

AN ADULT APPROACH **TO HANUKKAH**

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PART ONE – THE FIRST HANUKKAH

Introduction: We are all familiar with the basic story of Hanukkah. Judah Maccabee is the central hero. We light the menorah for eight nights, we spin the dreidel and wipe the grease off our chins from those delicious latkes. It is a time of light-hearted happiness, the exchange of gifts, and the giving of Hanukkah gelt to the children. Our knowledge over the years has not gone too far beyond this paradigm. In this paper, we will go into the multiple meanings of Hanukkah and study it in-depth. The festival represents many deep miracles. Indeed, we are told by our sages that at the end of time, we Jews will celebrate only two holidays – Purim and Hanukkah. Is it possible that Hanukkah may be more significant than Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover or Succoth?

The Last Festival: Hanukkah is the last event in Jewish history to merit becoming a holiday. Hanukkah was also the last time God performed an open public miracle that affected the Jewish people.

The Players: We must keep in mind the major players of the Festival of Hanukkah:

Mattahias
Johanan (Gaddi)
Simon (Thassi)
Judah (Maccabee)
Eleazar (Auaran)
Jonathan (Apphus)
Alexander the Great
Alcimis (High Priest)

Demetrius I (Soter)
Lysias
The Generals:
Nicanor
Gorgias
Seron
Hannah and her 7 sons
Ptolemy

Antiochus IV (Epiphanes or God Manifest)	Seleucus
Antiochus V (Eupator)	Greece
Septuagint	Syria
Bacchides	

The Septuagint: After the death of Alexander the Great, the Greek Empire split into three major divisions. The first was Greece itself ("Yavan" in Hebrew). The Middle East was divided between two of Alexander's primary generals, Ptolemy governed Egypt and its territories (the Egyptian Empire) and Seleucus took over Syria (the Syrian-Greek Empire). Israel was caught in the middle of these two great empires. During the reign of Ptolemy II (285-244 BCE), the story goes that 72 elders of Israel, 6 from each tribe, were placed in one large facility in Alexandria to translate the Torah into Greek. Legend has it that all 72 versions were identical! This translation gave the Greek Empire the key they needed to begin their process of trying to integrate Israel and the Jewish people into the Greek way of life and to replace Jewish beliefs and Jewish traditions with the Greek view of the world. You might say that the Septuagint was the true beginning of Hanukkah.

The First Hanukkah

Background: Judah Maccabee, his father and brothers, belong to the family of Hasmoneans. They were Kohans from the Tribe of Levy. Judah's father, Mattathias, was the grandson of Shimon Hatzaddik, a famous Kohan Godol. They were very devout Jews. The villain in our plot is Antiochus IV. He was a major anti-semite who issued many evil decrees against the observation of Torah mitzvoth and the observance of Jewish traditions. At this time in history, there was intense Hellenization of the Holy Land. Hellenized Jews were known as "Misyavnim". An overwhelming number of Jews in the Holy Land assimilated into Greek culture. They adopted Greek names. They sent their children to Greek schools known as gymnasiums. As a matter of fact, Hellenized Jews were the majority in Jerusalem and its surrounding areas. Today's counterpart would be the Jewish assimilation in Germany and all of Europe prior to World War II.

Antiochus IV: Antiochus IV spent his youth as a hostage in Rome. He was definitely part of the "in crowd" politically. He learned the Roman way of governing and subjugating people. In Rome, the culture of ancient Greece was very strong. In fact, it is truly amazing how Greek culture spread throughout the known world. For many centuries after the Hanukkah Revolt, up until the fall of the Roman Empire, Greek culture was dominant.

When Antiochus' brother, Seleucus, was murdered in Antioch, Antiochus was the next heir to that throne. He became the ruler of the Syrian-Greek Empire. As ruler, he was totally ruthless and he took his hatred out on the Jews especially.

He was an excellent military leader and led many battles. He furthered the spread of Greek art and science throughout the Greek empire. After he had committed every possible crime in Jerusalem, he established a permanent military occupation force at the Citadel in Jerusalem. Antiochus' goal was to destroy every remnant of the Jewish way of life. Unlike his predecessors who preferred a more subtle approach to assimilation, he did not hesitate to use murder and brute force. Actually, Antiochus was the first ruler in recorded history to engage in purely religious persecution. His modern-day counterpart was Adolph Hitler.

Antiochus decreed the death penalty for the study of Torah and for Jews gathering in prayer. If parents had their child circumcised, those parents would be murdered. Jews were also murdered for observing Shabbat and for carrying tefillin. The Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Second Temple, was desecrated. There were statues of Greek gods placed in the Temple and there were sacrifices of non-kosher animals including pigs. All towns and villages throughout Israel were required to have altars to Greek gods with non-kosher animal sacrifices. The king's soldiers forced the Jews to bring offerings to those altars and idols. Jews were forced to imitate Greek customs and to engage in Greek immorality. Make no mistake. Many Jews did so willingly. Torah scrolls were destroyed and Torah students and their teachers burned at the stake. Teachers of the Torah were tortured and executed. One famous Jewish scholar, Eleazar the Scribe, was tortured to death and his students forced to watch.

Antiochus' Treatment Backfires: The cruel treatment of the Jews by the Syrian Greeks started to backfire. Many Jews who were normally not observant saw Judaism slipping away. They reacted by embracing their Judaism. There began a small quiet movement of the Jewish population against Syrian Greek oppression. They met for secret prayer and study sessions. One such group was Mattahias and his 5 sons.

Many Jews who were either very devout or who began to embrace their faith died as martyrs. The most famous example is Hannah and her 7 sons. When the soldiers of the king rounded up the Jews and forced them to worship a Greek idol and to eat pork, all 7 of Hannah's sons refused. All 7 sons were killed before her eyes. Her response to this horror was to commit "Kiddush Hashem". She killed herself in front of the soldiers by throwing herself on a fire. She fell dead on the corpses of her children.

The First Blow is Struck!: Eventually the soldiers reached the small town of Modin. There they rounded up the Jews and forced them to worship a Greek god and to sacrifice a pig. In the audience, was Mattahias and his 5 sons. The 5 sons were Johanan, Simon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan. They were all very sad at what was happening to their fellow Jews, but they never lost hope. Mattahias

and his sons were armed with long knives hidden in their clothing. They had decided to go down fighting. One Jew voluntarily stepped forward to offer the swine sacrifice to the Greek God Jupiter. At that very moment, Mattahias saw the "big picture" of what was happening throughout the Holy Land and what would eventually happen to the Jewish people should no resistance be offered. He was a man of peace, the grandson Shimon Hatzaddik, the Kohan Godol, but he had had enough. He burst forth from the crowd and personally killed the volunteer traitor. His 5 sons attacked the Syrian-Greek soldiers and killed or wounded most of them. This act proved the turning point and set an example of courageous resistance. The first blow was struck! Mattahias said, "All who are with God follow me". These are the same words spoken by Moses when he saw the golden calf. You might recall that it was the Levites who as a group stepped forward to follow Moses. Mattahias, his 5 sons, and a group of followers fled the town and hid out in caves in the hills of Judea. Eventually, many Jews joined their ranks to form the first Jewish army.

Impossible Odds: Put yourself back at that time. The Greek-Syrian army was perhaps the most powerful military organization in the world. They are about to be challenged by a small band of Jews. It's all absolutely insane! This small group knew that they would soon be the object of Antiochus' revenge. Their numbers grew and they trained in military tactics and strategies. They formed guerrilla bands and attacked the Syrian-Greek army at night inflicting heavy casualties and severely damaging the morale of the Syrian-Greek army. They also destroyed Greek altars and smashed their idols. Weapons and ammunition were taken from fallen soldiers. The Jews all over the country were encouraged to fight back. The small group of Jewish soldiers were strengthened in their faith that help would eventually come from God.

Mattahias' Death: Soon after the rebellion started, Mattahias died. Before dying, he called his sons to him and told them to have faith in God and faith in their fight and not to rest until the enemy was destroyed and until the Holy Temple was rescued and purged of all Syrian-Greek influence. Mattahias appointed Simon to be the spiritual leader of the rebels and Judah to be the military leader. The death of Mattahias was mourned throughout the Holy Land. After his death, the flames of resistance were fanned into an all-out revolt against the Syrian oppressors. Judah began attacking the Syrian soldiers more aggressively. He soon boldly faced small units of the Syrian-Greek army in open battle. He routed them in one battle after the other. Judah, disregarding his own safety, was always in the front lines of battle. He soon earned the nickname "Maccabee" (the Hammer).

Maccabee is short for "Mi chamocha b'aylim Adonai". This means, "Who is like you O Mighty God?". This is a line out of the song sung at the Reed Sea (Yom

Suf). These words were inscribed on Judah's banner and some say inscribed on his sword as well.

Antiochus Reacts: The Syrian-Greek troops in the Holy Land suffered one loss after the other. They sent messages to Antioch for help. The king sent an army headed by two of his ablest generals, Apollonius and Seron, at the head of a Syrian army. Judah Maccabee used guerilla tactics of hit and run against the army, striking great fear to the point where the army became totally disorganized and fled. This was considered a miraculous victory!

This did not deter Antiochus. He put his more ablest general, Lysias, at the head of an enormous force consisting of 40,000 infantry, 7,000 cavalry and a large contingent of other troops against Judah's army of only 6,000 strong! Three of the Syrian's army most experienced generals, Nicanor, Gorgias and Ptolemy, were at the head of all these troops. The Maccabean army, well trained, and seasoned by prior battles, was ready for them. The night before the big battle, the Greek-Syrian soldiers got drunk while the Jewish soldiers prayed and fasted. The Jewish soldiers knew that nothing less than a miracle would win the day. Judah addressed his men, "Be brave in the fight against the heathen. They would deprive us of what we hold dear and holy. It is far better to die in battle than stand by idly and see the sorrow of our people and the desecration of our Holy Temple. Whatever God wants, that is what will happen." The Jewish soldiers attacked in the middle of the night and hurled themselves at the enemy who were camped at Emmaus. The Syrian troops were scattered in confusion. Many were killed and the camp was set on fire. The legions of Gorgias, approaching from a different direction, suffered the same fate. They were thoroughly routed by the small but brave Jewish army. The Jewish soldiers wound up with a very large amount of booty and weapons. They knew that a counter-attack was sure to come.

Lysias' Counter-Attack: Enraged by what happened to his three best commanders, Lysias equipped another army, much larger than the last. This army marched on Jerusalem from the south. He was stopped a few miles outside of Hebron and was thoroughly beaten as his generals before him.

PART TWO – JUDAH WINS JERUSALEM

This battle ended the first successful phase of the Maccabean revolt. The main forces of the enemy had been cleared from the land. Jerusalem was liberated and only a small enemy force in the Citadel remained. The next time that a Jewish army would enter the gates of Jerusalem will be 1948!

The Holy Temple is Restored: Judah Maccabee and his soldiers entered the Holy Temple. What they found brought tears to their eyes. The entire temple

was desecrated. They were very angry and vowed to get even, but first the temple had to be cleaned and restored. The first task was to destroy the many idols that littered the temple. They took apart the desecrated altar and put it into a separate room. They did not know what to do with it. They had to wait instructions from a prophet before anything else could be done with that altar. They built a new altar and consecrated it. The original golden menorah had been stolen. So, they made a new menorah out of wrought iron. Then began the anxious search for holy oil that was not desecrated. The Syrians systematically went about desecrating the jars of holy oil by removing the seals and sticking their fingers in the oil. Finally, they found one jar of holy oil with the imprint of the signet ring of the Kohan Godol. This oil was used for the new menorah. The jar of oil was only supposed to last for one day, but we all know that it lasted for 8 days. Why 8 days? Because that's the time it took to press new oil from olives and to follow the Torah's instructions for consecration. The 8 day's burning of only one jar of oil was a living symbol that the holy presence of God, the Shekhinah, was with Judah Maccabee and his soldiers. The Kohanim rededicated the Temple with a tremendous ceremony, sacrifices and intense prayer. This took place on the 25th day of the month of Kislev in the year 3622 of Creation. The burning of the oil is one of the major Hanukkah miracles.

The Festival of Hanukkah: The Great Assembly decided that every year the miracle of Hanukkah would be celebrated for all time. Hanukkah means "dedication". From the 25th of Kislev to the 3rd of Tevet we celebrate by lighting the Hanukkah lights, we say special prayers and we give thanks (hallel). We are thankful because in those days, Judaism and Jewry were undoubtedly saved from one of the greatest dangers ever threatened to our people. Hanukkah was a clash of cultures. It was a struggle not only of a few against the many and the weak against the strong, but more importantly, of the holy against the unholy. The Greek civilization was unholy darkness.

PART THREE – MORE BATTLES AHEAD

The Celebration Does Not Last Long: While Israel was under the domination of the Syrian-Greek forces, its neighbors went on a campaign of land grabbing, harassment, and murder of Jews. Judah Maccabee vowed to take back the land and to avenge murdered Jews, and to strengthen the borders. Syria was torn by strife. Antiochus IV had died a madman. Lysias and Philip fought over the guardianship of the heir to the throne, Antiochus V Eupator. Judah Maccabee embarked upon an aggressive military campaign against Edom. He set their cities on fire and punished them severely. He then marched north to capture small Jewish colonies along the Jordan. He freed more than 1,000 Jews from captivity. Simon successfully freed the Jews of Galilee. Judah then went south and punished the Philistines for killing many hundreds of Jews.

In Antioch, Lysias came out the victor. He was now in power. He renewed his attempts to establish Syrian rule over Judea. Taking the young king, Antiochus V Eupator with him, he marched at the head of a huge army against the Maccabees. He used battle-trained elephants, the equivalent of today's tanks. The Jews fought bravely but were hard-pressed to withstand this huge army. Eleazar, Judah's younger brother, thought the young king was riding a certain decorated elephant. He believed that if he could kill that elephant and its rider, the battle would be turned in favor of the Jews. He got under the elephant and stabbed it with his sword. The elephant rolled over and crushed him. The elephant was being ridden by one of the top Syrian generals but not the young king. The rest of the brothers fought on valiantly, but it was a losing battle. When all seemed to be lost, a messenger delivered a message to Lysias informing him that there was rebellion in Antioch. Lysias quickly concluded a peace treaty with Judah. The Jewish people were now able to live in peace and to practice their religion.

However, as long as Lysias and Antiochus Eupator remained alive, they lusted for control of Judah. There soon arose a revolt in Antioch. Lysias and the young king were killed. The ruler in Antioch became Demetrius. The Hellenized Jews under the leadership of Alcimis, the High Priest, found Demetrius favorably inclined to their cause. Alcimis was not a good person and brought shame to the office of Kohan Godol. Alcimis wanted control of the Holy Land and Demetrius wanted to put him in power. Alcimis was sent back to Jerusalem at the head of a large army. At the head of this army was Bacchides who was to assume the role of Governor of Judea. Bacchides promised the Jews peace if they would acknowledge Alcimis as the Kohan Godol. Judah and his brothers were not deceived, but many sages were. As a result of this misplaced confidence, over 60 Jewish sages were killed by the Syrians.

Alcimis was thoroughly hated. Bacchides returned to Antioch and assured Demetrius that the Jews could not renew their resistance to the renewed Hellenization process set in motion by Alcimis and his associates. But he was mistaken. Judah once again rebelled against these forces. Alcimis called upon King Demetrius to suppress the new rebellion. Demetrius sent a large military force into Judea. At the head of this force was his most aggressive general, Nicanor. Nicanor promised his king that the new rebellion would be put down quickly and without mercy. He too was mistaken.

Nicanor Day: Nicanor was an arrogant and brutal man who promised to quell the revolt without mercy. His troops landed on the coast and he moved south toward Jerusalem. His first encounter with Judah Maccabee's troops was a disaster for the Syrians. Judah launched a guerilla attack that caught the enemy by surprise and inflicted heavy casualties. Nicanor reformed and again proceeded to march toward Jerusalem. When he reached the outskirts of

Jerusalem, his troops were again attacked and massacred. Nicanor himself was killed and his arm and head hung on the walls of Jerusalem. Judah Maccabee entered Jerusalem at the head of his troops and received a hero's reception. This battle took place on the 13th day of Adar. This date is very significant. It was celebrated during the Festival of Purim and during the days of Queen Esther. Judah appointed the 13th day of Adar (161 BCE) as a Feast Day. For centuries, "Nicanor Day", was celebrated by Jews all over the world. It still has a place in the calendar of special days ("Megillat Ta'anit").

Judah Forms an Alliance With Rome: The victory against Nicanor greatly strengthened Judea. In order to safeguard the independence of the Holy Land, Judah arranged an alliance with Rome. Rome was very interested in extending its influence in the Middle East and especially in the Holy Land. Judah traveled to Rome and was honored by the Roman Senate. A political alliance was achieved. However, Rome did not directly participate in the political activities of Israel until the very end of the Hashmonaim Dynasty a few years before the beginning of the common era.

Judah Maccabee Falls: On learning of the alliance with Rome, King Demetrius in Antioch decided to act quickly. He sent a large army immediately to the Holy Land. This army numbered 20,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry. It was commanded by Bacchides. His attack came so fast that it took Judah Maccabee and his 800 troops totally by surprise. Although Judah fought valiantly, an arrow pierced his armor. His time was up. He was killed. The Jewish army beaten, their leader dead, the survivors withdrew into the mountains carrying their fallen leader. He was later returned to his hometown Modin, and buried. Modin is where the resistance movement began. The entire nation mourned this great loss. No other Jewish leader had shown less personal ambition. His zeal and devotion to the cause of Judaism and his people had transformed this small people into a great nation.

Judah Maccabee's Legacy: Until the time of the Hashmonaim revolt, the Jews had no army. Judah transformed small bands of untrained but brave souls into an army that continuously defeated what was then the most powerful military force in the known world. Thanks to Judah, his brothers and his father, a small nation facing annihilation, both physically and culturally, rose once again with the help of God to the heights and glory of kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The Festival of Hanukkah is a tremendous memorial to their spirit.