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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Hanukkah Story

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Tonight Jewish kids will light the menorah, spin their dreidels and get their presents, but Hanukkah is the most adult of holidays. It commemorates an event in which the good guys did horrible things, the bad guys did good things and in which everybody is flummoxed by insoluble conflicts that remain with us today. It's a holiday that accurately reflects how politics is, how history is, how life is.

It begins with the spread of Greek culture. Alexander's Empire, and the smaller empires that succeeded it, brought modernizing ideas and institutions to the Middle East. At its best, Hellenistic culture emphasized the power of reason and the importance of individual conscience. It brought theaters, gymnasiums and debating societies to the cities. It raised living standards, especially in places like Jerusalem.

Many Jewish reformers embraced these improvements. The Greeks had one central idea: their aspirations to create an advanced universal culture. And the Jews had their own central idea: the idea of one true God. The reformers wanted to merge these two ideas.

Urbane Jews assimilated parts of Greek culture into their own, taking Greek names like Jason, exercising in the gymnasium and prospering within Greek institutions. Not all Jews assimilated. Some resisted quietly. Others fled to the hills. But Jerusalem did well. The Seleucid dynasty, which had political control over the area, was not merely tolerant; it used imperial money to help promote the diverse religions within its sphere.

In 167 B.C., however, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, issued a series of decrees defiling the temple, confiscating wealth and banning Jewish practice, under penalty of death. It's unclear why he did this. Some historians believe that extremist Jewish reformers were in control and were hoping to wipe out what they saw as the primitive remnants of their faith. Others believe Antiochus thought the Jews were disloyal fifth columnists in his struggle against the Egyptians and, hence, was hoping to assimilate them into his nation.

Regardless, those who refused to eat pork were killed in an early case of pure religious martyrdom.

As Jeffrey Goldberg, who is writing a book on this period, points out, the Jews were slow to revolt. The cultural pressure on Jewish practice had been mounting; it was only when it hit an insane political level that Jewish traditionalists took up arms. When they did, the first person they killed was a fellow Jew.

In the town of Modin, a Jew who was attempting to perform a sacrifice on a new Greek altar was slaughtered by Mattathias, the old head of a priestly family. Mattathias's five sons, led by Judah Maccabee, then led an insurgent revolt against the regime.

The Jewish civil war raised questions: Who is a Jew? Who gets to define the right level of observance? It also created a spiritual crisis. This was not a battle between tribes. It was a battle between theologies and threw up all sorts of issues about why bad things happen to faithful believers and what happens in the afterlife — issues that would reverberate in the region for centuries, to epic effect.

The Maccabees are best understood as moderate fanatics. They were not in total revolt against Greek culture. They used Greek constitutional language to explain themselves. They created a festival to commemorate their triumph (which is part of Greek, not Jewish, culture). Before long, they were electing their priests.

On the other hand, they were fighting heroically for their traditions and the survival of their faith. If they found uncircumcised Jews, they performed forced circumcisions. They had no interest in religious liberty within the Jewish community and believed religion was a collective regimen, not an individual choice.

They were not the last bunch of angry, bearded religious guys to win an insurgency campaign against a great power in the Middle East, but they may have been among the first. They retook Jerusalem in 164 B.C. and rededicated the temple. Their regime quickly became corrupt, brutal and reactionary. The concept of reform had been discredited by the Hellenizing extremists. Practice stagnated. Scholarship withered. The Maccabees became religious oppressors themselves, fatefully inviting the Romans into Jerusalem.

Generations of Sunday school teachers have turned Hanukkah into the story of unified Jewish bravery against an anti-Semitic Hellenic empire. Settlers in the West Bank tell it as a story of how the Jewish hard-core defeated the corrupt, assimilated Jewish masses. Rabbis later added the lamp miracle to give God at least a bit part in the proceedings.

But there is no erasing the complex ironies of the events, the way progress, heroism and brutality weave through all sides. The Maccabees heroically preserved the Jewish faith. But there is no honest way to tell their story as a self-congratulatory morality tale. The lesson of Hanukkah is that even the struggles that saved a people are dappled with tragic irony, complexity and unattractive choices.

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