

Chanukkah

The Jewish holiday, Chanukkah, is observed for eight days, beginning with the 25th day of the Jewish month of Kislev. Because Chanukkah occurs near Christmas each year, many people have the misconception that Chanukkah is the "Jewish Christmas." However, Chanukkah has nothing to do with Christmas; it is no more the "Jewish Christmas" than Kwanza is the "Black Christmas."

Chanukkah is not one of the great Jewish festivals, and bears no aura of sanctity. No special ceremonials have been built around it; there is no cessation of work.

Chanukkah differs from all other Jewish festivals in one important respect; its origin is not lost in the dimness of antiquity. It is a dated festival, a festival that commemorates great events in the history of the Jewish people—the revolt and victory of the Jews, under the leadership of Judah Maccabee and his brothers of the Hasmonean family, against the imperial rule of the Syrians, under Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes.

By the end of the 3rd century B.C., after Palestine [as it later came to be named by its Roman conquerors] had been under the rule of the Ptolemies for 100 years, it was conquered by the Seleucids (Syrians). For decades a state of war had existed between Egypt and Syria, and often the Jews of Palestine were unable to tell to which kingdom the country belonged. Jewish parties arose at that time, an Egyptian party and a Syrian party; one section of Jews was in favor of Egypt, the other in favor of Syria.

This political division into an Egyptian and a Syrian party went hand in hand with a division in the spiritual life of the Jews. The Egyptian and Syrian kingdoms were entirely different from each other. The Egyptian kingdom was self-contained and exclusively Egyptian, and had no fear of disintegration. There were two classes in the population, the native Egyptians, who had no voice in the rule of the land, and the imperialist ruling class of Macedonians and Greeks. The ruling class kept itself apart from the "inferior" native inhabitants, and there was no talk of a melting-pot for the nation or of forcing upon the lower classes the new Hellenistic (Greek) world culture.

The Grecian kingdom in Asia had an entirely different character. It was a state formed of various nationalities. It was made up of various peoples and countries and could not, therefore, arrive at strength and unity. So the Seleucids (Hellenized Syrians) strove to hold and weld the various elements in their kingdom through imposing the Hellenistic culture.

The conservative Jewish circles of Judah (Palestine) were, therefore, in favor of Egypt, because of their religious interests, which were contrary to Hellenism with its worship of many gods instead of One God, its worship of images, etc. On the other hand, those who were in favor of Syria had to be, in accordance with Syria's political trend, Hellenists. The introduction of Hellenistic ways into Palestine had to be part of their political program. Furthermore, the East, at that time, was experiencing a boom in trade and manufacture; it was a time of wealth and riches. Many Jews, therefore, strove to take leave of their religious separateness and to participate in the rich life of the world in which they lived.

There arose, then, a Jewish aristocracy that was in favor of Syria and that strove to introduce Hellenistic ways into Judah. This aristocratic party governed in Jerusalem under the Syrians, who could rely only on this group for loyalty.

When Antiochus Epiphanes became king of Syria, there was a great upheaval in the local political situation of the Jews in Palestine. The conservative party, with its antagonism to Hellenism, was considered unpatriotic and could not be allowed to take charge of Jewish rule. The position of High Priest, that is, of governor, was won, therefore, by a Hellenized priest named Jason, an aristocrat. (He altered his Hebrew name, Joshua, to Jason.)

Jason belonged to the moderate Hellenists. Apparently a compromise candidate, he won the king to his side with his promise to Hellenize Jerusalem, thus proving his willingness to work for the interests of

Syria.

Jason was not an extreme Hellenist and did not disturb the fundamentals of Jewish religious life. He only desired that Jerusalem should attain the appearance of a Hellenistic city. For this purpose he erected a gymnasium in Jerusalem, and introduced Greek games.

But a moderate Hellenist could represent the king, Antiochus, only in a time of peace. Soon the war between Syria and Egypt broke out again and, in connection with it, a war broke out between the rival political leaders in Jerusalem.

The Syrian party now could depose the moderate Jason, to obtain complete rule. Antiochus was convinced that Jason was soft on Egypt; in his place, the king put Menelaus, (in Hebrew, Menachem), the leader of the extreme Greco-Syrian party.

Menelaus' strict Hellenistic regime in Jerusalem evoked bitter resentment in the masses of the Jews, and when a rumor spread that Antiochus had been killed in action, Jason, with a thousand men, besieged Jerusalem and forced Menelaus to seek refuge in the citadel.

But Antiochus retaliated with much greater force, retook Jerusalem, and ordered his soldiers to slay every adherent of the Egyptian party in the city, and a dreadful slaughter took place. In addition, Antiochus plundered the Temple. Jerusalem was left mourning, but this did not upset Menelaus, as long as his party had won and he remained in office.

Antiochus now undertook to convert his realm of diverse nationalities into a powerful, homogeneous kingdom, so as to feel secure against both Egypt and Rome, by attempting to fuse all the peoples of his kingdom in the melting pot of Hellenistic culture. In those days the national culture of peoples was strongly bound up with its religion, so Antiochus issued a decree that all the peoples of his empire were to serve the Grecian gods and to become Greeks. It was especially important to Hellenize the province of Judah (Palestine) in order for Antiochus to feel secure about his Egyptian border.

All the peoples of the kingdom accepted and obeyed the edict of Antiochus, except the Jews. Antiochus, therefore, sent a mighty army into Palestine to root out the worship of the Jewish God with force, and to eliminate the observance of distinctive Jewish laws and ways.

The Temple service was halted and God's House was turned into a Grecian temple. It was forbidden, on pain of death, to observe any of the precepts of the Jewish religion. There were many martyrs, the first martyrs for freedom of conscience known in world history.

The war between the political parties and their leaders led to a revolt against the tyrannic Syrian rule and against the leadership of the aristocratic Syrian party in Judah. The old parties were failures and a new, national party arose, which declared: Jews are concerned with neither Syrian nor Egyptian interests, but only with strictly Jewish interests. This national party was under the leadership of Judah Maccabee and his Hasmonean brothers.

At first, Judah Maccabee and his volunteer army sought only to re-install the Temple service, which had been interrupted for three solid years. On the 25th day of the month of Kislev they rededicated the altar in the Temple with a great ceremony, and decreed that an eight-day festival, commencing with that day, be observed yearly. Thus, Chanukkah began.

The Hasmoneans, however, went on from there to take advantage of the weakened Syrian kingdom, torn with inner strife, to erect a new, independent Jewish kingdom in Palestine. This kingdom lasted less than 100 years, before being swallowed by the Roman Empire. But it had far-reaching results for the Jews. Through the revolt and victory of the Hasmoneans, the latent forces of the people were aroused, and the various trends in Jewish spiritual life flourished. Jews grew enormously in numbers and power during the period; they extended their dominion over all of Palestine and also migrated in large numbers over the then known world.

In this way, through the victory of the Hasmoneans celebrated during Chanukkah, the Jews developed new powers and possibilities to

exist as a people. Chanukkah, today, stands for two ideals: first, for the achievement of religious liberty and, secondly, for a revival of the national development of the Jewish people.

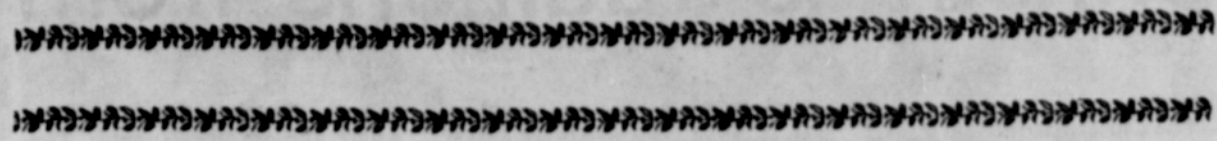
Chanukkah, then, is a celebration of the victory of national minorities in their struggles for self-determination against world-wide imperialist powers.

The Chanukkah lights

The Chanukkah lights originated in an old nature festival, that was observed in winter by certain Jewish groups, in the season when the days begin to lengthen. In time the lights were eventually tied up with Chanukkah.

In order to imbue the Chanukkah lights with a religious aura, with a sacred tradition, the legend of the flask of oil was created.

"What is Chanukkah?" asks the Gemara, a Jewish holy book, and the answer given there is that the army of Antiochus, when it occupied the Temple, defiled all the oil that was stored therein. When the Hasmoneans won, they searched the Temple and found only one small flask of oil bearing the seal of the High Priest, containing only enough oil to light the Menorah for one day. A miracle occurred, and this oil lasted for eight days. The next year these days were declared a festival, with prayers of thanksgiving to God.



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