

# Chanukah's Heroes and Heroines Take on Hellenism

By Sharon Kanon

(Israel Press Service) — Bravery and unflinching adherence to Torah laws characterized the Jewish heroes and heroines in the Chanukah story. Daring and defiant, they refused to give in to religious persecution and oppression and set in motion the rebellion and surprise victory of the Jewish patriots.

The villain in the tale, Antiochus Epiphanes (a Syrian Greek), heir to the rule of Alexander the Great, persecuted the Jews in an effort to thrust Hellenism on them. He changed the name of Jerusalem to Antioch, stole the gold altar and gold menorah from the Temple (169 BCE), desecrated the holy site with idol worship and the sacrifice of pigs, and prohibited circumcision and the observance of Shabbat.

Hellenistic culture was dazzling - material wealth, poetry, drama, sculpture, philosophy, sports and literature - and one can see why some Jewish residents of Judea fell victim to its lures, even participating naked (like the

Greek athletes) in sports events. Some went as far as to "undo" their circumcision.

One of the first heroes to set an example of defiance against the Greeks was Elazar, a 90 year-old scribe, who refused to eat pork. "I shall not violate the sacred oaths of my ancestors who swore to observe the Torah, not even if you cut my eyes out and burn my insides... You shall not defile the sacred lips of my old age..." (The Book of Maccabees IV, written in the first century BCE in Greek.) When suggested that he pretend to eat pork, to save his life, Elazar refused. "And so he died, leaving in his death a model of nobility and a memorial of virtue not only to the young but to the mass of his nation." (II Maccabees)

Mattathias, an aging Hebrew priest who had left Jerusalem with his five sons to live in Modi'in, was present when Greek soldiers came and demanded that the Jews sacrifice a pig to their pagan god. When a Jew stepped forward to make the sacrifice, he instinctively drew his sword and killed him.

Mattathias and his sons fled to a nearby cave and readied themselves to fight the Greeks. They were determined to preserve the exclusive worship of Judaism and battle the Greeks both militarily and religiously.



The elderly Mattathias died within a year and never saw the success of the revolt he began. His son Judah, a brilliant military strategist, took over as leader. Not deterred by the heavily-armed enemy army of 20,000 to 80,000 men, he led his small army of 3,000. With cunning and prayer and under Judah's inspired leadership, the Jews were able to successfully confront the Greeks and eventually recapture the Temple.

"They come against us full of hubris [arrogance] and lawlessness, to destroy us, our wives and our children and to plunder us,"

said Judah. "But we are fighting for our lives and our laws. God himself will crush them..." (I Maccabees 3:16-22).

Later, when the Jewish guerillas were pitted against the Greek army, another Elazar seized the moment. The younger brother of Judah the Maccabee crept under a Greek general's elephant, used as a super-tank, and slew it with a spear.

Women were pivotal in the Chanuka story. Two Chana stood out for their heroism. Torture did not break the will of Chana or her seven sons who refused to eat or bow down to Zeus. (The melodramatic narrative of multi-martyrdom is told in II Maccabees 7.)

Chana, the daughter of Mattathias, is given credit for inciting the actual rebellion. She stripped off her clothes in public after her wedding to shame her brothers and incite them to rebel against the Greek decree that a Jewish bride go directly to the local official for "first night privileges." "You are ashamed of my nakedness, but not ashamed to deliver me to the uncircumcised Greek official?" she asked incredulously.

Exactly three years from the date that Antiochus initiated idol worship and desecrated the altar of the Temple, Judah the Maccabee organized its rededication. The event, held on the 25th

day of Kislev, 164 BCE (recorded in Maccabees I), was made festive with harps, lutes and cymbals.

Improvising a menorah, the Hasmonians took iron rods, covered with zinc, and inserted wicks. Searching for oil, they found only one bottle of oil sealed by the High Priest, enough for one day's lighting, "a miracle happened, and there was light from it for eight days. In the following year, they established eight festival days," wrote the Rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat).

Chanukah, which literally means "dedication," did not get its name until over 100 years after this miraculous event, when Josephus the historian referred to it as the Festival of Lights, symbolizing religious freedom.

Unlike the Greeks, the Maccabean heroes and heroines fought for Jewish beliefs, traditions and values, bringing to their struggle commitment, vitality and dynamism.

"For the Jew, there is no greater sin than the sin of detachment," says Mordechai Gafni, a young Orthodox rabbi involved with spiritual renewal. "The basic Hebraic posture in the world is passionate involvement in the realness of life."

And it is this passion, centuries after the Maccabean victory, which enables Jewish families everywhere to continue to celebrate the festival of Chanukah as free men and women. ☆

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## A Good Name Is As Precious As Chanukah Oil

By Leo Lieberman, Jewish Times of South Jersey

Pleasantville, NJ — Maybe because it was Chanukah time when I heard my good friend and teacher Rabbi Aaron talk about oil, I was certain that he was going to be mentioning latkes in the next breath and maybe even suggest a new recipe, but then again I knew that when it comes to the recipe department even the wise Rabbi, smart as he is, plays second fiddle to Millie the Rebbitzen. Because as Tanta Peshia always points out, That lady is one smart cookie, especially when it comes to baking. And believe you me, I said a mouthful. And she laughed at her own joke.

But this time the thrust of Rabbi's sermon was that a good name was even better than precious oil. And he pointed out that shem tov (a good name) and shemen tov (good oil) sounded so much alike. And so this started me thinking about names, since I leave the oil to those far more gifted than I.

How times have changed. Now students call their professors by first names and another barrier

separating student from teacher has vanished. But I remember that once many moons ago when I was teaching in The Bronx (remember that place?) a student asked me when he could call me by my first name, and I replied, When you marry my daughter.

But today students talk about meeting me in Pam's office or Jan's office and I have to take a deep breath because I still refer to these revered folks by their last name or by their title, "The Dean." And I have grown quite accustomed to being hailed across the corridor with a wave of the hand and a cheerful, Hi Doc. How's it hanging? (Now I sort of enjoy the breezy informality even though the second part of the greeting made me check my apparel, just to make certain that ... forget it. Enough already.)

And as a child, I sometimes lost my identity and was simply called by the kids as "Hey Benny's Brother, Do you want to go to the movies?" But I always felt this was better than being referred to as "Hey Kid" although I am not too sure. It was certainly better than the way they called Izzy Fatso or Melvin Four-eyes because the former was rather plump and the latter wore glasses. And I even think it was one step above just being called Hey There or Hey You or certainly You with the Face by those who had (conveniently?) forgotten my Christian (Ha! I thought that would wake you up) name.

Now I must admit that even though names are important and I remember how much we toiled and thought and debated and argued before naming our children, look what happens. For example, I get so much delight when Dr. Franklin Littell spots me in the cafeteria and with a broad smile greets me with Well, Young Fellow, what are you up to? Now that change of name I can easily live with.

And again my mind wandered to how important names can be, and how hard I try to remember each of my student's name, although each semester it gets more difficult to keep these names in my memory since my forgettery is more powerful and students keep changing their seats so that the association process doesn't always work when I see Frank sitting where I thought Amie was. Still I do my best knowing how important names can be.

So the sermon was over and we were all thinking of going into the vestry where there would be Chanukah candies and latkes and applesauce and we would be hugging and embracing and Yenta-Leah would tell Tanta Peshia that she has a recipe for potato pancakes that would melt in your mouth. (I think she meant the pancakes not the recipe.) It was then that a six-year-old cherub saw me and waved and I tried to remember his name. Was it Jason? Or Joshua? I know it wasn't Izzy or Bernie because the only Bernie I knew was in his seventies. But he smiled at me and extended holiday greetings with, "Happy Chanukah, Ari's Grandpa." And that brought a decided smile to my face since this was a name I could wear with pride. And I repeated softly, "Grandpa." That is as good as precious oil. Or perhaps even better. ☆

This story is from Leo Lieberman's award-winning weekly newspaper feature column "Chalkdust" that received First Place by the American Jewish Press Association Rockower Awards in the category of Excellence in Editorial and Commentary. Leo is Professor of Holocaust Studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and the author of "Memories of Laughter and Garlic: Jewish Wit, Wisdom, and Humor To Warm Your Heart."

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