army of Syria. He preferred to die in battle. His death ended the Maccabean struggle. His brothers Simon, Jonathan, Johanan and a few hundred men fled across the Jordan River. That was when Johanan was killed.

For several years, the remnants of the Maccabean army took refuge in the hills and wild places across the Jordan River. They became the terror of the Hellenized Jews of Judea and their Syrian allies. Efforts to destroy the Hasmonean band failed.

The general population looked upon Jonathan as the real, but unofficial head of the Jewish people.

In a few years when the political climate became more favorable, Jonathan returned to Judea and became High Priest and Governor. He made his brother, Simon, Governor of the Philistine Coast and they practically became annexed to the Jewish territory.

This act resulted in the commercial development and prosperity of the Jews.

Judah had been an idealist and a hero. Jonathan was a diplomat and political statesman.

One act of diplomacy on the part of Jonathan that was supposed to benefit Judea actually brought a great deal of harm to the Jews about 100 years later. It seemed like an excellent idea for the Hasmoneans to enter into an alliance with Rome since Rome was also hostile to Syria. The Hasmoneans thought that to be called Rome's friend might make the Syrian kings think twice before attempting to destroy them. They could not foresee that in time, they would have to fear more from Rome than from Syria.

It was not long before Jonathan was assassinated by a Syrian general. The people naturally turned to Simon, the last of Mattathias' sons for leadership, but he was too old. He left the fighting to his son, Johanan Hyrcan (his Greek name).

Judah's efforts had won religious freedom. Jonathan's efforts gained power for the Hasmonean family and independence for Judea. Hyrcan's reign began the policy of territorial expansion and promoted the development of Jewish commerce. Once started on the road to conquest, he couldn't stop. To the south was the land of Idumea. Hyrcan persuaded the Idumeans to adopt Judaism, even if he had to put them to the sword. This was really tragic. Here was the grandson of Mattathias violating the very principle of religious freedom that the previous generation had so notably defended. So, the old conflict within the Jewish people was revived. Which was more important, religious welfare or national strength?

Hyrcan's reign saw the beginning of two political parties; the Pharisees who opposed the expansion and the Sadducees, who had a lot to gain from the growth.

The fact that the Idumeans became staunch Jews was more to the credit of the Jewish religion than to Hyrcan.

That is just the beginning of an era of strife and bloodshed amongst the Jewish people. The memory of these Jewish heroes and their peerless leader, the "Maccabee" himself, has become an inspiration to both Jews and non-Jews alike, who had to fight overwhelming odds when their physical survival was threatened.

So, let's light the Chanukah lamps and let us also remember those beloved glorious brothers, the "Maccabees".

The lights are a symbolic miracle. The Maccabees' struggle was the true and realistic miracle. But for them, it would have to be the end of Judaism.

The End.

My information, for the most part, comes from Solomon Grayzel's book, *The History of the Jews*.

You should read a book entitled *My Glorious Brothers* by Howard Fast. It is in the library. I guarantee you will be inspired.