

The ghosts of Chanukah future

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In this piece for Tikkun, Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes that Chanukah represents the triumph of memory over history.

It has become fashionable in Jewish liberal circles to note the irony that Chanukah, historically a victory of religious zealots over assimilationists, has become so popular among American Jews who participate in few or no other Jewish rituals. Even those of us who are regularly active in Jewish life may find it hard to identify with Mattathias, the leader of the Jewish revolt, whom the first Book of Maccabees depicts as killing a Jew who sacrifices to a pagan god. Anyone who has admired a work of ancient Greek culture can imagine the appeal this accomplished society might have had for the Jewish proponents of Hellenization.

We are hardly the first generation to have felt discomfort with the story of Chanukah, as recorded in the first two Books of Maccabees. The rabbis of the Talmud famously transformed the holiday from a commemoration of a military victory into a celebration of a divine miracle by which one flask of oil lasted for eight nights. This invention reflects rabbinic ambivalence about the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jewish autonomous government installed by the victors, which proved corrupt and whose failure ultimately led to the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. The early Zionists, on the other hand, saw the Maccabees as archetypes of the new Jews, who would not shy away from military or political power. For American Jews, Chanukah has become the primary defense against full assimilation, represented by Christmas. The attempts to turn Christmas into a universalist holiday of peace, love, and joy have only strengthened many Jews' resolve to cling to Chanukah as a shield against full assimilation into white-bread Americana.

Jewish thinkers have long noticed that Chanukah is a strange holiday, both because of the confusion about its meaning, and because of the way in which it is celebrated. The Kedushat Levi (Rabbi Levi of Berditchev), an eighteenth century Hasidic figure, zeroes in on the most prominent, and perhaps most unusual aspect of the holiday's observance. In considering the difference between the rituals of Chanukah and those of Purim and Pesach—two holidays which also commemorate the triumph of a Jewish minority over a great superpower—he notices the absence of any parallel practice of creating a visual symbol of the divine miracle that these holidays celebrate. That is, on Hanukah we light candles to recall the long-lasting oil for the Temple menorah—but on Purim, there is no mitzvah involving wood to symbolize that Haman was hung from a tree; and on Pesach, no ritual objects evoke the ten plagues or the parting of the Red Sea.

With this question, the Kedushat Levi highlights the central problem of the Chanukah story as constructed by the rabbis: namely, the supposed miracle is actually inconsequential to the story. That is, if the Hasmoneans had not found enough oil for eight days, they still would have overcome the odds to win political power; furthermore, thanks to the stipulation that one is not obligated to perform a mitzvah that is impossible, they would have been religiously exempted from lighting the menorah in the Temple until they were able to procure new oil. Lighting the Chanukah menorah, then, suggests the Kedushat Levi, does not commemorate the miracle of the Hasmonean victory, but rather serves as a sign of God's delight in the Jewish people's festivals and celebrations. God therefore provided eight days of oil not as a means of facilitating a victory or of ensuring the fulfillment of an obligation, but rather as a sign of a continuing and symbiotic relationship between the Jewish people and God.

This image of the Chanukah menorah as the symbol of the ongoing relationship between the Jewish people and God, and not primarily as a marker of a specific historical event, allows us to understand Chanukah as the story of the evolution of Jewish practice and self-definition, rather than simply as a commemoration of a political or religious struggle.

In *Zakhor*, his definitive study on Jewish memory, Yosef Yerushalmi wrote, "Memory is, by nature, selective...the fact that history has meaning does not mean that everything that happened in history is meaningful or worthy of recollection...the real danger is not so much that what happened in the past will be forgotten, as the more crucial aspect of how it happened."

Perhaps more than anything, Chanukah represents the triumph of memory over history. While the historical facts of Chanukah, insofar as we know these facts, have been available to every generation of Jews, each generation has selected from these historical facts the memories and attributions that speak best to the moment. For the rabbis of the Talmud, it was most important to credit the Chanukah miracle to God; for the Zionists, it was most important to credit this miracle to a scrappy band of political warriors; for contemporary Americans, it has been most important to credit the miracle to an enduring commitment to peoplehood. And presumably, voices in every generation have complained that the reinterpreters are getting the story wrong.

It has sometimes been said that Judaism is too focused on the past. Every generation of Jews mourns for the good old days and fears imminent extinction. But the past for which we yearn is not necessarily the past of history. Most of us would prefer not to return to a time when we were forced to choose between zealotry and full assimilation, or when a single set of standards governed religious practice.

History may be about the past, but memory is about the future. In redefining Chanukah, each generation considers anew the questions of assimilation and ethnic identity, the tension between Judaism as a religion and the Jewish people as a nation, and the possibility of identifying the divine presence, even in the darkest of moments.

It is valuable to deconstruct or debunk the many histories of Chanukah. But even more valuable are the discussions and explorations of the complexities tensions inherent in Jewish identity, assimilation, and the divine relationship. Each generation and each Jew needs to live in those tensions and to find the balance that brings light to each moment. Teaching ourselves and our children to grapple with these competing ideals and priorities may be the most profound Chanukah observance we can create – and one that will most successfully carry Judaism and Jewish peoplehood into the future.

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