Hanukkah: the Evolution of a Holiday

**Introduction**

I always like to start with a round – a favorite Hanukkah memory or tradition of yours.

**The Evolution**

1. Story:
   1. What is the story of Hanukkah?
   2. Though it is 2,200 years old, Hanukkah is one of Judaism’s newest holidays and is one of the few Jewish holidays not mentioned in the Bible. The story of how Hanukkah came to be is contained in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are not part of the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible.

These books tell the story of the Maccabees, a small band of Jewish fighters who liberated the Land of Israel from the Syrian Greeks who occupied it. Under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Syrian Greeks sought to impose their Hellenistic culture, which many Jews found attractive. By 167 B.C.E, Antiochus intensified his campaign by defiling the Temple in Jerusalem and banning Jewish practice. The Maccabees — led by the five sons of the priest Mattathias, especially Judah — waged a three-year campaign that culminated in the cleaning and rededication of the Temple.

Since they were unable to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot at its proper time in early autumn, the victorious Maccabees decided that Sukkot should be celebrated once they rededicated the Temple, which they did on the 25th of the month of Kislev in the year 164 B.C.E. Since Sukkot lasts seven days, this became the timeframe adopted for Hanukkah.

**The story we all know**

1. Josephus:
   1. About 250 years after these events, the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote his account of the origins of the holiday. Josephus referred to the holiday as the Festival of Lights and not as Hanukkah. Josephus seems to be connecting the newfound liberty that resulted from the events with the image of light, and the holiday still is often referred to by the title Josephus gave it.
2. Talmud
   1. According to a legend recounted in the Talmud, a compilation of 3rd to 6th century Jewish teachings Completed approximately 600 years after the events of the Maccabees, a miracle occurred at this time.

There was only enough oil to keep the Temple’s menorah, one of its most important ritual objects, burning for one day. But the flame stayed alight for eight days, until a new supply of oil could be found - the basis for the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah.

The Talmud relates this stories in the context of a discussion about the fact that fasting and grieving are not allowed on Hanukkah. In order to understand why the observance of Hanukkah is so important, the Rabbis recount the story of the miraculous jar of oil.

* 1. **Why** does the Talmud introduce the miracle of the oil? Perhaps the Amoraim — the sages of the Talmud — were retelling an old oral legend in order to associate the holiday with what they believed to be a blatant, supernatural miracle. Although the seemingly miraculous victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian Greeks was certainly part of the holiday narrative, this event still lies within the natural human realm. The Rabbis may have felt this to be insufficient justification for the holiday’s gaining legal stature that would prohibit fasting and include the saying of certain festival prayers. Therefore the story of a supernatural event centering on the oil — a miracle — would unquestionably answer any concerns about the legitimacy of celebrating the holiday.
  2. **Another option:** The military triumph, however, was short-lived. The Maccabees’ descendants – the Hasmonean dynasty – routinely violated their own Jewish law and tradition. Even more significantly, the following centuries witnessed the devastation that would be caused when Jews tried again to accomplish what the Maccabees had done. By now, Rome controlled the land of Israel. In A.D. 68-70 and again in A.D. 133-135, the Jews mounted passionate revolts to rid their land of this foreign and oppressing power.
  3. War no longer seemed an effective solution to the Jews’ tribulations on the stage of history. In response, a new ideology deemphasized the idea that Jews should or could change their destiny through military action. What was required, rabbis asserted, was not battle but perfect observance of God’s moral and ritual law. This would lead to God’s intervention in history to restore the Jewish people’s control over their own land and destiny.

In this context, rabbis rethought Hanukkah’s origins as the celebration of a military victory. Instead, they said, Hanukkah should be seen as commemorating a miracle that occurred during the Maccabees’ rededication of the temple: The story now told was how a jar of temple oil sufficient for only one day had sustained the temple’s eternal lamp for a full eight days, until additional ritually appropriate oil could be produced.

* 1. **Something to consider:** Based on this version of events, Jews have seen the Maccabees as heroes who fought for religious liberty against a repressive regime. But the historical record is more complex. According to First Maccabees, “lawless men came forth from Israel, and misled many, saying, ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles round about us’. … [T]hey built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil.” These “lawless men” were not the Seleucid rulers, but Jews who wanted to integrate aspects of Greek (Hellenistic) culture with Jewish tradition. Hellenistic culture was based on the Greek language, literature, art and philosophy, as well as the distinctively Greek form of social and political organisation, the polis. But Hellenistic culture also involved the worship of Greek gods and social customs, such as athletic contests, that some considered incompatible with Jewish tradition. These Hellenising Jews were the targets of the Maccabees’ vengeful attacks as much as the Seleucid Greek regime itself. As First Maccabees relates: “They organised an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and lawless men in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety.” In this light, the Maccabees were not heroic liberators and defenders of religious freedom. Rather, they could be viewed as intolerant religious zealots, intent on stamping out any attempt to “modernise” Jewish tradition. Today, most Jews would still consider the Maccabees to be heroes and defenders of Judaism. Certainly, it’s the story that children are taught in Jewish schools and synagogues. However, they would be surprised, and likely rather disturbed, by the religious fundamentalism of the Maccabees that is represented in the historical sources.

1. Zionism
   1. Hanukkah gained new meaning with the rise of Zionism. As the early pioneers in Israel found themselves fighting to defend against attacks, they began to connect with the ancient Jewish fighters who stood their ground in the same place. The holiday of Hanukkah, with its positive portrayal of the Jewish fighter, spoke to the reality of the early Zionists who felt particularly connected to the message of freedom and liberty.

Hanukkah began to find new expression in the years leading up to the founding of the modern State of Israel. In the post-Holocaust world, Jews are acutely aware of the issues raised by Hanukkah: oppression, identity, religious freedom and expression, and the need to fight for national independence. Hanukkah has developed into a holiday rich with historical significance, physical and supernatural miracle narratives, and a dialogue with Jewish history.

The modern secular nationalist movement among the Jews of the late 19th and early 20th centuries looked to the past in search of heroes whose prowess was expressed through their bodies, not (or not only) through their minds — heroes whose stirring accomplishments may be recorded in books but were not limited to the writing of books.

**Salvation through ourselves, not through God - secularism**

* 1. When Jewish sports clubs were established in central Europe, one of the first and largest networks of those clubs was called “Maccabi” (accented on the second syllable: “mah-KAH-bee”). Its successor organization, the Maccabi World Union, is the sponsor of the sports competitions for Jewish athletes from around the world. Maccabi sport clubs have been transformed into professional teams in some Israeli cities. Maccabi beer — no relation to the sports organization — is so named in order to promote a manly image for its primarily male market.

1. America
   1. How is Hanukkah celebrated in America? What do you think about this?
   2. Before World War II, Christmas was becoming increasingly popular even among immigrant Jews in America. By the 1950s, for example, 40 percent of middle-class Jewish homes in Chicago had a Christmas tree. In response to the seductiveness of Christmas, Jewish leaders worked to shore up the celebration of Hanukkah, which they did by framing it as a meaningful alternative complete with a dramatic story, a family setting, and, of course, gift-giving. Producers of Judaica, consumer goods and advertisers saw a great opportunity in marketing Hanukkah as a Jewish alternative to Christmas, manufacturing new ritual objects, promoting holiday foods, and encouraging parents to shower children with gifts thereby making them immune to “Christmas envy.”
   3. Inspired by children’s Christmas events in churches, American rabbis began introducing special Hanukkah celebrations for children at synagogues in the 19th century. They would tell the story of Hanukkah, light candles, sing hymns and hand out sweets. This was a way to entice children to attend synagogues, which otherwise offered little of interest to them. Over time, Hanukkah became one of the only times of the year that many Jewish families engaged with Jewish tradition.
   4. In the early 20th century, with the commercialisation of Christmas well under way, more changes occurred. Gift-giving was never a feature of Hanukkah historically, but new Jewish immigrants from Europe began buying presents for their children as a way of signifying their economic success in the new world.
   5. In more recent years, the public display of menorahs has also been promoted by Chabad, the Orthodox Jewish Hasidic movement that aims to bring Jews closer to their own religion. These displays, often alongside Christmas trees, have elevated the significance of Hanukkah in the minds of both Jews and non-Jews.
   6. Yet, the commercialization of religion is not the whole story. The popularity of Hanukkah is also linked to its symbolic meaning as an American holiday. The Hanukkah story is, after all, one that is celebrated as a struggle for religious liberty, a people’s will to fight for their beliefs, and, of course, a victory. Hanukkah also roughly coincided with Christmas, and it offered an opportunity for Jews to participate in the holiday celebrations complete with gift-giving and merry-making without giving up their distinct religious and cultural identities.

**Songs**

Anu Nosim Lapidim

What do you think of this song? What sticks out?

We spoke about the Zionist approach to Hanukkah:

Perhaps the most daring rejection of the traditions of Hanukkah in popular Israeli music is the song Anu nos’im lapidim (“We are carrying torches”), the lyrics to which were written by the poet “Ze’ev” (Aharon Ze’ev, 1900-1968) and published in his 1951 collection Pirhei Bar (“Wildflowers”). Sung to a march beat, the song is an anthem of the self-sacrificing pioneers of modern Israel, who, contrast their lives with those of the Maccabees as described in the Babylonian Talmud.

The lyricist does not directly deny the historicity of the Talmudic account of the oil that miraculously burned for eight days. He does, however, contrast the ancient tale of God’s deliverance of the Jews with the mythic accomplishments of the pioneer generations of modern Jews returning to their homeland.

Yemei HaHanukah:

Aside from the difference from the English, which we will get to in a minute, what sounds familiar but different?

The traditional liturgy speaks of giving thanks “for the miracles and the wonders… which You performed for us in those days at this season.” The lyrics of Y’mei ha-Hanukkah, written by Hebrew linguist and educator Avraham Avrunin (1869-1957), speak of appreciation “for the miracles and the wonders which the Maccabees brought about.” Significantly, among religious traditionalists in Israel it is common to hear the end of that refrain revised to: “…which God brought about for the Maccabees.”

**Suggested Questions for thought and discussion:**

1. Chanukah O Chanukah is the commonly known English version of Yemei Ha’Chnukah. Compare this song and the English translation in the middle, what are the main meaningful differences?
2. What do those differences suggest about the different approach of Israelis and Americans to the holiday?
3. What do you think the educational emphasis of Chanukah should be? Should it focus on the Macabim (Maccabeus) as brave heroes who fought for the freedom of their nation and their people? Should it focus on the miracle of oil and the faith in God? Should it simply be a ‘party theme’ holiday? Or should it focus on the concept of spreading the light? Would you suggest any other optional focus?