

# Hannukah: How the Collision with Hellenism Changed the Jewish Religion and Culture

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## 1. Introduction

Shabbat Shalom!

In response to recent events, I would like to begin by quoting part of Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, and we wept when we remembered Zion.

On willows in its midst we hung our harps.

For there our captors asked us for words of song and our tormentors [asked of us] mirth, [saying] "Sing for us a song of [your] Zion."

"How shall we sing the song of the Lord on foreign soil?"

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill].

May my tongue cling to my palate, if I do not remember you, if I do not mention Jerusalem at the beginning of my joy.

I suspect that there was a conspiracy to prevent me from giving this sermon. Whenever I sat down to write, a neighbor started operating a jackhammer. But, like the Maccabees, who stuffed wax into their ears to shut out the trumpeting of the elephants, I used earplugs, and—well, you will judge the result!

My goal tonight is to shed some light on the Holiday of Lights. More concretely, I want to challenge the traditional understanding of Hannukah and to suggest a different and more complex interpretation of what this holiday is about. This will require telling the story more completely than is usually done. I want to start with the historical and cultural context, discuss events leading up to the Maccabean uprising, and explore the long-term impact of Hellenism on the Jewish religion and culture.

I also have a subsidiary goal, and that is to keep all of you awake! To this end, I will be doing some polling. In fact, I'd like to do some polling right now!

Q1: Raise your hand if you think that King Ahasuerus of Persia had something to do with the story of Hannukah. Raise your hand if you think that he did not. How many have no idea? [Pause. If children raise their hands, comment on how the Religious School is doing.] Those of you who said "no" were right.

Q2: Raise your hand if you think that the Romans had something to do with the story of Hannukah. Raise your hand if you think that they did not. Well, we shall see that they did.

In what follows, I'm going to draw shamelessly on historical material from the lectures of Prof. Isaiah Gafni of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, as well as from the two-volume set "The Rise and Fall of the Judean State" by Solomon Zeitlin.

Primary sources describing the Maccabean Uprising and related events include texts by Greek authors and texts by Jewish authors. The most important Jewish sources from the period are the history written by Josephus Flavius, and the books Maccabees I and II. It is curious that Maccabees I and II are part of the Christian canon—the collection of works that they hold sacred—but not part of our Tanach, although Hannukah is our holiday and not theirs.

There is one problem with all of these sources, both ancient and modern: They are rather dry. In fact, there's no humor at all. This *is* a serious subject, but that doesn't mean that we can't have a bit of fun with it.

## 2. The Traditional Hannukah Narrative and the Traditional Understanding of that Narrative

All of you are familiar with the traditional Hannukah narrative. The short version runs something like this:

"There was a maniacal king by the name of AntiOchus or AnTiochus—no one is sure which pronunciation is right. He was either Greek or Syrian—no one is sure which. Antiochus tried to suppress the practice of the Jewish religion, and also introduced idolatrous rites into the Beit Hamikdash—our Holy Temple. A brave band of zealots—the Maccabees—led a rebellion against Antiochus, threw off the rule of the Greeks or Syrians, reconsecrated the Beit Hamikdash, and inaugurated the second Jewish Commonwealth, all in a very short period of time."

Oops. I almost forgot: "A small cruse of oil that should have lasted for only one night amazingly lasted for eight."

Important parts of this narrative are true, but not *all* of it is the truth. (And, I'm not referring to the supposed miracle here). More importantly, this narrative does not tell the *whole* truth. More on that shortly.

Let's turn for a moment to the traditional understanding of what Hannukah is all about. Hannukah is often compared with Purim, a holiday that celebrates an instance in which Jews survived the threat of *physical* destruction. Hannukah, on the other hand, celebrates our victory over a king

who tried to forcibly assimilate the Jews, depriving us of our religion, values, and way of life—the threat of *spiritual* destruction. In each case, the events in question involved a minor disruption of routine, minor loss of life, and the addition of a minor holiday to the Jewish calendar. In both cases, aside from the new holiday, Judaism remained essentially intact.

I believe that this understanding of Purim is fundamentally correct, but that the corresponding understanding of Hannukah is totally wrong. We'll see if I can convince you that Judaism was transformed by the encounter between Jews and the Hellenistic world.

Oops! I used that word "Hellenism" again, but still haven't said what it means. Hold on.

### 3. Setting the Political Stage

Before proceeding, let's review some major historical events and set the political stage. In 334 BCE, Alexander III, better known to us as Alexander the Great, is the young king of Macedonia, a region to the north of Greece populated by a mix of Greeks and non-Greeks. Macedonia is a bit of a rough place, and other Greeks have a hard time understanding their dialect. In 334, Alexander begins a 10-year series of military campaigns, destroying the Persian empire and establishing an enormous but short-lived empire that stretches from the Adriatic Sea to the Indus River in modern-day Pakistan.

In 323 BCE, Alexander dies suddenly from some unknown infectious disease, and his generals immediately begin carving up the empire into fiefdoms. Ptolemy becomes king of Egypt. Seleucus takes Babylonia, which includes Syria, establishes the Seleucid Empire, and later grabs much of Alexander's near eastern territories, including Persia and Afghanistan.

Because Syria is an important part of the Seleucid Empire, the Seleucids are often referred to as Syrians. Because of the influence of Greek culture on the top echelon of society, both the Egyptians and the Seleucids are sometimes referred to as Greeks. I hope that this isn't too confusing.

In the late third century, there are three powers in the eastern Mediterranean and vicinity. Rome, which is still a republic—not yet an empire—is the power in the west. Egypt and the Seleucid Empire, which are the major powers in the east, have been fighting with each other for over 100 years, with sometimes one side winning, and sometimes the other.

Judea is right in the middle between Egypt and Syria. For over 100 years, Judea has been controlled by the Ptolemy of Egypt, and although you might be surprised to hear this, things have been quite good for the Jews living under Egyptian rule. But, in 201 BCE, the Seleucid King Antiochus III, also known as Antiochus the Great, drives the Egyptians out of Judea and takes control.

An important train of events begins in 190 BCE when Antiochus III suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Romans in Anatolia—modern-day Turkey. (See—I told you that the Romans were going to come into this story. We will be hearing from them again). Terms of the treaty require the Seleucids to not only give up territory, but to also pay a huge indemnity to the Romans. The Seleucids are now deeply mired in debt, and will spend decades trying to pay it off.

## 4. Hellenism

I promised to explain the term "Hellenism". "Hellas" is the Greek word for "Greece", but Hellenism is *not* the culture of 5th Century BCE Classical Greece. Rather, it is the amalgam of Greek and Middle-eastern culture that emerged after the death of Alexander the Great. In both Egypt and Syria, there's an elite that speaks Greek and has absorbed elements of Greek culture, but the bulk of the population is only weakly affected by these changes.

Religion in this period is a confusing business. The Greek god Zeus is thought to be the same as the Babylonian god Marduk. The mid-Eastern goddess Astarte or Ishtar is a bit like Aphrodite—the Greek goddess of love—and Mars—the Greek god of war—rolled into one. Deciding which gods to make offerings to is much more complex than ordering from a Chinese menu, because your choices depend on what you *need* from each god or goddess *and* how much you can afford to spend. Each god or goddess offers certain kinds of protection or helps with certain kinds of problems. But, it's going to cost you! Whether you want to make love or war, it's a good idea to have Astarte on your side. She can help women with fertility problems and can also help with a certain male fertility problem. Some minor gods are tied to a locality and have no power elsewhere. Some minor spirits can protect one specific house—yours—so that the roof doesn't collapse. Then there are the new-fangled mystery religions. Oy Vey! What a mess!

On the positive side, the polytheists tend to get along quite well with one another. There are absolutely no holy wars and no religious persecutions<sup>1</sup>—at least not yet. Paraphrasing Prof. Gafni, if you can get along with so many gods, one more god can't make much difference.

But, there is a G-d who's *quite* different. Those crazy Hebrews worship a G-d who is everywhere and nowhere. He's also rather jealous. If you enter into the covenant with Him, you can't make side deals with other gods. Not even one! Who in their right mind would put all of their eggs into that one basket?

Health and fitness are an important part of the Greek culture, and it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the Greeks worship the ideal of the human body—especially that of the perfect male body. We know this from Greek literature and art, and from the importance of the gymnasium and athletic competition in Greek society. At the gymnasium, men exercise and compete in the nude. From Greek art, including a number of pieces in the Getty collection, we know that the prepuce or foreskin of the penis is considered an important element of male beauty,

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<sup>1</sup> My nephew Aaron O. Feldman cited the persecution of the Zoroastrians by Alexander the Great (see <http://www.livius.org/sources/content/oriental-varia/religious-persecution-under-alexander-the-great>) as a possible counter-example.

and that no Greek man would be caught dead in public without it. A man who lacks a foreskin is viewed as mutilated, ugly, and possibly also debauched.<sup>2</sup>

The glorification of war, combat, and martial prowess are also important elements of Hellenistic society, but this was common of most societies existing at the time.

On the positive side, Hellenistic Greeks make important contributions in philosophy, the arts, and mathematics. One of the core ideas of Hellenism is that there is a brotherhood of mankind, and that race and ethnicity should be unimportant. These are things that we can admire.

A significant segment of the Jewish elites in both Egypt and Syria (Syria now includes Judea) find Hellenism extremely attractive and become assimilated to varying degrees. Many Jews give their children Greek names. Alexander and Phillip (my given name) are particularly popular names for boys. If one wants to rise in society, one must speak Greek fluently, and dressing like a Greek and adopting other Greek customs also helps. For most Syrian Jews, Greek becomes their primary language, and they no longer speak Hebrew. Most Jewish literature is now written in Greek. (Tellingly, the first book of Maccabees is written in Hebrew, but the second is written in Greek). As Maccabees I recounts, some Jews go further, marrying non-Jewish spouses, not circumcising their male children, sending their sons to the gymnasium, and even in a few cases having surgical procedures to undo circumcision. Some try to combine Judaism with pagan worship, or abandon Judaism entirely.

Although there is considerable social pressure on Jews in Syria to assimilate, we should keep in mind that this assimilation happens voluntarily, and not by any government edict or by threats. So far, there is no Seleucid government “program” to turn the Jews into Greeks.

## 5. The Uprising and the Founding of the Hashmonean Dynasty

In 187 BCE, Seleucus IV, the eldest son of Antiochus III, ascends to the throne. He’s desperate to raise cash to pay off the indemnity, and Jewish advisors have described the many wonderful treasures in the Jewish Temple. Seleucus has what seems like a brilliant idea: Why not sack the Temple? He sends an officer to do just this, but the Temple is well protected and the attempt fails. This is the beginning of the downward spiral in relations with the segment of the Jewish population that has remained true to the faith; I’ll refer to this party as the “traditionalists”.

In 175 BCE, Antiochus IV, who is the younger brother of Seleucus IV, ascends to the throne. Antiochus IV styles himself “D’ho Epiphanes” [pronounce like “Deo Epiphanes”], meaning “The Revealed God”, and the title tells us a lot about this man. He has an unbelievably large ego and huge ambition to boot. At times Antiochus behaves very oddly, appearing in the public bath houses or applying for offices in municipal government, but he is more sane than this behavior suggests.

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<sup>2</sup> See Frederick M. Hodges, “The Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme”, *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Volume 75, pp. 375-405, Fall 2001. I’d like to thank Prof. Bard C. Cosman of the University of California at San Diego for directing my attention to this article.

Antiochus doubts the loyalty of the Jewish High Priest Onias. After all, Onias helped to prevent the sack of the Temple, which is very suspicious. The pro-Greek Jewish party doesn't like Onias either, because he's rather old-fashioned and refuses to change with the times. The net result of all this is that Onias is replaced by his brother Jason, who inaugurates sweeping changes in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is renamed "Antioch" in honor of the king, and is made over into a Greek-style city, complete with a gymnasium and an ephedrium, where young Jewish men are trained for combat. (This might have been a mistake). You can read Maccabees II for more details.

But, these changes are not enough for Antiochus, and not enough for the pro-Greek Jewish party. In 172, Antiochus deposes Jason as High Priest and replaces him with Menelaus, an even more radical reformer. This creates a dangerous, explosive environment.

The key lesson here is that, as has so often happened in our history, we Jews are deeply divided amongst ourselves. Many Jews are strongly in favor of the changes instituted by the new High Priests, and many are strongly opposed. I believe that this is an important element that has been edited out of the traditional rendering of the Hannukah story for propagandistic reasons. It simply does not make us look good.

Back to the story: Antiochus dreams of expanding his empire, but he has learned the lesson of his father's defeat at Magnesia, and is afraid to challenge Rome. Egypt, on the other hand, looks very tempting. Antiochus begins a new round of military campaigns against Egypt, and things go splendidly until he arrives at the gates of the city of Alexandria. At this point, a Roman consul by the name of Gaius Papilius Linus appears and tells Antiochus, "You have no business here. Go home." Antiochus responds, "I'll think about it." Linus takes his staff of authority, draws a circle around Antiochus, and says, "You'll think about it here." Antiochus is furious, but he will not risk a confrontation with Rome and orders his forces to retreat.

Why does Rome interfere? A united east would be a threat to Rome. And, the Romans must already be thinking about how and when they will make their own move into the region.

In the meantime, all sorts of rumors are flying back in Judea, including one that Antiochus is dead. Some Jews are delighted and begin celebrating, while others begin to riot. As the humiliated king returns to Judea, he receives reports on the situation and goes ballistic. A Greek garrison is installed in a fortress in Jerusalem, pagan rites are introduced into the Jewish Temple, and a wide range of Jewish practices are forbidden.

Maccabees II and the Talmud both tell the story of an unnamed Jewish woman whose seven sons are martyred as each in turn is ordered to publicly break one of the Jewish commandments and is executed when he refuses.

All of us know that Judah Maccabee and his brothers led an uprising. The Jews lay siege to the Greek garrison in Jerusalem for three years. Several attempts are made to break the siege, but all of these are repelled, and the garrison finally surrenders and the Temple is rededicated. After many years, the Jews become fully independent from the Seleucids, establishing what would become known as the Hashmonean dynasty.

This was the first war for religious freedom in the history of humanity.

There's a wry coda to the Hannukah story. The Jews enter into a treaty with Rome. The Romans promise not to provide men, weapons, or ships to the enemies of the Jews, and the Jews make a similar promise to Rome. (This was an easy promise to make, especially since the Jews didn't have any ships). To quote Prof. Gafni, "We can imagine the Roman senate breathing a huge collective sigh of relief when this treaty was signed: 'The Jews are on our side now, so we have nothing to fear.'" Unfortunately, the Jews have much to fear from Rome, but they have not yet figured this out.

## 6. The Long-Term Impact of Hellenism on Judaism

I want to close by discussing the long-term impact of Hellenism on our culture and religion. Aside from the Holiday of Hannukah, how did the contact with Hellenistic civilization affect our religion, culture, and way of thinking about things?

I mentioned that many Jews have Greek names, but this is rather superficial.

The Greek language has also left its mark. Surprisingly, there are over 1,000 Greek words appearing in the Talmud. Rabbis used these terms because they felt that there were no suitable equivalents in Biblical Hebrew.

Our Passover service is essentially a Greek-style symposium, with a couple of minor modifications: We are limited to four cups of wine, and women of the night are not customarily invited.

Although some Chabad rabbis will argue that we Jews invented philosophy on our own and were never influenced by Greek philosophy, the evidence is fairly clear that this is not so. Western Philosophy begins about 600 BCE with Thales and Anaxamander, Greeks living in the city of Miletus. Their writings are not particularly interesting, but we can see these buds gradually develop, until they reach full flowering almost 300 years later with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. (I would have liked to omit Plato from that list, but my daughter would have been unhappy if I did that).

What is the evidence that we Jews absorbed philosophy from the Greeks? Greek-style philosophical argument and debate appear throughout the Talmud, the earliest parts of which were written after over 100 years of Hellenistic influence. There is absolutely no argument and debate of this type in earlier Jewish works. So, in Greek thought, we see a gradual progression of ideas, while in Jewish thinking, there's nothing at all for a long time and then **bang**—we have fully-grown philosophical thought. This reminds me of the Greek myth that the goddess Aphrodite was born fully-grown (and rather attractive, if the painting by Botticelli is to be believed).

Philosophy is not all to the good. Jews begin arguing more than ever, and a three-way split develops between Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes (the Essenes are also known as the Dead Sea Sect, and we know about them from the Dead Sea Scrolls). Some of the early Jewish philosophical speculations are downright unhealthy. The Book of Jubilees proposes that human history follows a regular pattern and that everything of importance can be predicted in advance. The Book of Enoch teaches that evil is the result of wicked angels who fell to earth and united with human women, leaving their offspring hidden among us. Some of them might be right here in this room! Fortunately, these books did not become part of the Jewish canon.

Some specific traditional Jewish beliefs are of Greek origin. In particular, the idea of a division between body and soul—*goof* and *nephesh*—comes from Aristotle. In the Middle Ages, Maimonides read Aristotle, was deeply impressed, and even incorporated some of Aristotle's teachings into his Thirteen Principles of Faith.

In balance, Jews and Judaism adopted some of the best elements of Hellenistic culture. In particular, we adopted philosophy and the use of reason and rational inquiry as tools for understanding the world and for developing our system of law, the Halachah. But, we have also been profoundly shaped by what we *rejected* from Hellenism. Here, I'm thinking mainly of polytheism, the worship of the human body, and the glorification of war.

May we always have the wisdom and strength of character to emulate the best in the society and people around us, and to reject the rest. And let us say, "Amen".