Hanukkah: A Vote Against Religious Zealotry

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He teaches advanced Tanakh at Yeshiva University. This article originally appeared in his "Holiday Companion."

One of the difficulties in learning about the meaning of Hanukkah is that there is no biblical text. There are only three pages in the Talmud dedicated to Hanukkah, and they focus primarily on the technical laws of lighting the hanukkiyah (Shabbat 21a–23b).

Why are there so few sacred texts for Hanukkah? This question becomes more pressing when we consider that the Maccabees and their supporters composed four Books of the Maccabees. These books describe the heroism of the Maccabees and God’s role in the victory.

Amazingly, the Talmud never mentions the Books of the Maccabees. Why would the Sages ignore them? Why did they exclude the Books of the Maccabees from the Bible?

Some argue that the Sages turned against the Maccabees once their descendants embraced Hellenism and persecuted the rabbis. Additionally, the Maccabees abused their religious authority and became corrupt (see Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Angel for Shabbat, vol. 1, 2010, p. 36).

Another possible dimension emerges from a closer reading of the Books of the Maccabees. One of the greatest heroes of the Maccabees was their putative ancestor Phinehas (I Maccabees 2:26), the grandson of Aaron the High Priest. In Numbers chapter 25, we learn of Phinehas’

religious zealotry as he killed the leading participants in the idolatry of Baal Peor. God approved of his actions, stopping a plague and granting Phinehas a covenant of peace (Numbers 25:12).

The Maccabees viewed Phinehas as a religious role model and sought to apply his teachings to a Hellenized society. According to the Books of the Maccabees, the Maccabean revolt began when a Hellenized Jew was about to sacrifice to the Greek gods. Mattathias (Judah Maccabee's father) killed him and proclaimed, "Whoever is on God's side, come with me!" (I Maccabees 2:27). This expression derives from Moses' battle cry against those who served the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:26). Although the Torah prohibits idolatry, Jewish Law does not allow Jews to take the law into their own hands and harm or kill violators of the Torah. However, the Maccabees believed that they had acted correctly like their ancestor Phinehas and like Moses. They claimed that the victory and miracles enumerated in the Books of the Maccabees were proof that God had sanctioned their actions.

On his deathbed, Mattathias instructed his children to continue to act in the manner of their ancestor Phinehas:

When the time drew near for Mattathias to die, he said to his sons, "…my children, be zealous for the Torah, and be ready to give your lives for the covenant of our fathers…Phinehas, our ancestor, through his act of zeal received a pact of priesthood for all time." (I Maccabees 2:49–50, 54)

Although the Maccabees idealized the religious zealotry of Phinehas, the Sages drastically curtailed the application of his behavior. A passage in the Jerusalem Talmud poignantly captures the paradox facing the Sages. On the one hand, they were uncomfortable with Phinehas' taking the law into his own hands. On the other hand, God explicitly approved of his actions:

Phinehas did not act in accordance with the Sages. Rabbi Judah b. Pazi said: the Sages wanted to excommunicate him, were it not for the divine spirit that jumped in and said that he and his descendants shall have an eternal covenant of priesthood. (J.T. Sanhedrin 9:7, 27b)

The Sages conclude that Phinehas himself acted appropriately, and God attested to the absolute purity of his motives. However, the Sages deeply circumscribed the applicability of Phinehas' actions to others.

Two generations after the Maccabean victory, Hillel preached that we should be students of Aaron—loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer to Torah (Avot 1:12). Hillel represents proper Jewish teaching. We should emulate Aaron, not Phinehas.

Perhaps Hillel also learned this lesson from his mentors, Shemayah and Abtalion (see Avot 1:10–11). They were the rabbinic leaders of the previous generation and were either converts of descended from converts (see also Gittin 57b). The Talmud relates a story where the High Priest was jealous over their popularity and denigrated them for being converts whereas he was nobly descended from Aaron the High Priest. Shemayah and Abtalion retorted that they truly reflected the peaceful values of Aaron whereas the High Priest—the biological descendant of Aaron—did not:

It happened with a high priest that as he came forth from the Sanctuary, all the people followed him, but when they saw Shemayah and Abtalion, they forsook him and went after Shemayah and Abtalion….The high priest said to them: May the descendants of the heathen come in peace! They answered him: May the descendants of the heathen, who do the work of Aaron, arrive in peace, but the descendant of Aaron, who does not do the work of Aaron, he shall not come in peace! (Yoma 71b)

The Sages rejected the Books of the Maccabees from the biblical canon and ignored them in their literature. The Sages also recast the holiday as a spiritual festival, downplaying the military victory and focusing instead on lighting candles and the beautification of the mitzvot (hiddur mitzvah). The Talmud describes one miracle associated with the Hanukkah story, namely, the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days (Shabbat 21b). Although the Books of Maccabees report several miracles, the miracle of the oil is conspicuously absent. By ignoring the miracles in the Books of the Maccabees, and by focusing on a miracle that the Maccabees did not consider important, the Sages effectively deprived the Maccabees of the divine sanction they had claimed for themselves.

The Sages also selected a Haftarah for Shabbat Hanukkah that preaches a message in opposition to that of the Maccabees (Megillah 31a). The prophet Zechariah envisioned a Menorah, and told Zerubbabel, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit—said the Lord of Hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). It appears that the Sages chose this passage to take a stand not only against the Hellenists, but also against the overzealous approach of the Maccabees.

In medieval times, Jews often were persecuted and powerless. Consequently, the military heroism of the Maccabees against the Greek enemy (and not against assimilated Jews) was brought to the fore and celebrated. The Al HaNissim prayer that we recite in the Amidah and the Grace after Meals appears to have been introduced during these times and represents a response to persecution.

During this period, a book entitled “Megillat Antiochus” that related the military victories of the Maccabees was composed and widely circulated. The Maoz Tzur hymn also was composed, celebrating God’s victories over the enemies of the Jews. This medieval model of Jewish pride in the Maccabees’ strength sustained our people through difficult times and became an additional layer of meaning for Hanukkah.

Although that medieval recasting of Hanukkah is important, the core of the talmudic observance of Hanukkah celebrates the triumph of the spirit of the Sages against both assimilation and religious zealotry. We celebrate peaceful dialogue, and transmission of the Torah to students and children. We should again be reminded of Hillel’s teaching: Love peace, pursue peace, love people, and bring them closer to the Torah.