

On Chanukah, We Met the Enemy, And They Was Us

DON'T BLAME IT ON THE GREEKS:
*The Real Story of Chanukah Suggests That It Was
Jewish Hellenists Who Imposed Pagan Culture in Judea,
And That the Maccabean Revolt Was as Much About
Class as It Was About Religion*

By JEROME A. CHANES
Chanukah is for me a *yahrzeit*™
Thus Professor Louis Feldman, a scholar of classical languages and history, used to bemoan the misrepresentation of the Greek side in the Chanukah story.

Most of us have been brought up with the idea that the holiday, like Purim, has its bad guys and its good guys. In the case of Chanukah, the bad guys, in the words of the *Al HaNissim* prayer, are “*Malchuth Yavan har’sh’adah*,” the “evil Greek kingdom” of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Syrian Greeks. The good guys are, of course, the Maccabees. The implication? Prior to Antiochus, the Jews of Palestine were pious and unassimilated, wrested away from their observance only by Antiochus’s evil decrees.

So what’s wrong with this picture? Plenty, as it happens. First, as Feldman and other historians of the period have noted, Hellenism was a fact in Judea long before the Maccabees. Greek was known and spoken in Judea, at least in aristocratic circles, more than a full century before the reign of Antiochus IV (known as Antiochus Epiphanes, 175-164 BCE). Indeed, a century before Antiochus, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, suggesting Greek was already commonplace. Likewise the prevalence of Greek names among Jews, evidence of hefty commercial relations between Jews and Greeks and the appearance of the Book of Ben Sira, authored around 180 BCE and replete with Stoic philosophy. All point to Hellenism’s inroads in Judea by the time Antiochus IV comes on the scene.

Second, Antiochus IV had in fact been educated in an atmosphere of religious tolerance, which he had inherited from Alexander the Great, from the Persians and, most important, from his own father, Antiochus III, who had shown special favor to the Jews. Moreover, as a practical matter, it was hardly in the interest of the Syrian Greek rulers, the Seleucids, who were in constant struggle with the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt and with the Romans, to alienate a significant portion of their subjects.

So what did happen? Here’s the real story.

It was Antiochus IV’s bad luck to ascend the throne in a time of conflict, internally within Judea and externally with Egypt and Rome. In Judea, the powerful high-priesthood was held by the pious Onias III, who (unluckily for him) was pro-Egyptian in his sympathies. Onias’s brother Jason, knowing that Antiochus needed huge sums of money for his campaigns against Ptolemaic Egypt and Rome, promised the king substantial cash if the high-priesthood were transferred to him.

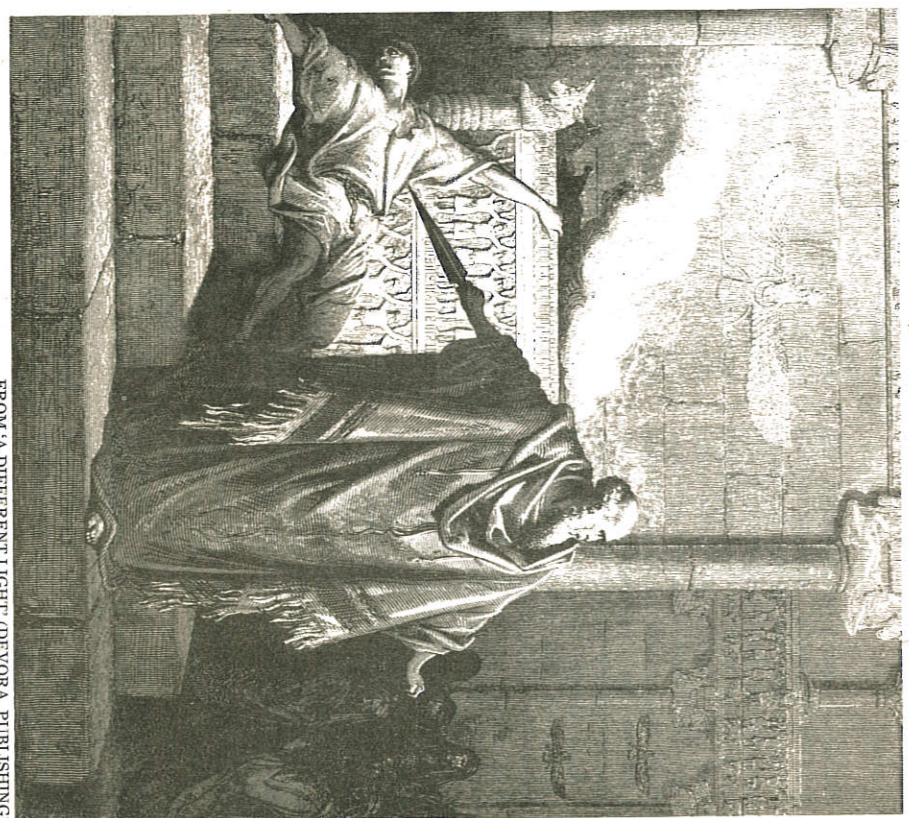
Antiochus agreed. Jason, a committed Hellenist, instituted or permitted many Hellenistic and even pagan practices, without any compulsion by Antiochus.

Three years later, in 171 BCE, Antiochus dismissed Jason as high priest and replaced him with Menelaus, who had offered even greater sums of money and who, though not even a priest, was backed by the financially powerful and highly assimilated Tobiad family. Menelaus inaugurated his tenure by murdering Onias III and plundering the Temple treasury, and he proceeded aggressively to advance the Hellenizing agenda. That agenda, it must be remembered, represented a crossing of cultural lines, and potentially a total collapse of Jewish identity. The First Book of Maccabees suggests that it was the Jewish Hellenizers — not the Greeks — who began imposing pagan culture in Judea.

The plot thickens: In 170-169 BCE, when Antiochus was in Egypt battling the Ptolemies, Onias’s brother Jason, the deposed high priest, seized Jerusalem in a surprise attack. It was Jason’s success, according to the Second Book of Maccabees, that led to Antiochus’s intervention in Palestine. Antiochus could not afford unrest and possible civil war in Judea while attempting to conquer Egypt to the south. Since the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE Palestine had been the main bone of contention between the Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt, and the Seleucids, who ruled Syria. In 169, therefore, with Menelaus as aide and instigator, Antiochus proceeded to loot the Temple, and Jews were murdered.

In 168 BCE, following a false rumor that Antiochus had died, Jason again attempted to return and seize power in Jerusalem. Supported by the majority of the people, Jason succeeded in expelling Menelaus and his Tobiad supporters who, according to the historian Josephus, begged Antiochus for help. Antiochus at the time was on another campaign in Egypt. He was also frustrated by Roman intervention in his affairs. He decided once and for all that he could not afford civil war along the sensitive border with Egypt, especially since a significant portion of the Jews in Judea sympathized with the Ptolemies, a feeling fostered by the large Jewish population in Egypt.

In 167 Antiochus ordered the elimination of the Temple sacrifice and the observance of the commandments of the Torah, once again abetted by the Jewish Hellenizers in Jerusalem. The revolt against Antiochus, already more than a year old, was picked up by Mattathias and his Hasmonean family. The first religious war in history had begun.



FROM “A DIFFERENT LIGHT” (DEVORA PUBLISHING)

JEW VS. JEW: Mattathias kills a Jewish traitor who obeyed the Greek command to worship Zeus, in a 19th-century depiction by Gustave Dore. The Maccabees’ real struggle was against their fellow, assimilated Jews.

Nor can we ignore the economic side of the story. Whatever else was going on, the Maccabean revolt was a struggle of peasant groups and an urban plebeian class against merchants, landowners and those of high birth. Landowners and merchants had experienced an economic boom under the Antiochid regulations. The lower classes rightly felt left out.

Was Antiochus “anti-Jewish”? There is no evidence to support the assertion. If he had wanted to eliminate the Jewish religion he would have issued his orders not just for Judea but for Syria and Asia Minor, where Jews were extremely numerous. But his decrees were promulgated only in Palestine, and for purely political reasons. Moreover, explicit religious-political measures to subject an unruly population, like the ones Antiochus undertook, are without parallel in antiquity. We must therefore conclude that the driving force behind them must have been the Jewish Hellenizers, not Antiochus or the Greeks. While we cannot let Antiochus off the hook, it is clear that the persecution resulted from the civil war and was instigated by the Jewish Hellenizers in Jerusalem. The issues were political and economic, not religious.

And what of the Maccabees? They had the good fortune to be fighting Antiochus while the Syrian Greek monarch was busy on other fronts and Rome was seeking to weaken his power in the region. The 25 years of protracted Maccabean

struggle were indeed an exercise in heroism. The heroism of the Maccabees, at least before their descendants became themselves Hellenized, was evident in the fact that their real struggle was against their fellow Jews who assimilated and were apostatizing, at least as much as it was against Antiochus.

Who were the villains? Antiochus has been unfairly scapegoated by Jewish history and tradition. The idea that a Jewish holiday could come as a result of a civil war between Jews is a proposition that surely was anathema to the rabbinic leadership during talmudic times, who carried with them the experience of the struggle against Rome that was marked by intra-Jewish antagonism. Indeed, in the discussion in the Talmud about Chanukah there is no mention of Hellenizers, of Jew against Jew, of civil strife as the genesis of Chanukah. But the fact is that Antiochus’s intervention was the result of that intramural strife. The villains were the plutocratic Jewish Hellenizers who exploited a political situation and who undermined the fiber and fabric of Jewish religious and social society. Modern parallels are not far to find.

Mr. Chanes is an adjunct professor of sociology at Barnard and Stern colleges. His most recent book is “A Dark Side of History: Antisemitism Through the Ages” (2000).

¹See “Chanukah Reconsidered” by Louis H. Feldman (*The American Mizrahi Woman*, Vol. 54, no.3 (6-7), Dec., 1981) for a full discussion.