

Judah and the Maccabees – the story of Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an 8-day winter celebration held every year from 25 Kislev – 2 Tevet. In our current year 5783, this corresponds to Dec. 19-25, 2022 CE.

This is really a celebration which has its roots in military conquest; only because of the extraordinary political/military events leading to Hanukkah, could there be Yeshua, otherwise the Jewish race could have been exterminated. Even though this festival is not included in God's appointed yearly festivals as listed in Leviticus 23, it became a tradition and Yeshua celebrated it.

Therefore, we as scholars of history can accurately deduce that -
no Hanukkah = no Moshiach

Hanukkah is also known in the bible as the Feast of Dedication. [John 10]

For the sake of chronology, we count the years from creation; we are now in year 5783 [2022 CE].

If these great successive victories had NOT been accomplished, then 164 years after the first Hanukkah celebration, the Jewish race could have been decimated and nothing would have happened. But as we learn from history, since these Jewish victories did indeed occur, then 164 years after the first Hanukkah celebration came an amazing event – the coming of Moshiach.

The best way to relate history is in the form of a story, which is far more engaging than mere event data. Some interesting features of these ancient stories is their forecast of future events.

This is the story of Hanukkah. Unlike the fables, songs and Hallmark movies that have relegated Christmas to a mere pagan event, this narrative of Hanukkah is true. Yeshua celebrated it, as apostle John relates in chapter 10, so this gives it great importance.

In the year 2479 [1282 BCE], Israel left the slavery of Egypt after the 10 plagues and came into the land previously called Canaan. They cleared it of the 6 idolatrous nations at God's instructions given to Moshe. Centuries later, B'nai Israel [nation of Israel] had been pushed out of Eretz Israel [land of Israel] because of their unfaithfulness to Torah.

They were overrun and then exiled to Babylon, which was later conquered by Syria. Babylon became part of the Syrian-Greek Empire, ruled by the Syrian dynasty of the Seleucids.

Antiochus III, the King of Syria, reigned from 3538 to 3574 [222-187 BCE]. He went to war against King Ptolemy of Egypt over the possession of the Land of Israel. Antiochus won and the Land of Israel was annexed to his empire. At the beginning of his reign, he was favorably disposed toward the Jews and granted them some privileges; autonomy of culture, commerce, religion and national identity.

Later on however, his empire was conquered by the Romans. They basically gained market share by acquisition, as it were, and the obvious goal was to gain monetarily from their new conquest of Syria. These ancient empires were provincial-states, most with their own national groups, individual languages, customs, gods, etc. Israel at that time became annexed to the Syrian empire.

Antiochus III, as a client of the Roman empire, was compelled to pay their heavy taxes, so this burden fell upon the various peoples of his empire; the Syrian people were forced to furnish the gold that was required of him.

When Antiochus III died, his son Selucius IV took over, and further oppressed the Jews. Added to the Jews' troubles from the outside, were the dangers of assimilation that threatened Judaism from within. Hellenism is basically the process by which other people groups would acquiesce to Greek culture, governance, commerce and religion.

This demographic absorption to Greek life occurred roughly 300 BCE to 300 CE. In the Jewish commonwealth, Hellenists were spineless Jews who were basically sellouts; they accepted the new idolatrous lifestyle of the Syrians, rather than rock the boat by keeping to the Law of Moshe [Moses]. When you imagine a Hellenist, image Bernie Sanders.

To review, the Law of Moshe was given to Israel in the year 2479, after he led them out of Egyptian slavery. 50 days after they left Egypt, they camped out for about a year in the land of Horeb at Mount Sinai, during which time Moshe was given the 10 Devarim [10 Words] by God. During the remaining 40 years of the Israel's travels in the wilderness, Moshe continued to write God's words [mitzvot/instructions], the first 5 books of the bible known as Torah.

This steady capitulation to Hellenism was increasing in the land of Israel, among many Jews. Yochanan, the Cohen Gadol [high priest], foresaw the danger to Judaism, from the penetration of Syrian-Greek influence into the Holy Land. It was in the metropolis of Antioch was where the Jews first began to be Hellenized, and Antioch was the place from which Palestine was ruled.

It's important to note here, that two major cities on earth have shaped philosophy and morality from antiquity right up to our current times: Athens, Greece and Jerusalem, Israel.

In stark contrast to the ideal of outward beauty and intellectual attainment held by the Greeks and Syrians, Judaism emphasizes truth and moral purity, as commanded by God in the Torah. Greek philosophy is abstract and intellectual, whereas the Jewish understanding of life is literal and concrete. The true Jewish people could never give up their faith in God and accept the idol-worship of the Syrians.

Cohen Gadol Yochanan opposed the Jewish Hellenists and their introduction of Greek and Syrian customs into the land, so they hated him. One of these Hellenized Jews told the king's commissioner that the Temple treasury contained a great deal of wealth; solid gold and silver utensils and implements created especially for Temple service, along with the contributions of the 1/2 shekel [silver coin], made by all adult Jews annually. These monies were given for the purpose of providing offerings on the altar, as well as for fixing and improving the Temple building.

Another part of the treasury consisted of orphans' funds which were deposited for them until they became of age. Naturally, the immoral prospect of stealing funds raised its ugly head - Selucius IV desperately needed money in order to pay off the Romans. He sent his royal official Helidoros to take the money from the treasury of the Temple.

Yochanan, the High Priest, begged the minister not to do it. But Helidoros didn't listen and entered the gate of the Temple. Suddenly, he became pale with fright. The next moment he fainted and fell to the ground. After Helidoros regained consciousness, he didn't dare enter again. This event has been a favorite subject of at least ten famous artists from 1512-1861.

A short time later, Selucius IV was assassinated [probably by Helidoros] after which his brother Antiochus IV began to reign over Syria in 3586 [174 BCE]. He was a rash, impetuous tyrant, contemptuous of religion and of the feelings of others. He considered himself a god, and called himself Epiphanes, meaning "god manifest." Several of the Syrian rulers received similar titles. However, a historian of his time, Polebius, gave him the epithet Epimanes "madman", a title more suitable to his madness; this nickname came into common public use.

Lamech, Nimrod [founder of Babel], Pharoah [during the lifetime of Moshe], Nero, Hitler are examples of potential world-dominators; Epimanes fits this pattern also. Like these tyrants, he also was relegated to the dustbin of anti-semitic history.

Antiochus IV wanted to unify his kingdom through the medium of a common religion and culture, and attempted to eliminate the individualism of the Jews, by suppressing all observation of Torah. He removed the righteous High Priest, Yochanan, from the Temple in Jerusalem, and in his place installed Yochanan's brother Joshua, who loved to call himself by the Greek name of Jason. Obviously, he was a Hellenist, and he used his new position to spread more of the Greek customs among the priesthood.

Jason was later replaced in the office of Cohen Gadol by another man, Menelaus, who had promised king Antiochus IV that he would bring in more money than Jason did. When Yochanan, the former High Priest, protested against the spread of the Hellenists' influence in the Holy Temple, Menelaus had Yochanon assassinated.

At that time Antiochus IV was engaged in a successful campaign against Egypt. However, orders from headquarters in Rome came to him, commanding him to stop the war, so he had to yield. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, a false rumor spread that Antiochus IV had a serious accident or had been killed. Thinking that he really was dead, the people rebelled against the treacherous high priest Menelaus, who fled together with his friends.

Antiochus IV returned from Egypt, enraged by Roman interference with his ambitions. When he heard what had taken place in Jerusalem, he ordered his army to attack the Jews, murdering thousands of them. [Sounds like recent history?] Antiochus then enacted a series of harsh decrees against the Jews. Jewish worship was forbidden; the scrolls of the Law were confiscated and burned. Sabbath rest, circumcision and the dietary laws were prohibited under penalty of death.

One of the respected priests of that generation, Rabbi Eliezer, a man of 90, was ordered by the servants of Antiochus IV to eat pork so that others would do the same. When he refused, they suggested to him that he pick up the meat to his lips to appear to be eating. But Rabbi Eliezer refused and was put to death. Thousands of others refused and sacrificed their lives.

Antiochus' men went from town to village, to force the Jewish inhabitants to worship pagan gods. Only one area of refuge remained; the hills of Judea with their caves. Even there, the Syrians pursued the faithful Jews; many Jews died as martyrs.

One day the henchmen of Antiochus arrived in the village of Modi'in where Mattityahu, the old priest, lived. A Syrian military officer had built a temporary altar in the marketplace of the village, and demanded that Mattityahu offer detestable pagan sacrifices to the Greek gods. Mattityahu replied, "I, my sons and my brothers are determined to remain loyal to the covenant which our God made with our ancestors!"



IVDAS MACHABEVS

At that point, wanting to pacify the Syrian military officer with a public act of idolatry, a Hellenistic Jew approached the altar to offer a sacrifice. Mattityahu drew his sword, killed him, then his sons and friends fell upon the Syrian officers and men. They killed many of the Syrian soldiers and chased the rest away. Then they destroyed the altar.

Mattityahu knew that Antiochus would be enraged when he got the news of this small-village revolt and would certainly send a military expedition to punish him and his followers. So Mattityahu left the village of Modi'in, together with his sons and friends, for the hills of Judea.

The loyal and courageous Jews joined them. They formed legions, and from time to time they left their hiding places to attack Syrian enemy detachments and outposts, and to destroy the pagan altars that were built by order of Antiochus. They became experts in guerrilla warfare.

Mattityahu had a position of honor, as priest and elder of Modi'in. Before his death, he called his five sons together and urged them to continue to fight in defense of God's Torah. He asked them to follow the counsel of their brother Shimon the Wise. In waging warfare, he said, their leader should be Judah the Strong.

Judah was called "Maccabee," a word composed of the initial letters of the four Hebrew words **Mi Kamocha Ba'eilim Hashem**, "Who is like You, Oh God."

IVDAS = Judas

MACHABEVS = Machabeus [hammer]

Makebet [Hebrew] and maqqaba [Aramaic] means 'Hammer' – this was Judah's nickname.

Antiochus sent his General Appolonius to wipe out Judah and his followers, the Maccabees. Even though the Syrians were more numerous and better-equipped than their adversaries, the Syrians were defeated by the Maccabees. Antiochus sent out another expedition which also was defeated. He realized that only by sending a powerful army could he hope to defeat Judah and his brave fighting men.

An army consisting of more than 40,000 Syrian soldiers attacked, under the leadership of two commanders, Nicanor and Gorgiash. When Judah and his brothers heard of that, their declaration in response was: "Let us fight unto death in defense of our souls and our Temple!"

The people assembled in Mizpah, where Samuel, the prophet of old, had offered prayers to God. After a series of battles, the Jews were again victorious against overwhelming odds.

The dedication of the Temple

The Maccabees returned to Jerusalem to liberate it. They entered the Temple and cleared it of the filth and idols placed there by the Syrian vandals. Interesting to note here: When it concerns Jewish land [national/community/neighborhood] the Palestinian/Arab tendency is still to create filth, latrines, or modern landfill.

This is true today; I saw trash dumped over the walls in the Arab-occupied, Palestinian-Authority [Waqf] controlled cities of Bethlehem and others. As I entered the Temple Mount controlled by the Waqf Arabs, there were 3 distinctive things to be seen; Israeli police riot gear, poppy flowers, trash. Since the golden Menorah had been stolen by the Syrians, the Maccabees made one of cheaper metal. Judah and his followers built a new altar, which he dedicated on the 25th of the month of Kislev, in the year 3622 [139 BCE].

The zeal of the Maccabees and their followers, to engage in worship, created a problem. They wanted to light the Menorah, but when they prepared to light it, they found only a small cruse of pure sacred olive oil bearing the seal of the High Priest Yochanan; there was only enough oil to burn for one day.

There was only enough sacred oil to burn for one day. They decided to go ahead and burn with the oil they had. By a miracle of God, it continued to burn for eight days, until new sacred oil was made available. That miracle proved that God had again taken His people under His protection. In memory of this, our sages appointed these eight days for annual thanksgiving and for lighting candles.

Temple services were again restored, according to the law of Moshe. Morning and evening offerings were again presented as God had directed. The Jews were joyful that they could worship properly in the restored temple area.

The holy fires for sacrifices on the altar, burned again in the Beit ha Mikdash, [Temple] from morning to evening, as prescribed by the Law. The priests were again busily officiating in the old customary ways, and day in, day out they prepared the offerings. Order and peace seemed established.

The Jewish farmers wanted to return to their land after two years of hardship, separation from families and danger, while they had been serving in the victorious Jewish army. It was high time to break the ground and to till the soil, if the barley was to grow and ripen in time for "Omer-offering" on Pesach [Passover] in the spring.

Jewish farmers had left their farming implements to rally about the heroic Hasmonean. The first victories had drawn even the hesitant into the ranks of the enthusiastic Jewish rebels, led by the sons of Mattityahu. Farmers had forsaken their lands, merchants and tradesmen their stores and shops. Even Torah students had emerged from the four walls of the Beit ha Mikdash to join the fight against the oppressors.

The goal of the battle seemed reached, and Torah again was supreme law in Israel.

One man, though, realized that the time for a return to normal living had not yet come. Israel could not yet afford to relax; it would have to stand ready and prepare to carry on the fight against the overwhelming odds of the enemy.

This man was Judah Maccabi. His name was upon everyone's lips and in every Jewish heart. He was admired as a hero, as a man with the heart of a lion and the simple piety of a child; as the one whose mighty armies fought and conquered, yet who never failed to pray to God, the Master of all battles, before he entered the fray.

It wasn't just the spirited warrior's joy that made Judah Maccabi stay in camp. He longed to return to his former peaceful life, to Modi'in, the quiet town of priests, which held the grave of his father Mattityahu. Bloodshed and battle meant a hard and unwanted profession for the men of Judea, who preferred peace to strife. Yet this was no time for relenting.

Not only did he stay the course of vigilance, but with his magnetic persuasion, he encouraged his comrades to stand fast. His own reasoning and his two wise brothers, Shimon and Yonatan, told him that only the first phase of this war of liberation had passed. Hard and desperate times were yet to come. Clever enemies merely needed an extended lull to prepare new assaults with more troops and better equipment. And there were enemies all around Judea, besides the defeated Syrians.

The neighboring countries begrudged the dazzling victories of the small Jewish armies. They would much rather have seen the Jewish people oppressed and humiliated, than armed and spirited, a threat to their own lands. How did the Jews have the sudden source of strength, courage and fortitude?

What was there in this nation that made history in proud seclusion and isolation from other nations? Ancient hostilities were revived. Descendants of Edom [the Idumeans], the Ammonites [Amman, Jordan], the Philistines [Palestinians] and Phoenicians; they all joined in their common jealousies of Israel.

Like the 4 nations that later surrounded Israel and united against them in 1967, this 'alliance' was a coalition of revenge. They were merely co-belligerents; united in a common cause against God's holy nation of Israel.

Messengers arrived from Gilead. The pagan people joined forces to destroy Judea. From Galilee came the bad news of similar evil intentions and active preparations in Ptolemais, Tyre and Tzidon. The messengers found Judah Maccabi already at work. Fortifications had to be built around Zion. Towers, walls, battlements and moat had to be constructed opposite the fort still held by their worst enemies; Hellenistic Jews, under the leadership of the false priest Menelaus.

These Hellenized Jews hated everything Jewish, and actually hoped for the return of the Syrian masters. Judah Maccabi prepared Jerusalem against them and against imminent assault by the troops of Antiochus. Under his supervision the Jewish people worked feverishly to refill their arsenals and turn the whole country into a stronghold.

Once this most important task was accomplished, Judah Maccabi led his freshly trained troops to the aid of the regions and villages harassed by the spiteful neighbors of Judea. He drove the Idumeans from Hebron, which they had annexed, and he punished the people who had acted with hostility towards the Jewish settlers. Then he led his army across the Jordan River against

the Ammonites. Their capital and their fortress of Yaeser fell before the furious onslaught of the Judah Maccabi the Hammer and his Jewish troops.

Judah's brother Shimon led an army north to aid the plagued Jews of Galilee, in the fertile Sea of Galilee basin. He defeated the enemy and cleared the Jewish land. At his urging, a great many of the Jewish settlers who had fled to Jerusalem, returned to their villages in outlying areas of Israel, to rebuild in safety what had been destroyed during the years of weakness. Judah Maccabi and Yonatan joined forces and marched against Gilead, where they were met with the toughest resistance. By Shavu'ot, [Feast of Weeks, usually in early June] this campaign was successfully concluded.

Judea was again free, and all lands captured by the neighboring nations had been recovered. Celebrations and festivity transformed Jerusalem and the Temple, just a few months after the victories over the Syrian armies. The Jewish people expressed their joy and gratitude to God in the form of psalms and offerings, for He had restored glory and liberty to the Jewish land.

This is the story of the miracle of Hanukkah. Like most Jewish stories, these events are patterns for similar events in the future. Israel is the center of God's attention. What happens in Eretz Israel is of epic proportions.

World War II was fought because of Israel. Why did Israel gain 'independence' in one day, on May 14, 1948? [Isaiah 66:8] Why did the US administration, via the leadership of Donald Trump, finally recognize Yerushalayim as eternal, national and spiritual capital of Israel 70 years later? Why was US the first foreign nation to observe Sukkot with a Sukkah on the White House lawn in 2019?



Menorah [7 branches]

The image above is the Temple Menorah, having 7 branches. This is what was used for Temple worship since the very first one, made by Bezalel [metalworker for Moshe]. At God's instruction and design, it was commissioned by Moshe to be used in the Mishkan [tabernacle].

The Temple Menorah in Yerushalayim was crafted by the Temple Mount Institute, ready to be installed in the third Temple. It weighs 1,000 pounds, contains 45 kg of 24-carat gold plating and is valued at \$3,000,000. Vadim Rabinovitch, leader of Jewish community of Ukraine, is the benefactor who made this possible.



A Hanukkah candelabra [Hanukkiah] is different from a menorah, and thus is designed differently; it is an 8-branch device, with a 'servant' candle in the center. The Hanukkiah was crafted to honor the Festival of Dedication and the memory of the miracle of the 8 days. Since it is profane [common] and not used in worship, it has to be distinctive from the typical 7-branched menorah, so as not to conflict with the proper temple ritual items.

Hanukkiah [9 branches]

God is doing what He has desired to do – bring light to the nations through Israel. Some truly amazing things are happening and will continue to move forward in Israel.

Folks who simply believe God's word and act in obedience, will find opportunities and freedom like nothing else. Shabbat will be the time of rest, of re-creation, of finding the Father's embrace.

Traditionally, the candles are lit a little before sunset, so they are already burning when the new day starts, at sunset. The hanukkiah faces east, and the center [servant] candle is lit first. On the first night, the servant candle lights the #1 candle on far right. Second night, servant candle lights #1 and #2 adjacent to it. Obviously, following the Hebrew language, things progress from right to left.

This pattern follows until on the eighth night, the servant candle lights all 8 candles, starting with #1 on the right side, ending with #8 on the left side. In this way, the light increases every night, to commemorate the victories won centuries ago. It reminds us of God's faithfulness to preserve a remnant people from hardship and grant them peace and prosperity.

As we celebrate Hanukkah wherever we are, we'll be surrounded by
Jews all over the world who will be celebrating God's faithfulness,
His gift of courage, provision and His Fatherly protection.