

Parshat Meeketz- 2017/5778

While Jews celebrate the Festival of Lights worldwide, where we focus on the miracle of the menorah oil that lasted 8 days, the lesser known story of Hanukkah, and historical context of why we celebrate the Festival of Lights, is that of the Maccabees.

In reality, Hanukkah commemorates the Maccabean Revolt, which took place from 167-160 BCE, and how the Jewish rebel Judas Maccabeus defeated the Greek emperor Antiochus, ultimately rededicating the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, where the miracle of the oil occurred.

What is typically misconstrued as a revolt by Jews in ancient Israel against a foreign ruler is, in truth, a story about Jews rebelling against other Jews.

Let's dial back about 400 years before this revolt, when the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Jews who were dispersed into the greater Babylonian empire after the destruction of the first Temple to return to Judea. Cyrus' doctrine over his empire was to allow semi-autonomous government and religious control by local inhabitants, and indeed, Jews developed their own government in Judea and the establishment of a theocracy in the Temple run by the High Priest and priestly families. Interestingly, the "Prayer for Our Country" that is recited worldwide by Jews on Shabbat mornings, which honors the leaders of each country they live in, was started as a praise for Cyrus' progressive doctrine.

Judea's semi-autonomy would continue for centuries through many conquerings: by Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic Kingdom based in Egypt, and the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucids is the group we need to focus on because they introduced Hellenism- its language, religion, philosophies, and its sense of trans-national economic growth throughout their empire. Their economic success, though, was through enriching an elite class in each territory, and the in case of Judea, they worked through the *Cohanim*, the dominant urban priestly class, who subsequently became quite wealthy and Hellenized.

But the majority of Judeans were rural farmers, who neither gained from this economy nor adopted the sophistry of cosmopolitan Jerusalemites. And as is typically the case when money is involved, wealth only led to fighting

between families of prominent Cohanim. This is because the work of the Temple was BIG BUSINESS. Someone had to raise and sell the animals needed for sacrifice, that included turtledoves to oxen, someone needed to store and sell the grain that was part of the *omer* offering. Turf wars broke out as to who controlled what part of this enterprise.

In 175 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes became the Seleucid emperor, with Judea under his control. His desire to conquer the Egypt required cash, and into the fray stepped one group of Cohanim who offered large sums of money if Antiochus would replace the High Priest Onias II with his brother Jason. Three years later, another rich priest, Menelaus- who was a radical Hellenizer, offered even more money to be installed as High Priest. Beside exiling Jason, Menelaus apparently looted Temple treasures to continue paying Antiochus, and to make matters worse, he installed a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies, the *Kadosh h'kodashim*. Even to religious Jews in Jerusalem, this affront was too much to bear. There are descriptions of rioting at the Temple mount, in which many Judeans were killed, requiring Antiochus to post Seleucid troops to protect Menelaus and his clan. This also led to many pious Jews fleeing to the countryside where they joined their agrarian cousins to plan revolt.

One hotbed of this revolution was in Modiin, just west of Jerusalem, led by Matityahu (not the reggae singer) and his five sons, chief among them, Yehudah Maccabee, literally translated as Judah the Hammer. Although outnumbered by far, the Maccabees proceeded to defeat attacks by the armies of Generals Appolonius and Seron, and a larger Seleucid army sent from Antioch led by Generals Nicanor and Giogias. The rebels eventually conquered Jerusalem in 164 BCE, where the Temple and its menorah lamp were rededicated. Originally, though, the 8-day holiday commemorating this victory was modeled on the 8-day holiday of *Sukkot*, and indeed, the first reference to the miracle of the oil lasting 8 days appeared in the Talmud centuries later. It is interesting to note that although the Maccabees controlled most of Jerusalem, an enclave of Hellenized Jews still remained in an adjacent neighborhood, in what is now the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan, protected by Seleucid troops.

This Maccabee's victory was short-lived because 3 years later, Lysias, who was now the Reagent to Antioch's child heir, sought to retake Jerusalem, only to reach a military stalemate with Judah's rebels. As part of the

compromise pact, the Maccabees agreed to share governing and the Temple duties with the Hellenized Jews previously protected by the Seleucids, and so, they installed moderate priests acceptable to both groups. Yet, once Lysias returned home, internecine fighting erupted between the Jewish groups, and seeing a vulnerability, the new Seleucid ruler, Demetrius I, sent a massive army. At the Battle of Elasa, near today's city of Ramallah, Judah's rebel band was defeated and Judah killed.

Why is it important for us to recount these historical details? Because this story, the story of Hanukkah, is about the age-old lesson that in-fighting between Jewish groups has been the bane of our existence and the source of our defeat over the ages.

Having just returned from a wonderful and moving tour of Israel with an ecumenical group, a theme that was eminently apparent was that antipathy between Jewish groups in Israel, focused on political AND religious differences, is often greater and more destructive than the assumed antipathy between Jews and other religious groups, or between Israelis and Palestinians. Ironically, many speakers pointed out that living with people who were considered "other"- speakers of another language, followers of another religion- was not a problem once you accepted their difference, and once you realized that your peace meant helping them realize their peace, that is, helping them live a life of reasonable freedom and reasonable respect.

We heard from Shaul and Noor who helped form the organizations Roots in the Gush Etzion Bloc. Shaul is a typical Zionist, nationalist settler who strongly believes that that area of Judea where he settled is ordained by G-d for the Jews to inherit, whereas Noor grew up near Bethlehem less than 5 miles away, yet even after he received certification as a licensed tour guide, he was prevented from taking tourist groups to any part of Jerusalem (15 miles to the north) or from taking higher level training classes in Tel Aviv, 35 miles to the west. These two people lived miles apart, and even though they were infused with great antipathy for each other, they realized independently that for each of them to have their own peace on a daily basis, they would need to accept the "otherness" of the other. Roots now has a meeting site, halfway between Shaul's and Noor's towns, so that they can train generations of youth, both Israeli and Palestinian, to live side-by-side with each other's otherness.

The same can be said for the K-12 school Yad B'Yad, which is fully bilingual in Arabic and Hebrew, taught by teachers from the adjoining Jewish town of Gilo and the Palestinian town Sharfat. The school celebrates ALL holidays in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim calendars, and the students learn about conflict resolution from the earliest age- even how to resolve when two kids bump into each other on the way to class- which we witnessed.

This week's parsha, *Meeketz*, talks about the conflict between brothers, between Jacob's sons who sent their brother Joseph into bondage because of jealousy and competitiveness, only for the tables to turn around years later, when they find themselves in front of the Egyptian viceroy, begging for food during a famine, not knowing it is their brother Joseph. But before unmasking himself, Joseph tortures them back, accusing them of being spies, throwing them into jail, forcing them to bring back their brother, Benjamin, who remained in Canaan with Jacob. Brothers say and do horrible things to each other, sons torture their father by taking away his remaining sons, all sorts of horrible things happen, and for what reason? I submit that the resolution to this story only occurs when the whole family, Jacob and all his sons, are united with Joseph in Egypt, so as to teach us that if we can't live together, we all perish; that if one of us fails, all of us fail; that our unity is our salvation.

I agree with Hillel that we must add daily to the candle lighting on Hanukkah so that by the last day, all the candles are lit as one large family. It is there to teach us that, however long it takes, we still must strive to build towards our maximal light, our maximal community. It is my wish that in the year to come, that we all strive to link our lights with those in our communities around us, ever striving to bring light to those who don't have it, so that we may enjoy the priestly blessing,

יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֵינוּ, וְיַחַנֵּךְ. May Adonai make His face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֵינוּ, וְיִשְׁמַח לָנוּ שְׁלוֹמִים. May Adonai lift up His face unto you and give you peace

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Hanukkah Sameach.