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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

Hanukkah for Grown-ups

By Marianne Novak

Ronda Arking, Editor

# Hanukkah for Grown-ups

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**H**anukkah is the most adult of Jewish holidays. Yes, *that* Hanukkah, with its candle lighting, dreidel playing, present giving, and fried food and chocolate coin eating. It would seem from our celebrations, that if anything, the opposite is true. And, if you also consider the somewhat juvenile way the holiday is taught, you could easily get the impression that Hanukkah is just for kids.

The simplistic conception of Hanukkah might derive from how the story has been traditionally told. One version of the story emphasizes the miraculous victory of the Maccabees, a tiny group of Jewish over the mighty Seleucid Greek Empire. Judah Maccabee and his small army were able to cleanse the temple of Hellenistic idolatry and rededicate it. This view of history is reinforced with the recitation of the *Al haNissim* prayer that is inserted into the *Amidah* and Grace After Meals during the eight days of the holiday:

In the days of Mattityahu, the son of Yohanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons, when the wicked kingdom of Greece rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to stray from the laws of Your will, You, with great mercy stood by them in the time of their distress. You fought their fight, judged their cause, and avenged them with vengeance...After these things, Your children entered into the Holy of Holies of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified the place of Your Holiness, kindled lights in Your holy courts and established these eight days of Hanukkah to express thanksgiving and praise to Your great name. (*Koren Siddur translation*)

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But, the real history is a bit more complicated and goes beyond the idea of "They tried to kill us! Let's eat!" In 200 BCE, Seleucus, one of Alexander the Great's military officers, expanded Greek rule over Judea. With his rule came the introduction of Hellenistic culture that many of the Jews at the time adopted. In 175 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes ascended the Seleucid throne and enacted laws and policies to overtly promote Hellenism in Judea. Initially, this did not create too much controversy in the Jewish community, and the majority of Jews were able to navigate their Jewish and Greek identities. However, in 167 BCE, Antiochus, through the High Priest Menaleus, enforced a new program of Hellenization that made observance of key Jewish practices, such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, capital crimes. These enactments were the tipping point for a small group of Jews, the Maccabees, who decided the situation was no longer tolerable and rebelled.

The talmudic sages downplay the military victory and focus on the rededication of the Temple. In *Shabbat* 21b, we read the following:

The Gemara asks: What is Hanukkah...What is the reason? When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days... (Sefaria translation)

Since the Rabbis of the Mishnaic period lived in Judea under what became increasingly difficult Roman rule, perhaps they did not want to highlight the military victory of the Hanukkah story. Glorifying Jews who rebelled against the ruling authority—and won—might have been seen as threatening. But maybe the Rabbis turned to

the miraculous story of the oil because they also knew that the true history was very complicated. They understood that it was not really a story of a united Jewish community fighting against Greek tyranny, but rather a story of a group of Jews who decided that for Judaism to survive they had to revolt even when many in their community would have been happy with the status quo.

In addition to the somewhat complex reality, we also see the adult nature of this holiday when compared to the biblical holidays. Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and the three pilgrimage holidays—Pessah, Shavuot, and Sukkot—all have clear Torah directives that command us, at a minimum, to celebrate the holiday on a specific date. Additionally, the *mitzvot* of the holidays contain specifics as to the how to observe the rituals, and possibly the reasons why the holiday is celebrated. Whether or not the commandments contain all of these elements is secondary. After all, they are *mitzvot d'oraytah*, Torah-based commandments, and we are obligated to observe them. Our feelings and historical involvements with the holidays — are not essential for our observance of them..

Nowhere in the Torah, however, is there any direct commandment to observe Hanukkah. Most of the information we have about Hanukkah comes from the two books of Maccabees, which did not even make it into our religious canon. By that criterion, Hanukkah is a rabbinic holiday, although the midrashic tradition does try to at least find some sort of hint in the Torah of the future celebration of Hanukkah. In Numbers, we read the narrative of the tribes giving gifts for the dedication of the Mishkan (tabernacle). The Levites do not bring gifts, but are instead given the eternal commandment by God to light the candelabra, the *menorot*:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand." (Numbers 8:1-2)

The Ramban comments that these verses and their juxtaposition to the previous chapters describing the dedication of the Mishkan are a hint to the rededication of the Temple, which will happen during the time of Hanukkah:

There is another *hanukkah*, dedication, in which there will be lighting of the lamps, when I will perform through your children miracles and salvation for Israel, and a *hanukkah* that will be called..."The Hanukkah of the children of the Hasmonean." (Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, Rabbi Dr. C. B. Chavel)

But even as a rabbinic holiday, Hanukkah is different than other rabbinic holidays—especially Purim, to which it is often linked. While the Rabbis derive the how and why of Purim observance from *Megillat Esther*, that derivation isn't particularly difficult. The narrative in the text tells us explicitly when and how to observe the holiday.<sup>2</sup>

Ours observance and understanding of Hanukkah just isn't that clear. We don't have the same kinds of rabbinic directives that we see regarding Purim. With Hanukkah, Antiochus enforced severe decrees but didn't chose a specific doomsday for the Jewish people, as Haman does in *Megillat Esther*. The Jews in the Persian Empire had no choice but to act. It was do or die. But with Hanukkah, it took the understanding of a small section of the Jewish community to see that the situation was indeed dire. They had to make the decision alone: There was no clear voice from God; there was no set date for extermination. And they alone had to have the mature foresight to

<sup>2</sup> 'Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year—the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor. The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had begun to practice and which Mordecai prescribed for them.' (Esther 9:20-22, JPS translation).

understand that if they didn't act now, all would be lost for Judaism and the Jewish people. It took adult initiative to comprehend why rebellion was the only viable option for the future of the Jewish people.

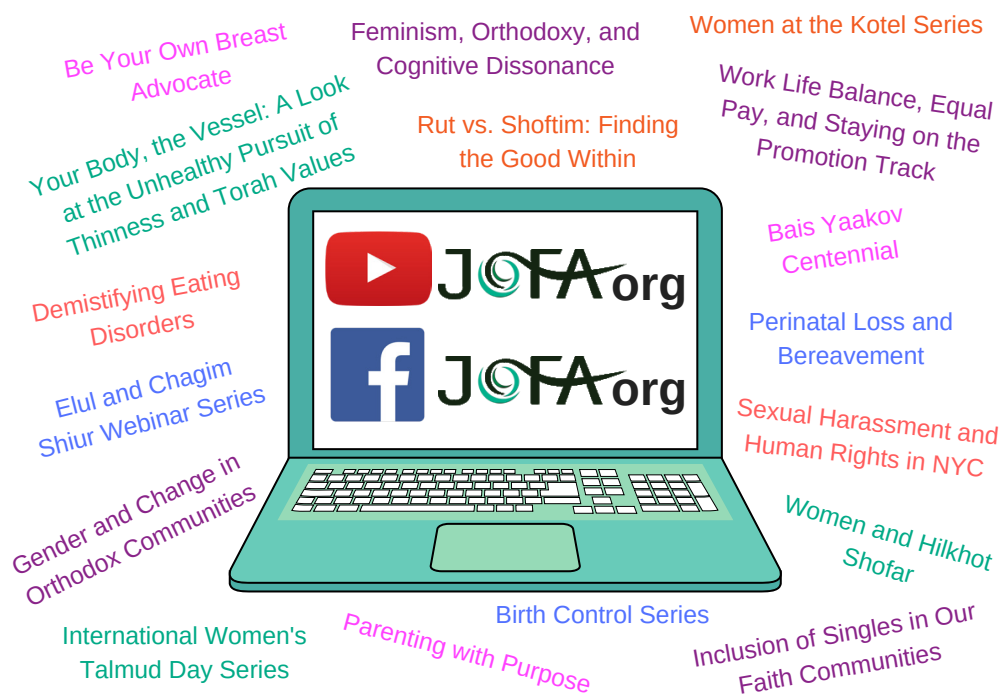
Indeed, Hanukkah is the most adult of our Jewish holidays. It has a complicated story that goes beyond a simple "us vs. them" narrative. The Maccabees took upon themselves to put their lives on the line for the sake of our people without a divine or definitive earthly catalyst. And perhaps, that is why our Rabbis see this holiday as miraculous. It was truly a miracle that a small group of Jews from within a Jewish community was

able to rededicate of all Israel to Judaism. When we publicize the miracles of Hanukkah, we not only note God's hand in the story, but also remind ourselves that we can take responsibility for the survival of our people. By being conscientious and thoughtful Jewish adults, we also have faith that God will then come and help us.

May the lights of Hanukkah and the Hanukkah story invigorate our efforts to bring light to our communities, the Jewish community at large, and the entire world.

*Hag Urim Sameah!*

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