



## Heroes or rabble-rousers? The real story of the Maccabees

By Gil Shefler  
December 10, 2009



NEW YORK (JTA) -- In 165 BCE, a group of warriors led by Judah Maccabee and his band of brothers ushered in a new era in Jewish history when they routed the soldiers of the Greek-Syrian empire and rededicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

That victory, and the miracle of the menorah that followed, is celebrated every year by Jews around the world at Chanukah.

But if the same thing had happened today, would contemporary Jews hail the Maccabees as heroes?

The place in Jewish history of the Maccabees -- a nickname for the first members of the Hasmonean dynasty that ruled an autonomous Jewish kingdom -- is much more complex than their popular image might suggest.

"Historically it was much more complicated, as there were Jews on both sides," Jeffrey Rubenstein, professor of Talmud and rabbinics at New York University, said of the Maccabee uprising. "Nowadays, historians look at the conflict more in terms of a civil war than a revolt."

The holiday's tradition obscures some of the history of the conflict.

Judah Maccabee, the hero of the Chanukah tale, died in battle a few years after his temporary victory, and several years before the Hasmonean kingdom came into existence. That mission was accomplished years later by his brothers.

"They didn't win the decisive victories, and the whole thing dragged on," Rubenstein said. "But once they did succeed, the Hasmoneans didn't restore the status quo -- they took over the priesthood."

At different periods of history, the Maccabees and their descendants have been reviled by their fellow Jews, not revered. The Pharisees, whose teachings became the tenets of traditional Judaism, considered them to be usurpers. To the Essenes, a mysterious sect of Judaism believed to have thrived on the Western shores of the Dead Sea, they were wicked.

"My guess is that most liberal Jews today wouldn't necessarily get along with the Maccabees if they showed up again," said Rabbi Jill Jacob, the rabbi in residence at Jewish Funds for Justice.

"Even those of us who are regularly active in Jewish life may find it hard to identify with Matityahu, the leader of the Jewish revolt, whom the first Book of Maccabees depicts as killing a Jew who sacrifices to a pagan god," she wrote in an essay about the meaning of Chanukah.

Jacobs argues that Jews should be aware of the complicated history, though they do not have to be bound by it.

"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," she wrote.

Many Jews in ancient times also had their reservations regarding the exploits of Judah Maccabee and his brothers.

In the first centuries of the common era, the Jewish sages of Mesopotamia sought to minimize the Maccabees' significance in the Chanukah story. These scholars of the Babylonian Talmud focused instead on the miracle of the menorah oil, emphasizing the divine element of the story over the military victory of the Maccabees.

Richard Kalmin, chairman of rabbinic literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, says the rabbis' irreverent treatment of the Hasmoneans was based on the concerns of their era.

"The rabbis were competing with a class of wealthy local Jews over influence," Kalmin said. "The stories of the Hasmoneans portrayed them as aristocrats, therefore entitled to be in a position of respect.

"However, the rabbis of Babylonia thought studying the Torah was more important. One of the ways in which they fought for their values was to engage in propaganda portraying the progenitors of the Hasmoneans as not coming across too well."

Largely as a result of this, the festival of lights for centuries focused on the miracle of the oil. Then, in the late 19th century, the Zionist movement revived the cult of the Maccabees. The story of Chanukah, which evokes images of warrior Jews fighting for independence, mirrored their own ambitions, and many early Zionists considered the holiday more important than Sukkot or Rosh Hashanah.

"The early Zionists could use the Maccabees as an example of Jews who took matters into their own hands, as opposed to the shtetl Jews," Jacobs said.

Stories like that of Elazar, the youngest son of Matityahu, who was martyred in a suicide mission to kill a Greek-Syrian general, grew in popularity.

Not coincidentally, Elazar is now the name of a West Bank settlement named in honor of the young Maccabee.

Rabbi Jacob Schacter, senior scholar at Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future, suspects attitudes toward the Maccabees again may be changing.

"In post-Zionism, there's been some cooling of ardor for the Maccabees," Shacter said. "I suspect that if the Zionist narrative is under scrutiny, then I believe that one's attitude toward the legacy of the Maccabees would be contingent upon the perspective of Maccabees as a whole."

Whichever way one sees the Maccabees, it is hard to imagine what the Jewish people would have been like without them, or whether they would have survived at all, Rubenstein suggested.

"Perhaps Judaism would have turned out more like Christianity without the Maccabees," Rubenstein said. "The other cultures of the region, such as the Edomim and the Nabateans, got assimilated into the Roman world.

"Judaism was constantly being Hellenized throughout the period, even under the Maccabees. They adopted Greek coins, names and customs. But is it going to compromise your fidelity to the Temple? That's where they drew a line in the sand."