

HANUKKAH FEATURE

IN HONOR OF HANUKKAH, JEWISH TRADITION OF SACRED CANDLE LIGHTING, THE LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE WILL PUBLISH A SERIES OF STORIES TO COMMEMORATE THE HOLIDAY WHICH COMMENCES SATURDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 18 AND LASTS UNTIL SUNDAY EVENING, DEC. 26.

Glory, Agony of Old Judea

By Alfred H. Paul

It is time to recall the reign of the Hasmonean Dynasty over the land of Israel. We celebrate the great miracle of the Maccabean victory which culminated the reconsecration of the Temple in Jerusalem. Every Jewish child knows how old Mattathias defied the Syrian conquerors in the small town of Modin, how he and his sons took up arms against the Syrians, how the Hebrews in Judea finally regained their religious freedom under the leader of Judas Maccabeus, how the few drops of oil in the Temple lamp burned miraculously for eight nights. It is a story of Jewish glory. What few remember these days is that the Hasmonean Dynasty, which started in ecstasy, ended in agony for the Jewish people in the Holy Land. Let's take the story in sequence.

Mattathias of Modin was the descendant of a man named Hashmon, or Asmoneus. A Seleucid despot from Syria, surnamed Epiphanes, had set out not only to conquer Judea but also to suppress that Land's religion. His troops were ordered to hellenize the Jews. The Syrians converted the Temple in Jerusalem into a Greek sanctuary and erected altars to their pagan gods in towns and cities throughout Judea, meeting very little resistance. But a country priest at Modin, a great-grandson of Asmoneus, showed fight. Soon, one of his sons, Judas, nicknamed the hammer (Maccabeus), took charge of the Jewish army. Three years to the date after the Temple had been desecrated--the Temple was reconsecrated. Us-

ing mainly what we would call today guerilla tactics--striking by night, hiding in the caves and hill by day--the under-equipped, under-armed, hardly-trained Jewish fighters defeated the highly-trained, disciplined might of the Syrians. The Jews won against superior forces literally because of their spirit. This has happened at many periods in history. A people imbued with an idea can win over brute force. The Jews had an idea: Their religion. They triumphed.

Skip almost a hundred years. A half-Jew named Herod--married to a woman who descended from the Hasmonians--seized the Jewish throne occupied by that time by Antigonus, last of the Hasmonian kings. Herod had Antigonus killed. He ordered death for the remaining male members of the Hasmonian Dynasty. He culminated his orgy by decreeing death for his wife and for her mother. The Hasmonians were wiped out.

In between Matathias' revolt and the blood-bath of Herod, other things were happening in Judea. The Hasmonians, having triumphed over the Syrians, did indeed reestablish the Jewish religion. Soon, however, the Hasmonians grew more ambitious. They wanted to be a power in the world. Some of their people objected to the new policies. They insis-

ted that the Jews remain an isolated sect, minding their ted that the Jews remain an isolated sect, minding their own religion. The Judeans had gone on, logically, from religious freedom to political independence. They saw a new world, in which new modes of communication had been developed, and they wanted to play a role in that world. They charged the isolationists with obscurantism. The isolationists retorted with accusations to the effect that the country's priestly (and economic) elite were flirting with death for the ancient faith. Out of this sprang what became the conflicting ideologies of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Spiritual isolation demanded political isolation. But political worldliness did indeed threaten assimilationism. The clashes were complicated further by greed and lust for personal power developed by the descendants of those idealistic Hasmonians of the time of Mattathias.

Which was best--for the country and for its religion? How can one compute the reckoning today? The historical facts are clear. The interpretations and the evaluations are hazy.

But, as we celebrate Hanukkah, it is worth recalling that the heroism of Mattathias and the bravery of his son Judas and the joy over the miracle that occurred during the reconsecration of the Temple--all of these ended in tragedy less than a century later.

That there is a lesson for us, there is not doubt. Exactly what the dimensions are of that lesson--this writer must leave to you. Today we worry about assimilationism through worldliness and perpetuation of our Jewish culture. Today some

of us fear theocracy and others shudder at the thought of isolationism. Today, there are still Pharisees and Sadducees.

And some of us are content merely to spin the dreidel and pile the plate high with latkes and toast and L'Chayem--and let the pundits worry.

I wouldn't advise you to burden the kids with all of this. Hannukah is a happy festival. Let it remain so. But like so many things Jewish--it has deep implications also.

Here's to Mattathias of Modin. He started something, indeed. How it all ended--that's another story.

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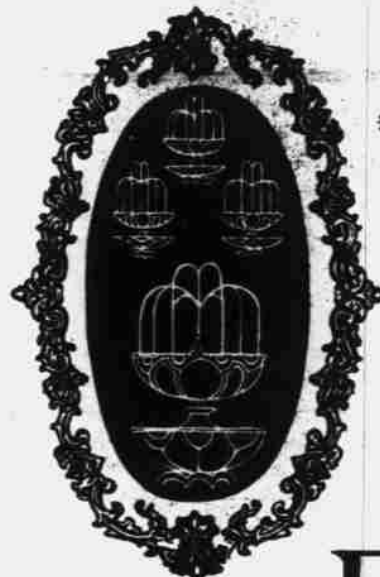
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