

## Don't Let the Light Go Out

Readings: 'The Shamash is the Tall One' by Lori Rottenberg  
'Chanukkah' by Lynn Unger

There is a joke in Judaism that all Jewish holidays revolve around the same idea: "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat."

While this is not entirely true, it is the story of many Jewish holidays. While, Yom Kippur is a day of atonement marked by not eating. Sukkot and Rosh Hashanah have special food but no particular story of survival, there are also a many holidays that follow the pattern "they tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat." Late every winter, Jews celebrate Purim by retelling the story of the successful effort to thwart the plan of a Persian prime minister to kill all the Jews in the Empire and eating special cookies and drinking a lot. In the spring, Passover is a time to remember the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt with a celebratory meal and a week with a limited diet.

And there's Hanukah, an eight-day minor Jewish holiday that begins tonight. It follows the pattern of "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat." Let us remember that day today.

First, they tried to kill us – who is the they? Who is the us? What happened?

To tell the story, we need to step into a metaphorical time machine and jump to the land that we now call Israel, a few thousand years ago. Or, at the very least, have a history lesson. In the fourth century before the common era, Alexander the Great and his armies formed an empire that stretched from the lands we now know as Greece and Egypt in the west to India and Uzbekistan in the east. When Alexander the Great died in 323 before the common era, that empire broke apart, with a few of his Greek generals becoming rulers of small portions of the former Empire, creating mini dynasties. There was an empire based in Egypt and one based in Syria. The land we know as Israel was home to Jews and other people. It was a borderland, first ruled by the rulers in Egypt, but later the rulers based in Syria, known as the Seleucids.

As far as ancient empires go, you could do much worse than being ruled by the Seleucids. They let the people they ruled continue to live in their ancestral home, practice their traditional faiths, and speak their native languages. The Jews in the area around Jerusalem were even led by their own high priest, a traditional leader who had inherited the role. Judging by the very low standards of ancient Empires, the Seleucids were not terribly oppressive. The peoples they ruled had some degree of freedom.

The Seleucids did promote their Greek culture above all others. If you wanted to advance in society and work in the ancient equivalent of the civil service, you needed to know Greek. You needed to be well versed in Greek culture and be able to recite portions of Greek texts like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. People of all ancestries educated into Greek culture had higher social status than those without this education.

And that presented a problem for Jews with means in the Seleucid Empire. How do they educate their sons? Do they teach them the ancient Jewish ways, their stories and language and culture – or do they send them to a Greek school to learn the Greek ways that will distance them from their family but allow them to advance in the hierarchy of the Empire?

Of course, different families made different choices and judged one another for them, in an ancient version of the mommy wars. This continued for a generation, with some Jews becoming assimilated and others holding onto their traditional ways. Then, the Seleucids fell on hard times. After losing battles to Rome, the Seleucids needed to pay a large tribute to Rome. In search of quick cash, the Seleucids auctioned off the high priesthood in Jerusalem to the highest bidder. In addition to being the spiritual leader of Jews in the land of Israel, the high priest also functioned as a local governor. The Jews of Jerusalem did not want to be ruled by someone whose only qualification was wealth, so they rebelled, overthrowing the high-bidder priest that the emperor installed.

The emperor reacted by outlawing all Jewish religion and culture. Religious practices such as following kosher dietary laws and circumcision were outlawed and could be punished with death. The Temple in Jerusalem, which was the holiest site in the Jewish religion of the time – was rededicated to the Greek God Zeus and pigs were sacrificed on the altar. That sacrifice is especially insulting because Jewish teaching is that pigs are unclean and should not be eaten.<sup>1</sup> That covers the 'They tried to kill us' portion of the Hanukkah story.

Now, 'we survived.'

In the face of this oppression, people resisted. Beginning in the year 167 before the common era, a small-town priest named Mattathias, the leader of the Hasmonean clan, along with his five sons, began to fight. This revolt began as a fight within the Jewish community. These Hasmoneans wanted to preserve their religion and culture and opposed the assimilation to Greek culture that was happening in their Jewish community. Their revolt began with the destruction of Greek altars, killing assimilated Jews, and forcibly circumcising men with Jewish ancestry. Mattathias died of natural causes shortly after the revolt began and his son Judah became the new leader of this resistance movement. As I mentioned to our children, his nickname was 'The Hammer' and that name lent its name to the group. Hammer in Hebrew is Maccabee. The group of fighters became known as the Maccabees.

After three years of vicious fighting, the Maccabees won, largely because the Seleucid Empire was facing other military challenges in other parts of the empire and the emperor didn't want to lose any more lives fighting with the Maccabees. A treaty was signed that ceded land to the Hasmoneans, gave the Jews the right to practice their own religion and customs, and returned the Temple to local control.

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<sup>1</sup> My primary source for the historical context of the Maccabean revolt is Carr, David M. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Pages 247-51

It was time to have the Temple rededicated after years of desecration. The leaders adapted Sukkot, an eight-day harvest festival, and had an eight day festival on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev in the Jewish lunar calendar, which falls somewhere between late November and late December in the calendar we use. It was given the name Hanukkah – the Hebrew word for a ceremony of dedication. Judah Maccabee “The Hammer” said that all Jews everywhere should celebrate this holiday – and the successful uprising led by his clan. People celebrated with bonfires in the street.

So, we've covered, “they tried to kill us,” and “we survived.” What about “let's eat?”

The traditional foods of Hanukkah are fried foods – the potato pancakes called latkes that we sang about earlier are the most common food in Jewish communities with roots in Eastern Europe. Jewish communities with roots in Southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East traditionally eat jelly donuts.

There is also a tradition to eat cheese and other dairy foods and retell the story of Judith, a Hebrew woman who lived a few hundred years before the Hasmonean revolt. In another time of war, she tricked an enemy general with the promise of cheese and wine, killing him and allowing the Hebrew people to survive. That is how people eat at Hanukkah, “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat.”

Those of you who know about Hanukkah are probably wondering at this point, but what about the oil and the miracle? There is a story, which many of us know, about how, at the time when the Maccabees wanted to rededicate the temple, there was only enough sacred oil in the temple to last one night, but it lasted for eight days of the festival for rededicating the Temple. That's a great story and it wasn't part of the original Hanukkah. There is no evidence that this story happened in history or that it was part of what the Hasmonean Kingdom celebrated when they celebrated a winter festival called Hanukkah. One of the earliest tellings of that first Hanukkah is in The First Book of Maccabees, an ancient text that describes the Maccabean revolt. That book is part of Catholic and Christian Orthodox Bibles but not part of Protestant Bibles or Jewish sacred scriptures – and that's a whole other interesting bit of history. In the text describing the first Hanukkah there is no miracle story, just a dedication with nothing more miraculous than an unlikely military victory. Where did the miracle come from? To explain that, we'll need to do a little more history:

The Hasmoneans and their descendants ruled the land we know as Israel for about one hundred years. Hanukkah was one of the national holidays they created. It celebrated the triumph of the Maccabees on the battlefield, not the rededication of the temple. Then the Hasmonean dynasty was conquered by the Romans, who installed the Herod family to function as local governors.

About a generation after Jesus died, Jews rebelled against their Roman rulers. This effort was led by clans other than the Hasmoneans, who wanted to assert themselves as leaders. Downplaying the military victory of the Hasmoneans was part of that effort. They changed the story of Hanukkah, probably bringing forward a less commonly told miracle story – that a small amount of oil lasted longer than anyone expected. A story of God preserving God's people. This is when

scholars think the story about enough consecrated oil to last for one day that lasted for eight days became part of Hanukkah celebrations. This story came to predominate over the next generations and within a few hundred years, people celebrating Hanukkah were exclusively celebrating the miracle of the oil, not a military victory. The Maccabees had faded to the background. They were lighting candles in a menorah—adding a candle for each night of the eight nights, lighting each one with the shamash candle, the tall one; saying prayers; eating foods fried in oil and remembering a story of survival that might not have happened exactly that way in actual history, but is, nonetheless, worth remembering and celebrating.

The Maccabees instituted several holidays in their short-lived dynasty two thousand years ago. Hanukkah is the only one that anyone celebrates anymore –because it was adapted by later Jewish leaders. The details were changes and themes other than the greatness of the Maccabees became the core of the day – survival; the preservation of customs, language, and religion; a God who is alongside people in moments of suffering, uncertainty, and triumph. The other Maccabean holidays that celebrated the greatness of a particular ruling family were not adapted and vanished shortly after that family was no longer in power.<sup>2</sup>

I had a wonderful Hebrew Bible professor in seminary, who had a few mantras that he would return to again and again. He always wanted us to know what a text meant in its original context, what conditions shaped the community in which a text emerged. Given the history of the ancient Near East, this meant we spent a lot of time learning about empires, their politics and policies, and how they impacted the people who were telling stories... but what made him a truly great teacher was that he reminded us that, while these origins mattered, they were not all that mattered. He would remind us that there are so many old texts that no one pays much attention to anymore. There are no communities who gather weekly to re-read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or *The Odyssey* or so many other ancient texts. Only a few have survived in this way – and they have survived because people have continually told the stories in new ways. Taking ancient histories and finding parallels in their day. Reading and re-reading. Interpreting and reinterpreting and changing the work of ancient peoples so they speak truth today. He would say that it is our job as future religious leaders – and I would expand that idea to say the job of all of us – to take what is ancient and find what can speak to us today.

Or, as the writer and educator Lori Rottenberg suggests,  
'the menorah compels us all to consider  
how centuries change stories,  
how celebrations reflect as much as preserve,  
and how we shape consecration of our own rituals.'

I tell this history of Hanukkah not to expose some two-thousand-year-old conspiracy or to lead an effort to 'Put the Hasmoneans back in Hanukkah' or in hopes that you explain the 'real history of Hanukkah' at a Hanukkah celebration this year. Read the room. Not everyone likes their

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<sup>2</sup> My primary source for the history of Hanukkah and how it is currently celebrated is Wylen, Stephen M. *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989. Pages 145-8

holidays with a side of history. I share all this as an invitation. As humans, we are part of a rich tradition of people who tell and retell, shape and reshape the stories we are given to make them true today. What are the stories and traditions that you have inherited? This time of year is rich with them. How might we take old stories and tell them in new ways, ways that give meaning to us today? Ways that tell the truth we need to hear, whether that is a truth about perseverance, unlikely outcomes, miracles, or the natural cycles that carry us along through no effort of our own?

Hanukkah, like all holidays in continuing to evolve. Hanukkah is, traditionally, a minor Jewish holiday. It's isn't even in Jewish scriptures... and yet it has grown in importance in recent decades. Part of that is in competition with Christmas, as Rottenberg writes, 'We who are Jews use blazing menorahs to find our way in the blinding dazzle of Christmas, we pump our eight days of dreidl and gelt like bellows to show we too can offer fuel for December's joy.'

And there is more to the rising prominence of Hanukkah than just competition with Christmas. Over the last several generations, the social position of Jews has changed. While antisemitism persists, life is generally much better for Jews in this country. There are no longer quotas keeping Jews out of higher education or restrictive covenants barring them from neighborhoods and social clubs. In this time of increasing assimilation and integration, some find meaning in the story of the Maccabean Revolt and ancestors who fought for the right to maintain their language, customs, and sacred stories in a diverse world that pressured them to 'be like everyone else.' The story of maintaining identity speaks across the generations, echoing its wisdom as people light the candles and say the prayers, beginning tonight at sunset.

So may we, as Hanukkah begins tonight, remember the story of the Hasmoneans and their unlikely triumph.

But may we also remember that stories worth telling again and again are rich enough to hold multiple truths, and speak in ways that the people who created the story could not anticipate.

And may we claim the stories that are ours and tell them in ways that bring more hope, more truth, and more love into our lives and into the world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.