**THOUGHTS ON HANUKAH**

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**Gentile Reactions to Hanukah**

Hanukah is an annual celebration of the Hasmonean victory over Seleucid religious oppression.  While it is true that the story of the profanation and rededication of the Holy Temple includes certain purely religious elements as well as lessons concerning Jewish infighting, at its core the narrative is about a successful armed insurrection by Jews against gentiles.  Whereas earlier generations of Jews, as a matter of religious doctrine, meekly accepted whatever temporal fate was imposed upon them by foreign overlords, the Hasmoneans used violence to advance religio-political ends.

In an earlier essay (“Purim and the Struggle between Moderates and Nationalists”), I noted that the historical development of Purim was influenced by Jewish concerns about how the gentile world might react to a jubilant Jewish festival recalling the slaughter of thousands of anti-Semites.  The doctors of halakhah took necessary preventative measures to avoid offending gentile sensibilities and thereby exposing Jews to mortal danger.  Given the thematic similarity between Hanukah and Purim – both are Second Temple-era celebrations marking the bloody victory of Jews over their adversaries – it is worth exploring the possibility that Hanukah, too, evolved because of (Jewish fears of) unfavorable gentile reactions to the practices and underlying premises of the holiday.

Students of rabbinic literature have long wondered why the laws of Hanukah are rarely mentioned in Tannaitic works.  There is no Mishnaic tractate devoted to Hanukah.  Even those stray Tannaitic passages that mention Hanukah do so only in passing and without presenting anything approaching a comprehensive version of the holiday’s laws and customs.

Louis Ginzberg suggested that this lacuna in halakhic literature developed because Hanukah was not widely observed in the Land of Israel during the Tannaitic period.  Hanukah was one of many half-holidays included in the Scroll of Fasts.  Those minor festivals recalled various episodes of Divine salvation from the hands of heathens or victories over Jewish sectarian rivals.  Upon the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and in light of the magnitude of the losses sustained by Jewry, it seemed futile to commemorate those prior occasions when heathen enemies had been unsuccessful in carrying out their malevolent designs towards Israel.  The Talmud records an Amoraic debate about whether the Scroll of Fasts officially was abrogated in the post-Temple era, though in practice it appears that the half-holidays simply fell into desuetude (Rosh Hashanah 18b).

Gedaliah Alon disagreed with Ginzberg.  Alon maintained that Hanukah was still widely observed until the Hadrianic persecutions following the failed Bar Kokhba rebellion.  In the late 130s CE, with Rome vigilantly guarding against any manifestation of Jewish nationalism, Hanukah could no longer openly be celebrated.  Alon supported his viewpoint by citing a Baraita: “It is a mitzvah to place the Hanukah lamp outside the entrance of one’s home.  And in times of danger it is sufficient to place the lamp on one’s table (Shabbat 21b).”  He read the latter clause of the Baraita not as a generic regulation but as an adjustment emerging from specific historical experience.

Reuben Margolies claimed that Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi intentionally excluded Hanukah from the Mishnah lest it offend the Romans.  Margolies noted that several other important doctrines of Rabbinic Judaism, including the notion of a Davidic Messiah, are missing from the Mishnaic corpus.  Rabbi, always concerned not to undermine the delicate modus vivendi worked out between the Jews and Rome in the early 3rd century CE, punctiliously de-emphasized zealous and nationalistic elements in Judaism.

Saul Lieberman rejected the idea that Rome was offended by Hanukah.  He noted that the sages restricted the timeframe for the lawful observance of Purim lest the gentiles react violently to that Jewish celebration (Megillah 2b), but no corresponding limitation was imposed on Hanukah.  He concluded that the sages did not anticipate heathen hostility to Hanukah, because the holiday focuses primarily on the miracles wrought by God, not on Jewish vengeance against gentiles.

Further proof that the rabbis were not fearful of a violent Roman backlash to the observance of Hanukah can be inferred from the list of minor holidays and fasts that Judah ha-Nasi sought to minimize.  He downgraded the significance of Purim, 17 Tamuz, and 9 Av lest those observances trigger unhealthy nationalistic fervor among Jews or stoke the wrath of the pagan occupiers (Megillah 5b).  But he made no attempt to downgrade Hanukah.  However, unlike Lieberman, who posited that no safeguards were enacted because Hanukah was regarded as relatively benign, I would like to suggest instead that no halakhic adjustments were needed for an entirely different reason:   Hanukah was not observed in the Holy Land at that time.

Moshe Benovitz has recently shown that Rabbi Yochanan reinstituted Hanukah in Eretz Yisrael in the 270s CE after nearly two centuries of its having not been observed.  Rabbi Yochanan ruled that Hanukah candles must remain lit each night until the Tarmodai have departed (Shabbat 21b). Tadmor is a reference to the Palmyrene Empire that arose during the Crisis of the Third Century.  That rump state ruled over Eretz Israel 270-273 CE.  The Jews suffered terribly under their new masters and the rabbis favored the restoration of Roman rule.  Rabbi Yochanan resuscitated Hanukah -- a holiday that celebrates the alliance of Rome and Palestine Jewry against Syria -- at a moment when history was repeating itself as the Roman-Jewish alliance once again battled a Syrian enemy.  If Benovitz’s historical assessment is correct, then we have no evidence of Roman opposition to Hanukah.  The holiday sputtered out for internal Jewish reasons as suggested by Ginzberg, not because it was too chauvinistic for an era when Jews needed to maintain a low profile.

If the Romans did not interfere with the celebration of Hanukah, to which group of gentile oppressors was the Baraita referring when mentioning candle lighting in “the hour of danger”?

Rashi and Rabbi Isaac of Dampierre suggested that the heathen opponents of Hanukah were Habbarei.  After the rise of the Sassanid dynasty in Babylonia and Persia in 226 CE, fire-worshipping Zoroastrian priests began to persecute Jews and prevented the full practice of halakhah.  They banned kosher slaughter, forbade Jews from using public bathhouses, and dug up Jewish corpses (Yebamoth 63b).  The halakhic leniency for Jews to bury their dead on the second day of Yom Tov was suspended lest the Habbarei, upon seeing Jews digging a grave, coerce the mourners to do all manner of work on the holiday (Bezah 6a).  On their holidays, the Habbarei did not allow anyone to have flames burning outside of Habbareitic temples.  They would snatch lamps even from private homes (Gittin 17a).  If Hanukah coincided with a Habbarei holiday, lighting Hanukah candles in a conspicuous fashion could provoke an anti-Jewish reaction.  Rav was asked whether the Sabbath muktzeh laws could be relaxed to move the Hanukah lamp out of the sightlines of the Habbarei (Shabbat 45a).  He gave an affirmative answer, noting that the rigors of halakhah are relaxed during an emergency.

Some scholars believe that the kindling of Hanukah lights was an invention of the Babylonian Jewish community and only later was adopted by the Jews of Eretz Israel.  This theory maintains that all Baraita’ot referring to Hanukah candles are the intellectual product of Babylonia (something quite atypical), and that citations from Palestinian authorities in these texts are examples of incorrect attribution.  Jews were influenced by their Zoroastrian neighbors to include fire in their holiday celebrations, something to which the Habbarei vociferously objected.

The Catholic Church accepted First and Second Maccabees as deuterocanonical books.  The Holy Maccabean Martyrs, also known as “Hannah and her Seven Sons,” are memorialized in the Eastern Orthodox Church with a feast on August 1.  Christianity had no reason to object to Hanukah and its message of sustained religious commitment in the face of possible martyrdom.  But the anti-Semitism of the Christian laity proved to be of greater relevance than official Church doctrine with respect to influencing the ritual behavior of Jews.  As early as the 11th century, Ashkenazic Jewry developed the practice of lighting Hanukah candles inside the house (that is, away from the public eye) (Mahzor Vitri 238, Mordecai Shabbat 262, Or Zaru 2:322).  An overt display of one’s Jewish identity was too risky in a society that held Jews in contempt as deicides and that tolerated murderous Crusades.

It was not until post-World War II that Ashkenazic Jews once again felt comfortable conspicuously placing their Hanukah candles in their windows.  In America, Hanukah has been stripped of its martial component and has become a completely innocuous seasonal holiday celebrating the forces of light and goodness over darkness and evil.  The traditional Jew is now free to observe the rites of Hanukah without fear of anti-Semitic repercussions because the distasteful – to gentiles – motifs that undergird the holiday (violent zealotry, monotheistic intolerance of paganism, Jewish chauvinism, etc.) no longer enter into the popular perception of the holiday.  Hanukah has, in effect, been “cleansed” of those elements.