



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Hanukah

By Dr. Shani Berrin Tzoref

*JOFA strives to promote women's learning and scholarship,
and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to
increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

“A Great Miracle Happened (T)Here”

Variations on the Hanukah story, in Days of Yore and in Our Time

By Dr. Shani Berrin Tzoref

For ancient Jews, as for us today, Hanukah was not only an occasion for celebrating the reconstruction of the physical sanctuary in Jerusalem. It also served as a stimulus for the construction of meaning surrounding this event and its commemoration.² A comparison of the two most ancient accounts of the Hanukah story, in the Apocryphal books 1 and 2 Maccabees, indicates that differences between these works foreshadow modern distinctions between conceptions of Hanukah in the Diaspora and the Land of Israel. As heirs to these varying traditions, we face the post-modern challenge of incorporating them into our efforts to imbue our own Hanukah celebrations with meaning.

Antiquity: 1 and 2 Maccabees

There are significant differences between these two Apocryphal books, particularly with regard to the status of heroes and the values of inclusiveness vs. particularism. 2 Maccabees opens with two letters appealing to the Diaspora community to observe the festival of Hanukah. The initial verses read:

To our Jewish brothers in Egypt, your fellow Jews in Jerusalem and the land of Judea send peaceful greetings. May God do good to you, and be mindful of his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, his faithful servants...Now [we write] urging you to keep the days of the Feast of Tabernacles in the month of Kislev.³

Among the many details and themes highlighted by these passages, it is significant that 2 Maccabees addresses a Diaspora audience.⁴

1 Maccabees is a product of the land of Israel, best described as a work of pro-Hasmonean propaganda. The book is written as historical narrative and follows biblical patterns of motifs, style, and language, in presenting the Hasmoneans as latter-day incarnations of Phineas, Solomon and other biblical heroes.

2 Maccabees is an abridgement of a five volume work written in Greek by Jason of Cyrene in the Diaspora. The letters referred to above indicate that this “Reader’s Digest” abridgement of Jason’s work was produced in Israel, for export back to a foreign market. In its current form, 2 Maccabees is very dramatic; it employs a mixture of biblical and Hellenistic literary styles to tell the story of the Maccabean revolt, and to communicate a message concerning Divine retribution and salvation.

For the author of 1 Maccabees, Hanukah was about the Maccabean reclamation of the Temple as a result of the military prowess of the Maccabees. One example of the emphasis on Hasmonean status is found in 1 Maccabees chapter 5, when Joseph and Azariah, a pair of non-Hasmonean commanders, attempt to wage a battle and are routed. The author gives the reason for their failure: “they did not belong to the family of those men through whom deliverance was given to Israel” (5:62).⁵

In 1 Maccabees, the Maccabean revolt is portrayed as the only appropriate response to the Antiochene persecution. The description of the deaths of a group of non-Maccabean rebels because of their refusal to fight on Shabbat is not cast in a heroic light, but is presented as a cautionary tale.⁶ Passing reference is made to martyrs who flouted the Antiochene decrees, those who studied Torah or circumcised their babies, but only to illustrate the extent of the nation’s suffering and degradation. It is 2 Maccabees that preserves the story of the execution of a mother and her seven sons, and other heart-rending accounts of martyrdom, as examples of noble sacrifice deserving of admiration.⁷ The Diaspora version of the story is more concerned with God’s role than the role of the Maccabean instruments of Divine will, and it recognizes alternative ways of incurring Divine favor.

This receptivity to non-Maccabean Jews reflects an openness that has also been discerned in the tolerant attitude towards Gentiles in 2 Maccabees. The author of 1 Maccabees presumes a pervasive Gentile agenda to

persecute and eliminate Jews and Judaism. In 2 Maccabees, as in many books composed in the Hellenistic Diaspora, there is a general tendency to blame conflict upon the corrupt behavior of individuals, or occasionally of factions, while maintaining an overall view of peaceful relations between Jews and Gentiles.⁸

Modernity: *Mi Yemallel; Oh, Hanukah! I Have a Little Dreidel;*

Similar cultural distinctions can be found in Hanukah songs from the modern period. It has frequently been observed that Hanukah has functioned in modern times as a vehicle for expressing disparate preconceived values, including some that others would view as antithetical to the “true” spirit of the holiday. At least two of these modern constructs align with those we have identified in 1 and 2 Maccabees respectively: Zionism and inclusiveness.

The popular song “*Mi Yemallel*” seems rather traditional on its surface. It uses language familiar from liturgy, and refers to the hope for redemption. However, the twists on the familiar expressions are actually quite subversive.

The lyrics are as follows:

מי ימלל גבורות ישראל אותם מי ימנה?
הן בכל דור יקום הגבור גואל העם.
שמע!
בימים ההם בזמן הזה
מכבי מושיע ופודה
ובימינו כל עם ישראל
יתאחד יקום ויגאל.

Who can recount the **mighty deeds of Israel**? Who can count them? Lo! In every generation a **hero** will arise, the redeemer of the nation. Hark! In those days and in our time, a Maccabee rescues and liberates. And in our days, all the nation of Israel will unite, arise, and **be redeemed**.

The opening words “מי ימלל גבורות ישראל” — “Who can recount the mighty acts of Israel?” are an appropriation of Psalm 106:2, “מי ימלל גבורות ה’” — “Who can recount the mighty acts of God,” marked by the replacement of God by Israel. Further, “הן בכל דור” — “in every generation” resonates with the text of the Passover Haggadah, which assures that “הקדוש ברוך הוא מצלינו מידם” — “in every generation...the Holy One Blessed be He saves us from their hand.” However, in “*Mi Yemallel*”, what arises in every generation is the “hero” — “הגבור”, the human redeemer of the nation. And again, the song asserts that “בימים ההם בזמן הזה” — “in those days and in our time” a Maccabee arises to provide salvation. This employs the formula of the blessing on the Hanukah candles, transforming the affirmation that *God performs miracles* then and now. Just as 1 Maccabees glorified the military founders of the Hasmonean dynasty, “*Mi Yemallel*” reflects a conscious attempt in modern times to promulgate a message of the importance of human heroism in a Zionist context.

The English version of this song lacks the strong tendentiousness of the Hebrew. I do not know if this is due to a deliberate effort on the part of the translator, or is the result of sub-conscious factors, or simply the exigencies of the rhyme, but the English is much more bland and a bit more inclusive:

Who can retell the **things that befell us**? Who can count them? In every age a **hero or sage** comes to our aid. Hark! In days of yore in Israel’s ancient land, Brave Maccabeus led the faithful band. But now all Israel must as one arise, **redeem itself through deed and sacrifice**

Another Hanukah song that highlights differences between Israel and Diaspora is “Oh Hanukah” (in Hebrew, ימי החנוכה):

Oh Hanukah, Oh Hanukah, come light the Menorah
Let’s have a party, we’ll all dance the *hora*
Gather round the table, we’ll all have a treat
Sivivon to play with, and *latkes* to eat.
And while we are playing

The candles are burning bright
One for each night, they shed a sweet light
To remind us of days long ago.

Dreidels and holiday foods appear in the Yiddish, English, and Hebrew versions of the song (though the former two feature *latkes* – potato pancakes, while the Hebrew has *sufganiyot* – jelly donuts). But the Yiddish version emphasizes miracles and God, just as 2 Maccabees stressed miraculous Divine intervention: “*Zingt ‘al Hanisim’, Loibt Gott far di nisim,*” — “Sing ‘*al Hanisim*; praise God for the miracles.” In contrast, the Hebrew “translation” refers to the miracles “that *the Maccabees brought about*” – “אשר חוללנו”, and to telling the story of the victory of the Maccabees.⁹

The English translation describes the function of the candles: “To remind us of days long ago.” We may see some similarity here to the appeal to history in 2 Maccabees, but what is most noteworthy about this formulation is how generic it is. In part this may reflect the relative ignorance of the target audience at the time of translation. But it is also indicative of a universalistic stance like that noted in 2 Maccabees. Of course, in American culture, this universalism gets taken to an extreme. “I Have a Little Dreidel” is devoid of any content that pertains to the Hanukah story, or religious ritual or observance. The song is a celebration of the fact that there is a holiday, without any indication of the nature of the holiday. Other Diaspora Hanukah motifs are the importance of religious freedom, multi-culturalism, and even consumerism.

Today: The Challenge

When I was growing up in New York in the 1970’s, I repeatedly heard the catch-phrase “pick and choose”—it was asserted that one could not “pick and choose” what one liked from within Judaism, within *halakha*, but that it was necessary to take the whole package. In the 21st century, that seems quaint. We are constantly picking and choosing from among seemingly endless selections of consumer products and services, sources of information, and variations of Jewish traditions, beliefs, and attitudes. In the search for meaning and authenticity, we need to attend to multiple factors in choosing our rituals and stories – historicity, ethics, cultural identifications, and family traditions all are brought to bear.

I wish I had some clear criteria to offer for selecting one’s myths, but I don’t think I do. I like the song “*Mi Yimallel*”; I like singing this in rounds as I have since childhood, and I like envisioning heroic Jewish warriors, both in antiquity and in my lifetime. And yet, I don’t want to be militaristic, nor to replace God with human heroes. I like giving my kids presents, though I feel guilty about buying into the consumer culture. I like thinking that the Maccabees’ victory was about ensuring the continuity of Judaism, but I know that it was also about the suppression of alternative approaches to Judaism, and I know that within a generation or so, the Hasmoneans were using Judaism as a mere tool for their own Hellenistic ambitions.¹⁰

So what will I be doing during the 8 days of Hanukah commencing with the 25th of Kislev? I will certainly be lighting candles, preferably oil lamps, increasing the quantity of lights daily until I reach 9 including the *shamash*. I will be spending Shabbat Hanukah in celebration of a young friend’s Bat Mitzvah, and I look forward to hearing her read from the Torah, and to singing songs with family and friends, in Hebrew and English, from *Ma’oz Tzur* and *Al Hanisim* to “You may not guess, but it was the *latkes*...” And what story shall I tell? I hope that I will tell and hear many stories, of oil and miracles, of battles and victories, of the glory and descent of the Hasmoneans, and of struggles, achievements, defeats, and hopes. If I am ambivalent about which Hanukah traditions are most valid and valuable, I can nonetheless celebrate the multivalence and multivocality of the tradition overall. And if I come across a game of *dreidell/sevivon*, I hope I’ll not belittle this activity as a late medieval development, nor overly condemn anachronistic attempts to ascribe the origins of the game to Hasmonean-era schoolchildren, but that I’ll just appreciate the opportunity to play and spin, to shape the tale as we publicize the great miracles that happened (t)here.

1 Dr. Shani Tzoref is a Visiting Scholar at the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature at Hebrew University, and a Research Associate of the Department of Hebrew, Biblical, and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. She holds a Masters degree in Classical Jewish History from Yeshiva University, and a PhD in Second Temple History and Literature from the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York

This issue of
Vehigadet Levitekh
was made possible through
the generosity of
The Farber family.

Dedicated to the memory of our beloved
mother and *safta*, **Esther Farber z"l**,
a pioneer in Orthodox feminism whose
great strength, courage, dignity and
elegance continue to influence and inspire
all of her children and grandchildren.

And in special honor of **Olivia Farber**,
Esther's granddaughter, who carries
on the legacy as she celebrates her
Bat Mitzvah this Hanukah.

- University. Dr. Tzoref has taught at Yeshiva University, the London School of Jewish Studies, Drisha Institute, and New York University, and, most recently, was the co-ordinator of the Biblical Studies program at the University of Sydney before making aliya in August along with her 3 children.
- 2 In last year's Hanukah issue of *Vehigadet Levitekh*, Lisa Schlaff discussed the transition from the centrality of the military victory in the historical writings of 1 Maccabees and Josephus, to the rabbinic emphasis on the miracle of the cruse of oil. This was plausibly explained as a reflection of dissatisfaction with the ongoing corruption of the Hasmonean dynasty. This d'var Torah expands upon the redefinition of the nature of the holiday by looking at an excerpt from yet another ancient source, 2 Maccabees, also from the Apocrypha.
 - 3 2 Macc 1:1-2, 39. Similarly, in the second letter (2 Macc 1:18), "Since on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev we shall celebrate the purification of the temple, we thought it necessary to notify you, in order that you also may celebrate the festival of booths and the festival of the fire given when Nehemiah, who built the temple and the altar, offered sacrifices." We will not deal at length here with the interesting identification of Hanukah as Sukkot in chapter 1 and, more extensively, in chapter 10 of 2 Maccabees. Two simple points will suffice: (1) Sukkot is associated with the dedication of the First Temple by Solomon in 1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chron 7:8-10; and possibly with the dedication of the Second Temple in Nehemiah chs. 8-10. (2) The simplest explanation for the 8-day duration of Hanukah is that it follows biblical precedent for dedication of sanctuaries. See Lev 9:1 for the Tabernacle dedication; 1 Kings 8:66 and 2 Chron 7:9-10 for Solomon's Temple dedication, and also 2 Chron 29:17 for Hezekiah's rededication. Contrast this observation with some of the creative proposals for reconciling the 8 day period with the miracle of the oil, e.g., those listed in "8 Reasons for 8 Days" by Rabbi Reuven Subar <http://ohr.edu/yhiy/article.php/1299>.
 - 4 Our discussion of 2 Maccabees relies heavily upon the analysis of Prof. Daniel Schwartz, especially his *2Maccabees: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (מקבים ב/כ, מנבוא, תרגום, פירוש ספר) Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi 2004.
 - 5 A parallel story in 2 Maccabees (12:40) explains the defeat as Divine retribution for transgression, saying that the slain men had been wearing "consecrated objects of idols of Jamnia." This religious perspective is typical of 2 Maccabees.
 - 6 The author of 1 Maccabees makes a point of highlighting the Maccabean innovation permitting defensive battle on Shabbat. In his view, those who refused to defend themselves on Shabbat sacrificed their lives unnecessarily. In 2 Maccabees, references to Shabbat and battle emphasize the praiseworthy observance of Shabbat.
 - 7 2 Macc. ch.7. This is an early version of the story more familiar in later forms as the story of "Hannah and her seven sons."
 - 8 This distinction is particularly evident with respect to the description of the causes of the Antiochene persecution. This is one of the most persistent debates among historians of the Maccabean revolt, since the Hellenizing reform described in the ancient Jewish sources is not corroborated in contemporary Greek sources, and seems out of keeping with what is known of general Hellenistic polytheism, and of the specific policies of Antiochus IV. Leaving aside the attempt to resolve *what really happened*, for our purposes, we note the contrast between our two sources. In 1 Maccabees, Antiochus is clearly portrayed as an arrogant, greedy, and cruel villain. His decision that "his whole kingdom should all be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs" (1 Macc. 1:41-42) appears to be an arbitrary dictatorial whim. In 2 Maccabees, "because of his Diaspora character, our author presents the decrees as the result of a misunderstanding (the king concluded- incorrectly- that Judea rebelled. [2 Macc 5:11])" (translated from D. Schwartz, *op. cit.* p. 38, following upon the analysis of V. Tcherikover.)
 - 9 This wording has been emended by some to "the miracles that were wrought for the Maccabees" – "אשר חוללו למקבים" or even "that God wrought".
 - 10 Last year, the NY Times website posted an article by Jennifer Michael Hecht, in which she stated that based upon her reading of ancient Jewish sources, including 1 and 2 Maccabees, "This year, my family's Hanukah will be a celebration of Hellenized Jewry. These ancestors weren't turncoats, after all — they were good cosmopolitan Jews." <http://happydays.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/12/15/my-real-holiday/#more-11> This was a troubling piece for me – here was an intelligent educated woman, reaching informed conclusions based upon her reading of the sources and her own values...and yet I oppose her position.

To access previous issues of *Vehigadet Levitekh*, please visit our website at www.jofa.org.