

# Forward.com

---

## Hasmoneans, Hellenism and Us

Opinion

**By Shaye J.D. Cohen**

Thu. Dec 11, 2008

---

This is Hanukkah season. In Hebrew schools across the country the Hanukkah story will be told, and the story usually goes like this: The wicked king Antiochus IV Epiphanes attacked the innocent and pious Jews of Judaea, imposing Greek ways, proscribing the observance of Jewish practices and profaning the Temple of Jerusalem. Judah the Maccabee and his sturdy brothers (known collectively as the Hasmoneans) went to war against Hellenism, against the king and against those Jews who supported the king and his policies. They triumphed. In 164 B.C.E. they reconquered Jerusalem, put an end to the religious persecution, purified the Temple and instituted the festival of Hanukkah to commemorate their victory. In this existential struggle between Jews and Greeks, between Judaism and Hellenism, the Jews triumphed. According to this Hebrew school version of the events, which mirrors the popular Jewish understanding, the Hasmoneans saved Judaism from Hellenism.

Recently some critics have accepted this version of the events but have turned the story on its head. Whereas every Hebrew school student knows that King Antiochus was the bad guy, and that the Hasmoneans were the good guys, according to these critics the opposite was the case. Antiochus represents Greek enlightenment, the Hasmoneans Jewish particularism and ritualism. According to Christopher Hitchens, in a much-discussed essay he wrote last year for the online magazine Slate, the Hasmoneans were simply anti-Hellenist religious fanatics. For Hitchens, Hanukkah represents the "victory of bloody-minded faith over enlightenment and reason." The Hasmoneans waged a "successful... revolt against Hellenism"; Hitchens wishes that they had lost.

Now, let us freely admit that some of what the Hasmoneans did was not pretty; wars and revolutions are usually not pretty. But let us at least get our facts straight. No matter whether we think that the Hasmoneans were the good guys or the bad guys, the fact is that the Hasmoneans were not opponents of Hellenism. The Hasmoneans did not save Judaism from Hellenism so much as they showed the Jews how to live with it.

The Hasmoneans faced two kinds of opponents within Jewish society. First were those who completely supported the Greeks, perhaps even to the extent of not objecting when the Greeks introduced a pagan cult object into the Temple and prohibited the observance of Jewish laws and customs outside the Temple. These Jews, who were in bed with the Greeks both politically and morally, are usually called "Hellenizers" in modern scholarship. At the other end of the spectrum were those Jews who wanted to have nothing to do with either the Hasmoneans or the Greeks, and who ran off into the desert in order to escape the capital city and its sinful ways. These Jews, who were anti-Hasmonean and anti-Greek in equal measure, founded the settlement at Qumran near the shores of the Dead Sea, ultimately giving us the Qumran scrolls. (I am telescoping events slightly, since the Qumran settlement was probably not founded until the 140s B.C.E. or so.)

The Hasmoneans steered a middle course, abjuring the Hellenism of the Hellenizers and the anti-Hellenism of the Qumranites. Their goal was to find a way to live with Hellenism, to combine a secure

Jewish identity with Hellenistic culture.

The Hanukkah narrative in the first book of Maccabees, written by a Jewish supporter of the Hasmonean dynasty at the end of the second century B.C.E., illustrates this point well. Perhaps most striking is the institution of the Hanukkah festival itself: "Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev."

Whence did the Hasmoneans get the idea to institute by popular acclaim a yearly festival celebrating their great victory? Not from the Torah; in the Torah God gives festivals to the people of Israel. The Israelites do not choose festivals for themselves. Nor from the biblical histories (Joshua through Kings), which are full of stories of conquest and victory but which never describe a biblical hero as instituting a festival.

No, the twin ideas that an assembly of the people has the power to institute an annual festival, and the idea that an annual festival is an appropriate way to mark a great victory, are ideas that came to the Hasmoneans from Greek culture. This is how the Greeks celebrated their great victory over the Persians in 479 B.C.E.; they instituted an annual festival at Delphi.

The narrative of First Maccabees has other examples of Hasmonean Hellenism. In 140 B.C.E. the Hasmonean party elected Simon, brother of Judah, as high priest. This, of course, is an un-Jewish idea; the popular election of a high priest is rooted in Hellenism, as is the inscribing of decrees of the people's assembly on bronze tablets and affixing them to pillars for all to see. The book also contains a dossier of documents in which the Hasmoneans try to establish kinship between the Judaeans and the Spartans. As long as the Temple and its rituals, the Law and its requirements, were not touched, the Hasmoneans were not afraid to enrich Judaism by incorporating Hellenistic ideas and practices.

American Jewish society today has both Hellenizers and anti-Hellenizers. Our Hellenizers are the large numbers of Jews who are not interested in Jewish observances; they have assimilated into the American mainstream, abandoning the hallmarks of Jewish distinctiveness, becoming simply Americans of Jewish background. Our anti-Hellenizers have fled not to the desert but to increasingly insular religious enclaves. They attempt to keep American culture and American mores at bay, contending that the Torah has a monopoly on truth and that Jews have nothing to learn from Western culture.

The Hasmoneans, however, show us a third way: observance of traditional rituals, loyalty to the Torah and Jewish distinctiveness, enriched by the ways of the Greeks, a Judaism made beautiful by the beauty of Hellenism. This is the lesson of Hanukkah.

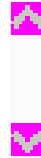
*Shaye J.D. Cohen is the Nathan Littauer Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard University. He is the author, most recently, of "Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism" (University of California Press, 2005).*

---

Thu. Dec 11, 2008

---

Post a Comment:



Your Name: **(Required)**

Your Email Address: **(Required)**

Post Your Comment

*The Forward welcomes reader comments in order to promote thoughtful discussion on issues of importance to the Jewish community. In the interest of maintaining a civil forum, the Forward requires that all commenters be appropriately respectful toward our writers, other commenters and the subjects of the articles. Vigorous debate and reasoned critique are welcome; name-calling and personal invective are not. While we generally do not seek to edit or actively moderate comments, the Forward reserves the right to remove comments for any reason.*

## Comments

robert r. cargill said:

excellent article dr. cohen. your analogy to today's observers is quite perceptive. and of course, your assessment of the origin of the qumran community is on the money! ;-) thanx for the article!!

Thu. Dec 11, 2008

robert r. cargill said:

excellent article dr. cohen. your analogy to today's observers is quite perceptive. and of course, your assessment of the origin of the qumran community is on the money! ;-) thanx for the article!!

Thu. Dec 11, 2008

Yehuda said:

It should only be true that American Jewish life would be "a Judaism made beautiful by the beauty of Hellenism". The intention of Prof Cohen is that Jewish distinctiveness should be influenced ("made beautiful") by the beauty of the American culture. This point of view assumes that one's primary culture and identity is Jewish, and now Americanism will leave its impact on this core Jewishness. Alas, this is not the situation in the American Diaspora. One's primary identity is American, and this has been the reality for a number of generations already. American Jews who participate in Jewish community life (i.e. "not assimilated" by their own self-definition) are generally illiterate in Hebrew, do not know more than just a meagre knowledge of the Jewish text and the history of the Jewish people, couldn't even recite the names of the months of the Jewish calendar, etc. This is not the case for their American culture. An American Jew - no matter what his academic profession might be - knows the cultural wealth of the American world. He's entirely at home in his American identity - and very much less at home in the Jewish world (unless his profession is Jewish studies).

One of the illusions of American Jewish life is the statement in this article that a large number of American Jews "have assimilated into the American mainstream..." (as if there are those who have not assimilated into the American mainstream)! Assimilation has occurred already. It is a fact of life - not for "large numbers" - but for the

overwhelming majority.

Prof Cohen is criticizing the "haredim" (the "anti-Hellenizers" who cut themselves off from the American world), and he is criticizing the "Hellenizers", those who have abandoned the "hallmarks of Jewish distinctiveness". The third way, however, has to be re-invented. An American Jewish educational system has to be created in which a primary Jewish identity is given to the next generation. A primary identity means fluency in Hebrew and the renewal of a Diaspora Jewish creativity in our own language. A primary identity means Jewish peoplehood - i.e. the renewal of the understanding that the Jews are a nation in exile, not merely Americans (or Canadians or Argentinians) who go to synagogue. Then, with this renewed primary identity, we could speak of "making it more beautiful" with the added beauty of American culture.

Fri. Dec 12, 2008

---

Dave said:

This middle ground is unsustainable. The assimilated Jews will eventually be gone from the community. The middle ground people are not having a replacement number of offspring.

That leaves the unassimilated. Their 'enclaves' are exploding with children.

What happens to an 'enclave' who's population almost doubles every decade. It doesn't stay an 'enclave' for long.

Fri. Dec 12, 2008

---

Joachim Martillo said:

Shaye Cohen underestimates the conflict between the Persian Imperial elite in Judea and the wannabe Hasmonean/Herodian Hellenistic elite.

I explain this issue in Connecting Hanukkah, Christmas, and 'Idu-l-Adha.

Fri. Dec 12, 2008

---

Joachim Martillo said:

The URL is <http://eaazi.blogspot.com/2008/01/connecting-hanukkah-christmas-and-idu-l.html> .

Fri. Dec 12, 2008

---

GK said:

I am not sure that the Hasmoneans can serve as a model for American Jewry, but I believe that they do for world Jewry as a whole. In other words, the "third way" that Prof. Cohen looks for can be found in Zionism - the use of a "generic", not specifically Jewish organization structure (the modern nation-state) as a means to preserve Jewish identity even as it allows for change and transformation. The challenge for the American Jewish community, for the last 60+ years, has been to figure out how to incorporate the lessons and successes of Zionism into their mindset while somehow avoiding the Zionist ideological imperative for aliyah.

Sun. Dec 14, 2008

---

GK said:

BTW, I forgot to add - Yehuda's comments on this article are right on the mark (I almost always find myself in agreement with him whenever I see his replies to op-ed articles in the Forward). A stronger emphasis on Jewish cultural literacy, Hebrew fluency, and national (vs. sectarian) identity may receive lip service from the major Jewish organizations, but are rarely translated into programs for meaningful communal change (Birthright Israel and the Ben Gamla charter school in Florida are the only really innovative examples that come to my mind right now).

Sun. Dec 14, 2008

---

socrates said:

the jews embraced hellenism. after all what else was there? we live like greeks today

Sun. Dec 14, 2008

---