

A BRIEF HISTORY OF Chanukah
More than a little oil – edited by Rabbi Ron Symons

BACK STORY

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Alexander the Great conquered Israel in the 4th century B.C.E. He was a benevolent ruler result of a vision he was said to have had before he began any battle. The story goes that upon entering Jerusalem, he was met by the High Priest, Shimon HaTzaddik. Before every battle, he saw his likeness in a vision. As a result, he cancelled taxes on the Jews during the Sabbatical year, offered animals in the Temple on his own behalf, and granted the Jews religious freedom.

Conditions changed when Alexander died. His empire was divided among different generals. After a power struggle, Israel came under the control of the Seleucid Dynasty – Greek kings who ruled from Syria.

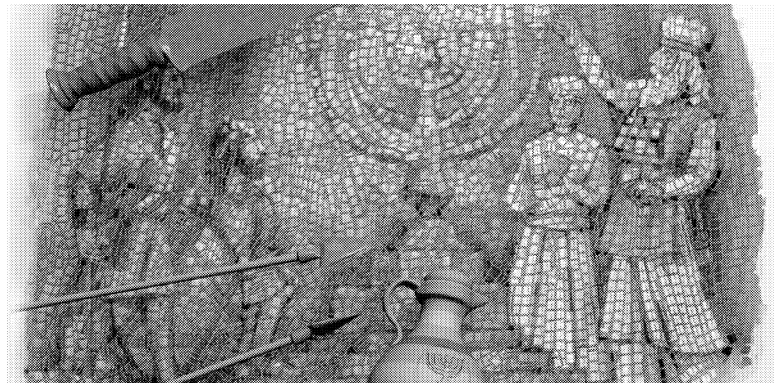
Until this point, the major threat was spiritual annihilation resulting from Hellenization, the adaptation of Greek culture and philosophy (assimilation). Hellenization attacked the moral, ethical and religious fibre of Judaism. Many Jews resisted assimilation but many became ardent Hellenists.

Under the Seleucid kings, this situation continued. With the rise of Antiochus IV both the spiritual and physical survival of the Jewish people was severely threatened. Sadly enough, Jewish Hellenists contributed towards Jewish destruction by complaining to the king that the pace of assimilation was not fast enough. Tragedy resulted.

One man, named Joshua, or the Hellenized Jason, bribed the King into replacing the high priest and appointing him instead. This new “high-priest” erected a gymnasium near the Temple where the priests would go and play sports, thereby neglecting their duties. Greek dress, names, and language took hold in Jerusalem as never before. Judaic religious observance and levels of morality declined.

Radical Hellenizers were still not satisfied. Menelaus, another Hellenized Jew, bought out the High priesthood from under Jason with an even bigger bribe. (Menelaus was not of a priestly family.) Since there was not enough money in the Temple treasury to pay the King, he sold some of the Temple Vessels to raise the money.

Jason was not about to let himself be deposed, so he amassed an army and marched on Menelaus in Jerusalem, massacring many Jews on the way. Antiochus IV interpreted this as a sign of revolt against his kingdom and supported Menelaus. He also slaughtered thousands of



Jews. Only Judaism still stood in the way of Hellenization. It had to be destroyed, whatever the cost.

Antiochus IV proceeded to desecrate and defile the Temple. He placed idols of Greek gods on the Temple altar and forced Jews to bow down to them on penalty of death. On the 25th of Kislev, pigs were sacrificed in honor of these statues and their blood brought into the Holy of Holies. Antiochus also forbade any observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and the declaration of the new moon. He placed heavy taxes upon the people as well.

Antiochus IV gave himself the additional name of Epiphanes which means the Divine or visible god (He was to be equal with Jupiter). A statue with his likeness was one of those brought into the Temple. Dear Menelaus acted as his high priest.

Throughout Israel, pagan centers of worship were set up and Jews commanded, upon threat of death to worship these gods, eat non-kosher food and commit other “abominations”. Their arrival in the little town of Modin marked the beginning of the end for the Syrians. The Hasmonean family, priestly descendants and dedicated Jews, could not tolerate such requests and revolted.

Mattathias was the head of the Hasmonean family. He had five sons: Simon, Eliezer, Judah, Yochanan and Jonathan. When the Syrians came to Modin, they erected an altar, and ordered Mattathias to sacrifice a pig to Jupiter. He stood still. A young Hellenized Jew stepped forward and offered to sacrifice it. Mattathias grabbed a sword from one of the soldiers and killed the Jew and the soldiers. The Hasmonians and other Jews of Modin then fled to the hills. The Jewish revolt had begun.

Within a year, Mattathias died and his son Judah the Maccabee took over. It has been said that Maccabee stood for the first letter of each word in the Hebrew sentence. “Who is like unto Thee among the mighty, Oh Lord?” supposedly inscribed in his shield. Others say his surname comes from the word *makkebet*, or hammer. He was the implement by which G-d smote the Syrians.

Over the next several years, the Jews fought and defeated the various, Syrian army divisions. On the 25th of Kislev, in 165 B.C.E., after capturing Jerusalem and cleansing the Temple, they rededicated it and lit the Menorah.

Chanukah is celebrated for 8 days because the rededication ceremony, modeled on the original dedication ceremony of Solomon lasted for 8 days; and because at the time of Sukkot in the year 165 B.C.E. we were not able to celebrate in the Temple due to the political/religious situation – Chanukah is the (8 day) Sukkot of Kislev. The famous story of the one day cruse of oil lasting for 8 is a later rabbinic addition to this historic reasoning.

In Song: Rabbi Joe Black, “Judah Maccabee”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGEeO9ruFLA>

