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HANUKKA IN HAZAL: THE MISSING PLAYERS

Discussion of the editorial shaping of the story and institution of *Hanukka* by *Hazal* has a distinguished history. Rabbi Moses Sofer (*Hatam Sofer*) is reported to have explained the absence of a mishnaic tractate devoted to the holiday as a literary expression of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's disapproval of the Hasmonean kingship; a scion of the House of David, R. Judah ostensibly saw the Hasmoneans as usurpers¹

The subject returns in modern Israeli historiography. It is clear that the talmudic story of *Hanukka*, focusing as it does on the miracle of the cruse of oil and the issue of ritual purity, remains completely silent on the military and nationalistic aspects of the events which are stressed in other narratives. This editorial choice has been taken by some as a principled omission, a deliberate denial of religious significance to success in arms. This spiritualized reading of *Hazal* has probably grown more pointed and popular (mostly in non-Zionist circles, but not exclusively: see the case of Yeshayahu Leibowitz) as a contrast to the Zionist celebration of the Macabbees as nationalist warriors who fought as much to free the homeland as for religious liberty.

Historians who did not wish to cede the Jewish tradition to a spiritualizing, non-Zionist reading, reacted appropriately. Gedaliah Alon responded on two fronts. First, he scoured Talmudic literature for mention of the Hasmoneans and of *Hanukka*, demonstrating that the holiday and its heroes were not repressed by the collective memory. More broadly, he claimed (or demonstrated, depending on your evaluation) that the Pharisees as a whole were courageously and actively involved in the struggle for national independence throughout the Second Commonwealth period, implying that politics were a central concern of traditional Jewish life.²

This is admittedly, a grossly oversimplified and condensed version of a complex issue. I have taken this liberty because the question of *Hazal's* attitude towards the military aspect of *Hanukka* is not my topic. It is merely an instance of the possible shaping of the history of the holiday by *Hazal*, a shaping with clear contemporary overtones. My proper topic is another such instance, one which to the best of my knowledge has not been noticed, yet is in my opinion no less significant. Indeed, perhaps it is a more meaningful topic for our community today.

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If asked about the basic underlying meaning of *Hanukka* and the struggle which it commemorates, I think our average observant Jew—certainly, but not only, the one living in the diaspora—would focus on the attempt to undermine observance of Judaism and force the people to betray their heritage and adopt a pagan worship and belief. In this reading, *Hanukka* is about culture, not territory. This is the explicit message of the *al ha-nissim*, which commemorates the failed attempt to force the people to “forget the Torah and abandon the laws of God’s will.” It is also natural enough to read the contrast between the single jar of pure oil and the many contaminated jars as symbolic of this struggle; the inextinguishable vitality of the pure oil symbolizes, as well, God’s providential commitment to the survival of Jewish spirituality—provided Jews make the right choice themselves.

But another motif would be mentioned as well—the motif of the “Hellenizers”. An integral part of the *Hanukka* story as we tell it is the presence of *Jewish* Hellenizers, that is Jews who identify with the Syrian-Greeks: “At that time lawless men arose in Israel and seduced many with their pleas, ‘Come let us make a covenant with the gentiles around us because ever since we have kept ourselves separated from them we have suffered many evils’ . . . many of the people took it upon themselves to apply to the king who granted them liberty to follow the practices of the gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the customs of the gentiles and underwent operations to disguise their circumcision. . . .” Eventually, we reach the old Hellenizer who is even willing to sacrifice a pig on the altar until killed by Mattathias the Hasmonean priest.

The initiative of the Hellenizers is apparently not restricted to halakhic matters alone, but seems to represent a total collapse of identi-

ty, a crossing of cultural lines. No less significant is the possibility, hinted in this quote from I Macabbees and adopted as fact by many historians, that the Jewish Hellenizers initiated the imposition of pagan culture in the land, or at least were eager allies of the Syrian rulers. Historians also find economic and social stratification which parallels the religio-cultural divide.

All this has echoed headily and triumphantly in contemporary Jewish discussion. Fundamentalist Orthodoxy especially has found in the "Hellenizers" early and apt models for those who are open to general culture, and *Hanukka* has thus become a holiday celebrating the total rejection of general culture and the stigmatization of Jews associated with it. True, the culture associated with the Hellenizers is that of the gymnasium and not that of the academy, the athlete and not the philosopher, but that distinction has not played a powerful role. All in all, the point has been that *Hanukka* is a beacon illuminating the perils of broadmindedness. *Hanukka*, in this perspective, has also been the festival of civil war: for there is no way of reading the struggle of Hasmoneans against Hellenizers other than as a history of civil war, Jew pitted against Jew.

It strikes me as most interesting that none of this is found in talmudic sources. The Talmud does not know of Hellenizers, at least not in the context of *Hanukka*. It does not know of a Mattathias who kills a Jewish idolator. It does not, further, tell of civil war as the genesis of *Hanukka*. *Al ha-nissim* does tell of the battle of the pure against the impure, the few against the many, the wicked against those who study Torah, but it is clear that this is a struggle of the Jewish people against the gentile persecutor (" . . . there arose the evil Greek kingdom against Your people Israel"). Ironically, those who argue that *Hanukka* delegitimizes any but "authentic" Jewish culture find their only sources for that reading outside the Talmud, in works which never entered the canon of Jewish learning!

The more interesting question, of course, is whether talmudic innocence is the product of ignorance or design. That is to say, is the Talmud truly unaware of the historical facts which led up to the Hasmonean revolt, or does it simply prefer to shape the story as it does, omitting material it finds productive to omit. Ignorance, of course, is never an interesting or generative phenomenon; so let us consider the other alternative.

The talmudic discomfort with a Mattathias who kills the potential idolator is easily explained. The *Mishna* (*Sanhedrin* 73a) after all, forbids such behavior, teaching that one must prevent murder by killing

the potential murderer (if no other solution presents itself), but that one ought not to kill the potential idolator so as to prevent his idolatrous act.³ True, there is talmudic debate on the question, but the mishnaic position seems to be dominant. Understandably, then, the halakhic tradition would not approve of this event or include it as one of the bases for a holiday. Indeed, considering the obvious incompatibility of our *mishna* with the story of Mattathias, the palpable tension between the two texts, it is remarkable that Jewish education has made the story canonical in so unambiguous a way.

Why repress memory of Jewish Hellenizers and of civil war as the matrix of *Hanukka*? I have no definitive answer or even suggestion. There are two obvious ways to go. One is that Hellenism is so heinous an option that the talmudic tradition cannot admit that it in fact proved attractive to a significant group of Jews. This repression is then the most powerful evidence for the rejection of the turn to anything outside the tradition itself. The other possibility is that Hellenism (or virtually any world-rank culture) is an extremely complex phenomenon, containing both positive and negative elements, so that both blanket condemnation and approval miss the point. A nuanced response is the order of the day.⁴ It is wiser, then, not to construct a class of Hellenizers who are totally evil, the enemy, as it were.

And, finally, the idea that a holiday could be the outcome of civil war between Jews, a proposition which encourages and legitimates intra-Jewish militancy, may simply have been unacceptable to *Hazal*. Indeed, the more immediate memory of the struggle against Rome, a struggle marked by intramural Jewish antagonism and even bloodshed, taught a different lesson.

NOTES

1. This view is attributed to *Hatam Sofer* in A. Sperling, *Otsar Dinim u-Minhagim* (Jerusalem, 1959), p. 365, section 847.
2. G. Alon, *Jews and Judaism in the Classical World* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 1-47.
3. I realize that unusual times may demand unusual and extra-normative responses, and that the Hellenizing idolator may represent not merely an individual but a social force endangering the national ethos. But a case may be made that it is precisely unusual times which demand the affirmation of usual, normative responses.
4. See my essay, "Rabbinic Judaism and General Culture: Normative Discussion and Attitudes," in J. Schacter, ed., *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures* (Northvale, N.J., 1997), pp. 1-56.