

The True Myth of Hanukkah



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What is a myth? A myth binds a “people” together, giving significance to an indifferent world in the present, serving as the motivation to act in order to keep this world and this people together, whole. Hanukkah was born a myth, and its continual reworking is its very truth. Even as it happened, there were stories of heroes and legends circulating about it. The holy days we celebrate were not given by God, but by a public assembly after the events. The Jewish people gave themselves the power to authorize a week as holy, a power that is seemly divine. But as we will see, Hanukkah is the true myth of a people acting as if they were divine.

Beginning: 190 BCE

The Jewish high temple is in Jerusalem, but Palestine is ruled by the Persian Empire, under King Seleucus, who gives freedom to the Jews to practice their religion. The High Priest of the Holy Temple is Onias, and the chief officer of the King in Jerusalem is Simon. Simon is angry because he thinks that the temple is hiding in its treasury a ton of money. But the money, which is collected from all Jews, is for widows and orphans. Simon doesn't care, he tells the King, and the King sends his envoy Heliodorus to check it out. Heliodorus hears them out, but has to follow the king's orders, and come back to confiscate the funds. As he's riding into town, the whole Jewish community, especially women “in sackcloths, with their breasts bare, thronged the streets (2 Mac 3:19).” Suddenly Heliodorus had a vision of a horse in gold armor attacking him and two men in “glorious beauty” flogging him on both sides. Shocked, he fell to ground, and acknowledged the sovereignty of their God. He returned to King Seleucus, and prayed that they do the Jews no harm.

This is the prologue to the Hanukkah story, the first initial spurt that begins the downward spiral into civil war. What does it mean? Well, it shows what drives the divisions in any community, especially fragile ones existing as minorities within a larger state. On the one hand envy, and the projection of the master's identity onto the slave, for it is from them that he gets his being. And he can never get enough. But more so, the problem starts as do all problems with the Jews: with money. But here we have an insight not into Judaism, but into the problem of money itself. You see, Simon can't stand the fact that money is sitting unused in a temple. For Simon, money must be *used*, it must be spent. The Jews are *hoarding* the money, saving it for widows and orphans, but this goes against what money is for Simon: the possibility of unlimited wealth, the possibility of realizing infinite desires. In other words, money contains, in its concept, the infinite, and this godlike quality of money is what this Persian minister wants to release. The Jews, however, disregard this aspect of money, treating it as another worldly good, for they see the infinite only in the law which they give to *themselves*, without any external compulsion. This is the true infinite, the free ability to follow ones' own command, a principle of every minority community, which living in an empire, will inevitably come to be tested.

Hellenization

Well after Seleucus dies, Antiochus succeeds the throne. And in Jerusalem, the High Priest Onias' brother Jason is able to manipulate himself in as the High Priest of the Holy Temple. Now this is bad because Jason is a Hellenized Jew, one who fully practices the Hellenic rituals and cares little for Jewish rites, like kosher food or even circumcision. First thing he does is abolishes all the customary laws of the temple; then he sets up a Greek gymnasium at its base for the "Antiochenes"—a corporation of Hellenized Jews with commercial and political privileges—and forces people to compete wearing Greek Hermes hats, introducing foreign customs. Why? Because he learned from the previous escapade with Simon and Heliodorus, that to gain power, he needs to succumb to their law and none of this ancestral Jewish crap. With all of this happening, the temple was neglected by the devout Jews, and it became polluted.

Now Antiochous the King was having some troubles, so he fled Syria to Jerusalem, and Jason welcomed him with open arms, and was happy. Three years later, Jason sent Menelaus, brother of Simon to the King, to request that he stay on as High Priest. Well, Menelaus outwitted Jason himself and took over the High Priesthood, placing the very enemy himself at the top of the most sacred power of the Jews. Now Menelaus was a bastard, and he wanted to destroy the Jews. So he stole a gold plate from the temple, and sold it to some people and gave some of it as a gift to Andronicus, a minister of the King who was temporarily in power as Antiochus went to repress a revolt in Tarsus and Mallus, cities in the southeastern coastal region of Turkey known as Clicia. (These revolts were over taxes). Now, remember Onias, the first High Priest, who was outwitted by his brother Jason? Well he's still alive, and when he heard about this, he denounced Menelaus and went into hiding—in the temple of Apollo! Menelaus convinced Andronicus to kill Onias, by drawing him out of the temple with kind words and mercy. Once he did this, Andronicus slaughtered him. Once the Jews heard about this, they were furious and sent a petition to Antiochus. He was moved to pity and tears, and had Andronicus stripped of his privileges and killed.

After this, Menelaus convinced a man named Lysimachus to sacrilege and plunder the temple. He did this indiscriminately, stealing gold and defiling the whole place. The Jews got angry and started to organize against him. Lysimachus amassed an army of 3000 and almost smashed the Jews, but before he was organized, the Jews were able to attack him and kill him near the treasury itself. Now, the Jewish senate sent three men before the King to charge Menelaus of causing this trouble, and the King mostly believed it and was ready to kill Menelaus. But Menelaus convinced an advisor to the King, Ptolemaeus, that if he was to win over the king for him, he would give him a big sum of money. And this is exactly what he did. Menelaus was acquitted and the three accusers themselves were sent to their death. Once again, Menelaus walks away victorious.

What's going on? Well we're seeing the intricate steps that it's taking to squash this tribe of people who are bonded by laws given by an invisible God, i.e., given by themselves. Defiling the temple, building a gymnasium, plundering gold—all of this is done to weaken these hoarders, but none of it works. In fact, it strengthens their resolve. We also see in this period the rise of the Hellenizing influence through the figure of Jason and the Antiochenes. This represents the class differentiation internal to the tribe, reflecting the fact that this problem is not merely external, but internal as well, and to solve it, they will need to "purify" this class difference as well.

Jason's Attack:

Now right after this happens, Antiochus goes on his second expedition to conquer Egypt—in which he sees many portentous omens. Jason, the ousted ex-High Priest in Jerusalem, hears a false rumor of Antiochus' death, and decides that *now* is the time to sack Jerusalem. He gathers a thousand men, attacks the city walls, and drive Menelaus to seek refuge in the citadel. “Jason embarked upon an unsparing massacre of his fellow-citizens, for he did not grasp that success against one's own kin is the greatest of failures (2 Mac 5:6).” But Jason failed to secure the government, and he was sent off. As it says, “he, who had driven so many into exile, himself died an exile. He who had cast out so many to lie unburied was himself unmourned; he had no obsequies of any kind, no resting-place in the ancestral grave. (2 Mac 5:9-10).” Now anyone who has read *Antigone* knows how serious it is to be unburied and more so, to be unmourned. For burial and mourning are not simply “facts” of life; they are ways in which a community of people ties the life of a single individual into its social fabric, not allowing the person to escape into the natural order of death. Burial and mourning are the central institutions for the individuation of members of any social whole that sees itself as more than just an assortment bones, blood and flesh. The unmourning of Jason emphasizes and reflects the greatness of his crimes against his own kin; in the end, he suffers the just punishment which he has given, that is, the punishment of assimilation into nothing.

When the King heard of this, it was clear to him that Judea was in a “state of insurrection.” (2 Mac 5:11) He was in a “savage mood” and sought to “cut down unsparingly everyone he met.” Old, young, children, women, families, girls, and infants were butchered. At the end of three days fighting, the victims numbered 80,000. Forty thousand killed in the fighting, forty thousand more sold into slavery. Not satisfied with this, the King entered the Holiest Temple on Earth, laid his “polluted hands on the sacred vessels, and profanely swept up the votive offerings” left there.

The editor of the text Maccabees text, Jason of Cyrene, makes an interesting comment at this point. He says that the pride of Antiochus “passed all bounds.” Again, it was as unbounded as Simon's previous desire for wealth. But the editor then says, “He did not understand that the sins of the people of Jerusalem had for a short time angered the Lord, and that this was the reason why the temple was left to its fate.” (2 Mac 5:17) If they were not guilty, then God would have stopped him like he stopped Heliodorus. “But,” and here's the key sentence, “the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the sanctuary; he chose the sanctuary for the sake of the nation.” (2 Mac 5:17) In other words, the most sacred site on earth isn't for God, it's *for them*!! If they can't keep themselves together—which the story of Jason and the Hellenized Jews exhibits—then they don't deserve the temple, the place in which *they are consecrating themselves*. Hence, the editor is correct to say that Antiochus doesn't understand that it's actually the Jews responsibility at work. We'll come back to this.

Judas Appears

At this point, almost out of nowhere, Judas Maccabee appears. Of course we know that he's a product of the aforementioned historical condition, that he comes out of the strife both externally from Antiochus and internally from the Hellenized Jews. But this is how he is introduced in the text. “But Judas, also called Maccaebaeus, escaped with about nine others into the

desert, where he and his companions lived in the mountains, fending for themselves like the wild animals, and all the while feeding on what vegetation they found there, so as to have no share in the pollution.” (2 Mac 5:27) Judas, the legend, the hero, the savior, begins by escaping. Escaping what? It seems like civilization itself. Living with wild animals, eating off the land, with nine others, Judas escapes from the “pollution” of Jerusalem, which can no longer be reformed, but must, in a sense, be completely renewed. The Hellenized Jews opened the doors of assimilation; Judas Maccabeus seeks to close them. To renew the tribe, they must destroy what is destroying it. This is the birth of the Jewish religion, literally. The first ever use of the word “Judaism” *as a religion* is found right here. No longer an ethnic group of slaves bonded by matrilineal descent, but a free people bound by their own laws, realized through their conviction to fight.

Now after this introduction, Judas is absent from the text for about 275 lines, two full chapters. He literally “escaped.” What we have next is a long description of the painful, particular sufferings and disgusting tortures that are submitted to individual Jews. But as this going on, we must keep in mind these ten figures, hiding in desert, waiting, plotting, and preparing to strike with great vengeance.

Sufferings and Torture:

Now, once Antiochus defeated Jerusalem and defiled the temple, he then sent some Athenians (philosophers) to try to compel the Jews to give up their “ancestral customs and to cease regulating their lives by the laws of God.” In other words, he says some thing like: give up your own political myth of being a self-determining people, and agree to ours of a people determined by the laws of nature. At this point, Gentiles filled the temple with prostitutes, had intercourse inside, and dumped pork on the altar. They forbid the Jews to celebrate the Sabbath, that is, their weekly strike, and forced them to “eat the entrails of sacrificial victims” on the king's birthday. Everyone who refused to conform was sent to death.

You can guess what happens next. Do the Jews submit? Some do. Most don't. Women and children are burned alive. Men's tongues are cut out, and rabbis are beat to death. But the editor again intervenes here and Stoically he begs his readers not to be disheartened by these tragic events. Rather we should “reflect that such penalties were inflicted for the *discipline*, not the destruction, of our race. It is a sign of great benevolence that acts of impiety should not be overlooked for long but rather should meet their due recompense at once.” (2 Mac 6:12) Now why this strong focus on the self-inflicted nature of such terrible events? By saying that God is doing this for the *discipline* of the people, the editor is not stating a “fact”, but forcing a myth onto the events, in hindsight, which binds the power of the people closer together at the very moment that such a bond is about to break. The fact that God gives people their *due* is a great benevolence, for that means we are treating ourselves from the perspective of universal justice, and not just particular victimhood. This is not a revenge story, but the story of a people taking themselves to be acting and suffering the consequences, whatever they are. As the editor says, “Although he may discipline his people by disaster, he does not desert them.” God cannot desert the Jewish people; only the Jewish people can desert themselves.

7 brothers.

Now there's a particularly disgusting tale in this section, in which a mother and seven sons are tortured individually in front of her. Before he goes to each son, the King asks him to give up his ancestral customs and laws, to eat pork. If not, he will cut their tongues out, force feed them pork, and scalp them. One by one, they refuse to renounce themselves, preferring to die nobly than live in defilement. One by one they state a similar claim: "Do not delude yourself: it is through our own fault that we suffer these things; we have sinned against our God and brought these appalling events on ourselves." (2 Mac 7:18) As the mother says before her death, "It is for our own sins that we are suffering, and, though to correct and discipline us our living Lord is angry for a brief time, yet he will be reconciled with his servants." (2 Mac 7:32) The discipline it takes to say that to a king, to watch your children die, is beyond judgment.

But why do they all blame themselves for the punishment they are receiving? This is no longer a statement by a later editor, but their own words. Well, when one begins to constitute a political community, a community that exceeds the bonds of an unfree nature (based on matrilineal descent) and the bonds of an unfree culture (based on occupation by an empire), then one cannot explain the trajectory or "fate" of such a community with reference to external factors. External factors are always given. But the meaning of a self-determined community is its own laws and practices, and these will come up against friction. Hence, to explain its fate as its own is to take its own limits as internal to itself, as the very dynamic which it constitutes and pushes forward. This is the meaning of taking responsibility for the very suffering they undergo, of *owning* themselves, and not letting themselves be owned. This can take the form of myth, but this myth is true, in the sense that its form expresses a real content.

Judas Maccabaeus revolts

Meanwhile, Judas Maccabaeus and his "band of partisans" have been making their way, into the villages, "unobserved", with six thousand men. They prayed, and then they rained down justice upon the gentiles like a mighty stream. "Maccabaeus came on towns and villages without warning and burnt them down; he recaptured strategic positions, and inflicted many reverses on the enemy, choosing the night time as being especially favorable for these attacks. Everywhere there was talk of his heroism. (2 Mac 8:6)" The King of Syria and Phoenicia was disturbed, not by the small victories Judas had, but by their *increasing frequency*, that is, their consistency and speed. Judas was reconceptualizing war: making it no longer about large slow gains, but about small lightning victories. This was threatening to the King. So he sent out an advisor named Nicanor to "exterminate the whole population of Judaea" (2 Mac 8:9) with twenty-thousand men.

The Maccabees, as they were now called, were frightened, and some fled. But Judas, the master strategist, gave them a speech that would have put Nicanor to shame. Here's the beginning: "They rely on weapons and deeds of daring, but we put our trust in Almighty God, who is able with a nod to overthrow our present assailants and, if need be, the whole world." (2 Mac 8:18) "God" here is just the name of their social power to act in unity according to their own laws. When he says, they rely only on God, and not weapons, he means they can only rely on themselves to accomplish their goal. Weaponry doesn't decide victory; resolve does. And their social

power can “overthrow the whole world.” Now we all know which social class has *that* particular power.

Two thousand years before Marx described the coup d’etat of Louis Bonaparte in 1852, in which bourgeois revolutions don the phrases, costumes and names of the past to give form to their present contents, Judas uses the battles of the past to give the Maccabees the indomitable spirit to win. Judas describes how, “in Sennacherib’s time, one hundred and eighty-five thousand of the enemy were destroyed, and how on the occasion of the battle in Babylonia against the Galatians, all the Jews engaged in the combat had numbered no more than eight thousand, with four thousand Macedonians, yet, when the Macedonians were hard pressed, the eight thousand through Heaven’s aid had destroyed one hundred and twenty thousand and taken much spoil.” (2 Mac 8:19-20)

As the text says, “his words put hearts into his men.” And he is right. For that is exactly where heart comes from: each other. From the recognition of ourselves with each other thrown together in this world, somehow making it up as we go along, but giving ourselves a framework in which we can make sense of it, and do it in a way in which we are the actors of our own destiny. That is the heart he put in them.

And they won. Their six thousand men against Nicanor’s twenty thousand, and the Maccabees slaughtered them. But they had to stop to celebrate the Sabbath, their weekly strike, their true God. Afterwards, Judas continued to fight more battles, and he continued to win. He was invincible.

Once King Antiochus heard of this, he was enraged. He got on his horse from Persia ready to destroy the Maccabees. But on the way, he felt sick, saw ghosts, went crazy, and renounced his vendetta against the Jews. “The power of God was made manifest to all.” (2 Mac 9:8) In his hallucinatory state, he begged mercy from the Jews, declared the Temple free, and proclaimed God’s might. Judas and the Maccabees returned to the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. They purified it, made a new altar, started a fire, and offered a sacrifice for the first time in two years. And from this day, the 25th of Kislev, a celebration lasted for 8 days, a feast of the tabernacles. The public assembly passed a decree that every year the entire Jewish nation should keep these days holy, the days of Hanukkah.



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