

DVAR TEFILAH: THE THREE THEMES OF CHANUKAH

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Chapel Minyan, Temple Emanuel of Newton

During the holiday of Chanukah we add a prayer to the Amidah. This prayer tells us about two themes of the holiday. In translation, the "Al HaNisim" prayer is as follows:

(And) for the miracles, and for the salvation, and for the mighty deeds, and for the victories, and for the battles which You performed for our forefathers in those days, at this time.

In the days of Mattityahu, the son of Yochanan, the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons - when the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and compel them to stray from the statutes of Your Will - You in Your great mercy stood up for them in the time of their distress. You took up their grievance, judged their claim, and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of Your Torah. For Yourself You made a great and holy Name in Your world, and for Your people Israel you worked a great victory and salvation as this very day. Thereafter, your children came to the Holy of Holies of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified the site of Your Holiness and kindled lights in the Courtyards of Your Sanctuary, and they established these eight days of Chanukah to express thanks and praise to Your great Name.

So what are the two themes of Chanukah shown in the prayer? Tyranny and Miracles. We will consider each in turn. Then I will argue there is a third theme.

Tyranny

The theme of tyranny comes from the "the wicked Greek kingdom". When Alexander died, his top generals divided up his kingdom. Seleucus dominated an area North of Jerusalem and Palestine. An expelled, renegade Roman general, Antiochus IV, sought a new patron and aligned himself with Seleucus. Antiochus IV and a band of his men occupied Jerusalem and the surrounding area. To please his patron he sought to send ever more money north; which he accomplished by plunder, heavy taxation, and expropriation.

Antiochus IV was the epitome of a tyrant. To support his own lifestyle and the funds he shipped to Seleucus and his heirs, Antiochus IV ruled through terror, arbitrary accusations and punishment, and constraining liberties. He outlawed all but the Pantheonic Greek religion. Those caught reading the Torah or even possessing one were put to death, together with their families. More minor resistance to assimilation resulted in enslavement. He stripped the Temple of all items of value, made the Temple the center of the pantheonic cult, going even so far as to build a "screen" in the court behind which there was ritual prostitution. Hence "straying from statutes"; "impurity"; and "wantonness".

Miracles

One of Antiochus IV's men went to the town where Mattityahu and his tribe lived and demanded he agree to the pantheonic cult. Mattityahu resisted, fled, and began the Hasmonean revolt. His son Judah HaMaccabee raised a force of local men and together with some allies from Rome managed to overthrow Antiochus IV and the surrounding local allies in a series of battles. What were the miracles? That these battles were fought with 5:1 and even 12:1 odds of the tyrants outnumbering the Maccabees. Yet, miraculously Judah still won.

Then the religious men, the "students of Torah", were able to clean the Temple, take down the screen and re-establish the Jewish practices.

As an aside, the miracle of the oil lasting eight days, is mentioned nowhere in the book of Maccabees. It seems to have been a later addition, perhaps by those uncomfortable with the log of dead and injured at the hands of the Maccabees in their victorious battles or their governance in later years. In the days when leaving forces far from home to keep the peace was impractical, the practice was to kill all the men, enslave the women and children, and take all their possessions. Judah Maccabee was no exception, and those who know the details of his story are not always so comfortable with it.

So, tyranny and miracles are the first two themes of Chanukah. That What then is the third theme? I will argue it is theocracy, or as we would say in the US, the relations between church and state.

Theocracy

Judah HaMaccabee became the political and spiritual leader of the Jews, as the result of these victories. After Judah HaMaccabee's death, his brother Jochanon (John) Hyrcanus established himself as the next political and spiritual leader of the Jews.

Antiochus IV had practiced a form of divide and conquer toward the Jews. The in-fighting was terrible. Jochanon HaMaccabee led the dominant group. And the early times were good.

On Shabbat it is a custom to study Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of Our Fathers, and two of them give some light on this part of our story. In Avot 1.6, with the triumph of Judah Maccabee, the study of Torah resumes and people are asked to look toward people's good sides - to see potential in the future rather than the pain and divisions of the past. Avot 1.6 is about those good times; good, easy-going feelings; and what to do to be good.

Avot 1.6

Appoint yourself a teacher

Acquire a companion (*for the study of Torah*)

And judge all men in the scale of merit

But the dominant group decided, in part from the lessons of living under Antiochus IV, that it was not right to have one person be both the spiritual and political leader. Jochanon Hyrcanus refused to give up his religious leadership and just be king. Instead he switched sides, to become the leader of the smaller, splinter group. Once he left, the darker Avot 1.7 was written.

Avot 1.7**Keep away from a bad neighbor.****And don't get involved with a bad person.****And don't give up hope of redemption.**

It cautions to stay away from the ways of the splinter group. If they seem to be doing something bad and getting away with it, Avot 1.7 tells us to keep faith that justice will eventually prevail.¹

The issue of separating political and spiritual leadership is very real today, and many models exist. Israel has the model of the dominant group, where the prime minister and the chief rabbi are different people who separately administer secular and spiritual affairs. In the US we call the issue the "separation of church and state", and we restrict the government to secular activities. Spiritual leadership is highly decentralized. In England, after King Henry VIII, the king or queen was both the head of the Church of England and the head of the government. In other countries, the Church has the highest authority, with the political under it. And there are still a few countries where religion has been outlawed by the political leadership as a dangerous competing power.

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¹ The dominant group believed in heaven and hell (while the splinter group did not) The dominant group are reminding us what to do if someone is bad and not to lose hope in redemption and justice.