

Jews, power, and Jewish power

by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Funds for Justice • December 13th, 2006

Jewish power. What other two words could possibly strike fear into the hearts both of virulent anti-Semites and of the most committed Jews?!?

When I teach groups of Jews about the concept and complications of Jewish power, I often begin by asking the group to free associate with the phrase. Generally, the first words that come up are “anti-Semitism,” “Elders of Zion,” and “Hollywood.” After these initial reactions, the groups generally turn their attention to Israel, and mention the IDF, or specific wars in Israel’s history. Some mention Joe Lieberman or other prominent Jewish political figures. Eventually, some participants may name American Jewish organizations, such as AIPAC or the Federation system.

Clearly, we Jews have a complicated relationship with power. As JJ Goldberg noted in his 1996 book, *Jewish Power*, “just about everyone seems to take the Jewish community seriously. Everybody, that is, except the Jews. . . Much of the world views American Jewry as a focused bloc of influential, determined believers, firmly entrenched in the American power structure. The average American Jew views his or her community as a scattered congregation of six million-odd individuals of similar origins and diverse beliefs, fortunate children and grandchildren of immigrant tailors and peddlers.”

Chanukah, of course, provides us with a yearly opportunity to grapple with the issue of Jewish power. No other pre-modern Jewish holiday so openly celebrates a military victory. The story of Chanukah asks us to identify with warriors, rather than with the more spiritually-oriented characters familiar to us from biblical stories. The two books of Maccabees (which appear in the Apocrypha, but are not codified in the Bible) are as filled with battle scenes as the *Iliad* or *Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, it may have been this discomfort with the military nature of the holiday that led the rabbis of the Talmud to introduce the story, not found in Maccabees, of the miracle of the flask of oil lasting eight nights. A holiday celebrating a military battle needed some religious embellishment.

But, the story of the magical oil aside, we can hardly celebrate Chanukah (as adults, at least) without tackling the issue of how we feel about our own power.

In addition to the basic story of the Maccabees’ dramatic victory, Chanukah lore includes at least two other major stories of different types of Jewish power. One of these stories is that of a woman who allows herself and her seven sons to be killed, rather than agree to desecrate God by publicly eating pig meat. In the Second Book of Maccabees, this woman is not named, but later Jewish tradition calls her “Hannah” and greatly expands on the story of her martyrdom. The other story, also about a woman, does not have any obvious direct connection to Chanukah, but has long been linked to the holiday. The title character of the apocryphal Book of Judith uses her beauty and her wits to save Judea from capture by an Assyrian general. When this general, Holofernes, lays siege to the city, Judith escapes to Holofernes’ camp, pretending to be a refugee from Judea who now wants to pledge loyalty to the other side. Judith dresses up, seduces

Holofernes, and gets him drunk. Once he has passed out, she beheads him and brings his head back to the leaders of Judea.

Three stories of power, and three different types of power: the story of the Maccabees is one of pure military and strategic power. Hannah and her sons demonstrate a kind of resilient or spiritual power—they pit their resolve against a show of physical power. Judith, like many biblical women, uses her sexual prowess and her cunning to outwit a mighty general.

At different times in history, Jews have claimed each of these kinds of power as their ideal. The early Zionists, who valued physicality and who defined themselves against the stereotype of the weakly Jew, idolized the Maccabees. Oppressed Jews contemplating or forced into martyrdom have found strength in the story of Hannah. And Jewish folktales have long portrayed the clever Jew outwitting a gentile enemy (albeit, usually through means much less bloody than that which Judith employs.)

There is much also, in all of these stories, to cause us discomfort. Given the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the clever and bloodthirsty Jews seeking world domination, and given the complicated relationships that many of us have to Israeli military power and to the role of prominent Jews in the Bush government, we may not be so comfortable claiming the stories of the Maccabees or of Judith as our own. In fact, many Jews would choose the story of Hannah as the archetypal Jewish story—it can feel much more comfortable to be a martyr than to be the victor.

When I teach about Jewish power, I often use a text from *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, which speaks to the discomfort that many Jews have with claiming our own power:

“Before I was aware, she set me in the most lavish of chariots” (Song of Songs 6:12) Rabbi Hiyya taught: This may be compared to a king’s daughter who was gathering stray sheaves. The king passed by and recognized that she was his daughter, so he sent his friend to take her and to seat her with him in his carriage. Her friends looked at her in astonishment, saying, ‘Yesterday you were gathering sheaves and today you sit in a carriage with the king!’ She said to them: ‘Just as you are astonished at me, so I am astonished at myself’; and she applied to herself the verse, “Before I was aware, she set me in the most lavish of chariots.”

Similarly, when the Israelites were in Egypt, they had to work with bricks and mortar and they were repulsive and contemptible in the eyes of the Egyptians. When they became free and were delivered and placed in authority over the whole world, the nations were astonished and said: ‘Yesterday you were working with bricks and mortar, and today you have become free and rule over the whole world.’ And Israel said to them: ‘Just as you are astonished at us, so we are astonished at ourselves’; and they applied to themselves the verse, “Before I was aware, she set me in the most lavish of chariots.”

Like the Israelites of this Midrash, we are surprised and uncomfortable when we find ourselves in positions of power. Rather than accept this power, our tendency may be to pretend to be weaker than we are.

In America today, Jews have power. Our community is disproportionately well-off and well-educated. But our discomfort with our own power often leads us to maintain an insular stance. Worried that everyone else is out to get us, we concern ourselves with protecting our narrow self-interests, rather than ask what responsibility our newfound power imposes on us.

Many of us (including figures as significant as the rabbis of the Talmud) tend to shy away from the story of the Maccabees and to minimize the role of militarism in Jewish history and memory. Rather than ignore this part of our tradition, we can allow Chanukah to challenge us to think about what our power means in the contemporary world, and about how we most responsibly can use this power.

Happy Chanukah