

Chanukah: One Last Taste of Sovereignty

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The celebration of Chanukah is most often associated with the dramatic miracle of the menorah oil. After vanquishing the invading Greek armies, it was crucial that the iconic menorah lighting be restarted as quickly as possible to signal the resurgent Jewish victory. Unfortunately, most of the oil in the plundered Temple had been vandalized and contaminated. The sensational discovery of one unopened and unmarred flask of oil was, itself, cause for great joy. Witnessing that miniscule amount of oil steadily burn for eight days confirmed, that, even in the tail end of the second Temple era, Hashem would still visit supernatural miracles upon His people. The "few" had defeated the "many" and a righteous band of brothers had overcome the invincible Northern Greek armies. The greatest armies of the world could not defeat the Jewish spirit. This enduring message of Jewish survival and heroism was embodied in the miracle of the oil.

Surprisingly, in his account of the Chanukah episode, the Rambam doesn't stress the oil miracle as the primary cause for celebration. In reality, there were numerous miracles during the Mikdash era, yet none of them were enshrined into a week-long festival. What is it about the Chanukah story-beyond the oil miracle- that warrants historical celebration?

The Rambam provides the answer: As a result of the divinely-aided military triumph "Jewish sovereignty was restored for more than two hundred years." Under Greek persecution, our autonomy had been suspended and the Chanukah victory restored Jewish self-governance. Chanukah doesn't just celebrate a miracle which occurred in a "historical vacuum". Chanukah reshaped Jewish history by restoring our lost sovereignty.

Ironically, the Chanukah-restored sovereignty during the final two centuries of the second Temple era was sadly disappointing. Regrettably, the leaders of the Chanukah uprising quickly fell from grace. The gemara in Kiddushin claims that if a person approaches a Jewish court claiming to be of Chashmonaim stock, he or she is assumed to be non-pedigreed and is banned from marrying pedigreed Jews. Within a few generations, the entire Chashmonai dynasty was massacred. The only surviving members of the household to escape this grisly death were a few slave hands or maidservants. Since all the pedigreed members of this line were murdered, evidently, a person who claims Chashmonai heritage must be slave.

This cruel outcome was actually a punishment for the illegal usurpation of the throne. Ideally Judaism mandates a division between religion and politics. Political authority is delegated to the tribe of Yehuda, while supervision of religious ceremonies in the Mikdash is the province of the house of Levi. A mix of religion and politics is always toxic, and never ends well for either. As descendants of Levi,

the Chashmonaim were charged with Mikdash ceremonies but enjoyed absolutely no claim for political power. Usurping the throne, and violating this seminal division within Jewish society, they were annihilated. A heroic band of warriors who had valiantly defended Yerushalayim, committed a grievous national offense and were practically erased from history. It did not end well for the house of the Chashmonaim.

Furthermore, some of the surviving members of the Chashmonai line became dishonorable. John Hyrcanus served as a Cohen Gadol, ascended the throne in the year 135, and spearheaded great military victories over hostile neighbors. He greatly expanded the borders of Israel, refortified the walls of Yerushalayim and instituted numerous worthwhile decrees. Yet, sadly, toward the end of his reign he had a falling out with the Sanhedrin and turned against them, becoming a sworn enemy of the Rabbinic establishment, and a leading member of the notorious Saducee movement. His infamous "late-in-life" desertion became a metaphor of infamy. The Talmud cautions: "don't ever take your faith for granted -even until your last day. After all John Hyrcanus deserted our traditions even after 80 years of reigning as Cohen Gadol."

John's son, Alexander Jannaeus or Yannai Hamelech had a similarly checkered career. Having been personally insulted by a ruling of the Sanhedrin, he murdered 6000 innocent people and barred pilgrims from freely entering the Temple. These two leading luminaries of the house of Chashmonaim brought disrepute to the family. The leaders of the Chanukah miracle launched a dynasty which betrayed our tradition, murdered innocent people and became embroiled in civil wars.

Not only did the Chanukah leadership ultimately turn suspect, but the sovereignty we experienced during that period was severely flawed. The two-hundred intervening years between the Chanukah miracle and the destruction of the second Temple were, possibly, one of the most pathetic periods in Jewish history. We were constantly under military aggression and constantly paying tribute to foreign powers. Additionally, that dark period was scarred by endless internecine struggle, as Jewish society splintered into multiple warring factions. Our regained sovereignty was hollowed out by civil war and, eventually, the second Temple caved in on itself.

Imagine the scene every erev Yom Kippur. The High priest was summoned by Sanhedrin, and forced to swear that he would not short-circuit the sacred ceremonies of Yom Kippur. More often than not the High priest was a Saducee-sympathizer and would intentionally torpedo these ceremonies. Both the High Priest and the Sanhedrin committee shed unhappy tears at the woeful situation in which such incredulous doubts had to be considered.

Finally, after two hundred years of strife and social disunity, the Romans marched into Jerusalem, burnt it to the ground, razed the land and renamed the city Aelia

Capitolina. The miracle of Chanukah has absolutely no long lasting political impact. It is a blip on the radar of history. What sovereignty, exactly, are we celebrating?

Evidently, whenever, Jews achieve autonomy and enjoy self-rule we celebrate and we recite Hallel— regardless of the caliber of leadership and independent of the texture of that sovereignty. It is specifically the imperfect nature of the post-Chanukah sovereignty which makes it so relevant and so contemporary. How long have Jews endured persecution, yearning for the day we could live under Jewish rule in a Jewish state? For how many cold Decembers did defenseless Jews endure the inevitable Christmas-time pogroms? How often did we dream of a Jewish army or police force for protection against interminable hostilities? How many centuries did we dream of Jewish government and of carving a society based upon Jewish values? It has now been restored to us and we celebrate our fate, despite our imperfect leadership and despite our incomplete sovereignty. It is the specifically the flawed nature of the post-Chanukah sovereignty which makes it so relevant! Chanukah demands that we appreciate and celebrate any form of Jewish sovereignty.

Thousands of year ago, as the Jews were about to embark upon a long and dark exile, Hashem offered us one last taste of Jewish sovereignty, so that we would recognize it when it was ultimately restored to us. He reminded us that Jews are meant to self-govern rather than subject to the laws of others. He reminded us that Jews were meant to live securely in their land rather than be precariously hosted across in foreign lands. He reminded us of that Jews were meant to defend their security rather than be vulnerable to the aggression of their many enemies.

Sovereignty has finally been restored. Chanukah has once again been renewed. We hope for more, but we rejoice for what has been already achieved. We know what sovereignty tastes like. For centuries Chanukah `kept that taste alive.