The Rabbis’ Hanukkah:
Rabbinic Reflections on the Warrior, the Zealot, the Martyr, the Peacemaker, and the Believer in Miracles

The Menorah in the Modern Temple.
This modern German rabbi, dressed in clerical robes, is lighting the synagogue Hanukkah menorah.
(J. Tolmann, Frankfurt, 1899)
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INTRODUCTION


The inspirational power of the Maccabean Revolt and of the miracle we celebrate on Hanukkah has been seriously undermined in the contemporary world. A shift in worldview in the West has made us very ambivalent about a series of concepts basic to Hanukkah. The national struggle for independence, requiring military heroism and self-sacrifice, is problematic in a post-nationalist era in the West where the praise of warlike qualities and collectivist identities seems outmoded and even dangerous. The belief that a miracle was involved in the victory appears unscientific and childish. The willingness to be a martyr for a religious cause is difficult for those with a pluralistic worldview because, for many, religious certainties have evaporated. Moreover, sacrifice of self is problematic in a society built on self-fulfillment and the pursuit of personal happiness as the ultimate purpose of human life. Finally, the zealot has become the incarnation of evil, since he has been identified with the fanatic who violently denies others individual freedom in the name of a totalitarian faith.

Though we cannot deal in depth with this massive attack on the traditional values associated with the Maccabees, we would like to explore the way the Rabbis themselves sought to qualify and bracket the problematic aspects of the national military hero, the zealot, the martyr and even the miracle. While still upholding these traditional values, they sought to counterbalance them with the ideal of the family peacemaker, the value of preserving life even when religious practice must be compromised and the precedence that legal due process takes over zealous vigilante activity.

This chapter’s first essay, The Family Peacemaker, begins with what seems like a halachic quibble over the lighting of a Shabbat lamp or a Hanukkah menorah when one has enough oil to light only one of them. This unlikely legal dispute is the vehicle for the Rabbis to promote the value of a self-effacing family peacemaker over the military effort to defend the dignity of one’s holy sites and one’s national honor.

In the second essay, on Mattathias the Priestly Zealot, we examine the multiple ways the Talmudic tradition seeks to prevent anyone from emulating the fanatic behavior of Mattathias and his hero, the Biblical priest Pinchas.

In the third essay, How Hanukkah became a Home Holiday, we speculate on the Rabbis’ decision to make Hanukkah observance reinforce home values rather than to celebrate the political victory in the streets and the religious triumph in the Temple or synagogue.

In the fourth essay, To Be a Warrior or a Martyr?, David Dishon shows the way in which the Maccabean martyr’s willingness to die for the sanctity of Shabbat was qualified in two ways. First, Mattathias urged that Jews defend themselves if attacked on Shabbat rather than immediately choosing the role of martyrdom. Second, the Talmudic Rabbis insisted that piku‘ach nefesh, saving a human life, was almost always to be preferred over the preservation of the sanctity of Shabbat.

In the fifth essay we transcend the Rabbinic world to bring a thoughtful sociological analysis of martyrdom in Eugene Wiener’s The Martyr’s Conviction: A Sociological Analysis.

Finally, the sixth essay, Do I Really Believe in Miracles, surveys different attitudes to miracles in order to clarify in what sense this central category of Hanukkah can still claim our faith.
Hanukkah not only commemorates past events, it celebrates the human virtues that shaped those events as well. Those are the martial traits of the priestly Hasmonaeans led by Mattathias, the zealot, and by Judah Maccabaeus, the warrior. Those values have their place in any society that seeks to defend its religious freedom, its national autonomy and its sacred places.

However, these uncompromising, combative virtues can be problematic in everyday life. Therefore the Rabbis — though ambivalent — sought to temper this heroic stance appropriate for extreme situations, by constructing an alternative model more suitable to normal conflict resolution. On one hand, they still honored the memory of the impassioned priestly Mattathias (166 BCE), who like his ancestor Pinchas, the priestly zealot, stabbed to death a Jew collaborating with a non-Jew in a public desecration of holy values. On the other hand, the majority of Rabbis (from the school of Hillel) actively cultivated and emulated the model of Pinchas’ peace-seeking grandfather, the High Priest Aaron, and his descendants who are idealized as the quintessential pursuers of peace within society. Opposite the “jealous/zealous God” of Mount Sinai who brooks no adulterous flirtation of his spouse Israel with idols like the golden calf, the Rabbis promoted an image of God as compromising the honor of his name in order to bring peace between earthly spouses. Most of the Rabbis preferred the Aaron model to the Pinchas / Mattathias model of Jewish leadership.

Oddly enough, the confrontation of the combative, national values of the Hasmonaean heroes and the pacific values of family conflict-resolution is discussed in the Jewish legal discussion of what seems a purely ritual question: When on Friday evening of Hanukkah one does not have enough oil (or money to buy sufficient oil) to light both the Shabbat candles and the Hanukkah candles, then what takes precedence?
Using insights I have learned from my teacher Rabbi David Hartman, let me explain how this shortage of oil becomes, in Maimonides’ great work of Jewish law, the Mishne Torah, an occasion for praising the Maccabees for their uncompromising defense of Jewish sovereignty and self-respect, yet ultimately giving priority to family values of compromise.

Oddly enough, the confrontation of the combative, national values of the Hasmonean heroes and the pacific values of family conflict-resolution is discussed in the Jewish legal discussion of what seems a purely ritual question.

Maimonides:
In Praise of Jewish Sovereignty

Maimonides summarizes the laws of Hanukkah in a unique way in Rabbinic tradition. He alone — unlike the Talmud or the Shulchan Aruch — opens his laws of “how” to light Hanukkah candles by reviewing the military struggle that led to national independence. Yet paradoxically Maimonides alone concludes these laws with a panegyric of peace — “Great is Shalom, for the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world.”

While the Shulchan Aruch focuses on the miracle of the cruse of oil that burnt for eight days in the Temple rededication, Maimonides begins with the national emergency:

“In the Second Temple period [167 BCE] the Greek kings decreed evil decrees on Israel: they abolished their religion, prevented them from studying Torah and doing mitzvot, stretched out their hands to take their money and their daughters, entered the inner sanctum of the Temple, violated its restrictions and defiled its purities. Israel was terribly distressed because of them and the Greeks oppressed them greatly. Then the God of our ancestors felt mercy for all Israel, saved them from their hands and rescued them. The Hasmonean priests killed the Greeks and saved Israel from their hands and then established a monarchy led by their priestly descendants — [not by King David’s tribe of Judah] — and restored sovereignty to Israel for over 200 years until the destruction of the Second Temple [70 CE].

“And when Israel overcame its enemies and wiped them out — it was the 25th of the month of Kislev [164 BCE], — then they entered the inner sanctum of the Temple. They were unable to find pure oil in the Temple except for one cruse of oil that could last only one day. They lit from it the Temple candles for eight days while in

1. 12th century philosopher, physician, jurist and political leader of Egyptian Jewry
2. 16th century, Rabbi Joseph Caro’s Code of Jewish Law.
the meantime they were pressing olives and extracting pure oil.”3

Although Maimonides mentions secondarily the cruse of oil that burned for eight days, he speaks with pathos of the Greek kingdom’s evil decrees against Israel — its religious laws, its Temple, its financial resources and its daughters. Then God has mercy on his people and “saves” them by allowing the Hasmonean priests to “save” them and by reestablishing Jewish autonomy in the form of a priestly royal dynasty.

Several points need to be highlighted in Maimonides’ historical reconstruction:

(1) The “saving act” is God’s intervention via human military and political action, thus both God and the Hasmoneans are “saviors.”

(2) The persecution was aimed at Israel. Therefore God’s and the Maccabees’ battle was to save Israel from the Greeks, not to save God’s Temple and God’s honor from desecration. Unlike the First Book of Maccabees which portrays Mattathias as a zealot in the tradition of Pinchas who is defending God’s jealously guarded dignity, Maimonides speaks in national religious terms about Israel’s desire to protect its own religious laws as well as to achieve political autonomy. The loss of Torah is the first aspect of Jewish persecution, but “the Greeks’ putting their hands on our money and our daughters” is equally grievous. The parallel of money and daughters, so strange to our ears, may refer to the indignity of adults who cannot prevent the invasion of their homes, their pockets, and their carefully protected daughters. It is similar to the “invasion of the inner sanctum of the Temple, the violation of its limits and the desecration of its purity.” The Greeks threatened not only our religious freedom or God’s sacred space, but our self-respect and autonomy as individuals, as families and as a nation. Therefore Maimonides — unlike any earlier or later rabbi — completes the narrative of redemption, not merely with the purification of the Temple, but with the return to national sovereignty “for two hundred years.”4

Hanukkah Candles: Going Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Maimonides’ introduction with its

4. In fact, full Hasmonean sovereignty lasted only from 140-63 BCE, though Jewish kings like Agrippas continue with limited power granted by the Roman Empire to 70 CE and beyond.
Rabbi Meir used to give regular talks in the synagogue of Hamat [the hot springs in the Golan Heights] every Shabbat eve. A certain woman of that town made it a habit to listen to his weekly sermons. On one occasion when he extended his talk to a late hour, she waited and did not leave until he finished.

But when she came to her home, she found that the lamp was out. Her husband asked her, “Where have you been until now?” She told him, “I have been listening to a rabbi’s talk.” Now, the husband said to her, “I swear by such-and-such that you are not to enter my house again until you spit in your teacher’s face.”

She left her house and stayed away one week, a second, and a third. Finally the neighbors asked her, “Are you still angry with each other? Let us go with you to the Rabbi.”

When Rabbi Meir saw them, he perceived the reason for their coming by means of the holy spirit. And so, pretending to be suffering from pain in the eyes, he asked, “Is there among you a woman skilled in whispering a charm for eye pain?”

Her neighbors said to her, “Go, whisper in his ear and spit lightly in his eyes, and you will be able to live with your husband again.” So she came forward. However, when she sat down before Rabbi Meir, she was so overawed by his presence that she confessed, “My master, I do not know how to whisper a charm for eye pain.”

But he said to her, “Nevertheless, spit in my face seven times, and I will be healed.” She did so, whereupon he said, “Go and tell your husband, ‘You asked me to do it only once but I spat seven times!’”

His disciples said to him, “Master! Is the Torah to be treated with such contempt? If you had only told us we would have brought that husband and flogged him at the post until he consented to be reconciled with his wife.”

Rabbi Meir replied, “The dignity of Meir ought not to be greater than that of his Maker. If the Torah enjoins that God’s holy Name may be obliterated in water in order to bring about peace between a man and his wife [in the case of the suspected adulteress], all the more so may Meir’s dignity be disregarded.”

In the exemplary story of Rabbi Meir (whose name means to “give light”) a great rabbi forgoes his personal honor and the honor of the Torah in order to relight the lamp of domestic life that has gone out between a pious woman and her difficult husband. The husband, in some sense, views the rabbi as his “adulterous competitor,” a source of jealousy, and he seeks to keep his wife at home tending to his lamp and his needs especially on Friday night. The public study of Torah in the synagogue has become a threat to domestic tranquility on Shabbat evening, a prime time for conjugal intimacy.

While Rabbi Meir could have had the husband flogged until he recanted his jealous oath, he knew that legal and physical force would not lead to emotional reconciliation. Therefore he chose the pretext of spitting into his “eye” as a medicinal charm, to relight the lamp between husband and wife. He saves both the dignity of the wife and the husband and still fulfills the literal meaning of the husband’s punitive oath. The woman is not forced to choose between public Torah and domestic Shabbat.

As Rabbi Meir explains to his students, the ordeal of sotah (the suspected adulteress) with its erasure of God’s name is understood as a paradigm of ethical behavior placing the family peacemaker above the zealot. God’s own honor, as well as the Torah’s, is voluntarily compromised in order to promote shalom bayit, domestic tranquility.

nationalist strains can be used as an interpretive key to understand the rationale of the ritual laws of how to light Hanukkah candles that he summarizes from the Talmud. The nationalist values are volunteerism, public display of one’s collective symbols and self-sacrifice for the community. Perhaps some of the ritual requirements of candle lighting echo those values symbolically.

(a) For example, while one candle is legally sufficient for each night of Hanukkah, (not one per night but one candle alone along with the shaman), one who wishes to “expand and beautify the mitzvah” (hiddur mitzvah) is commended for lighting multiple candles each night — one for each night that has passed — and for multiplying the number of family members lighting their own set of candles.8 Perhaps the volunteerism of the Hasmonean children is repeated in the voluntary act of every family member lighting multiple candles.

(b) The candle must be placed at the doorway or the window closest to the “public space” in order to be seen by passersby who are still outside returning from the market place. They should burn for up to half an hour after sunset.9 Only in times of danger may the Hanukkah candle be placed inside the house on the table.10 Perhaps the concern to propagate knowledge of the miracle of Hanukkah, from the family space to the public space, reflects the reversal of the process of persecution described above. The Greeks, who dominated the public space, our Temple, also sought to invade the private spaces of our homes, our pocketbooks, and our daughters. The Hasmoneans regained control of the public space in reestablishing the “kingdom of Israel.” In the contemporary experience every North American Jew who leaves the Christian public space of the Christmas season and comes to Jerusalem for Hanukkah feels the national significance of a Jewish public space.

(c) The Hanukkah candle lighting — even though legally speaking it has no roots in the Torah — is still very important and enormously popular. Maimonides says people should be willing to compromise their personal dignity to promote this symbol of God’s redemption of our national dignity.

“The mitzvah of lighting a Hanukkah candle/lamp is a very well-loved mitzvah and so one needs to be very careful to do it in order to proclaim the miracle and to add praise to God and gratitude for the miracles he did for us. Even if one has nothing to eat except from zedakah (handouts), one should borrow money or sell one’s coat in order to purchase oil and lamps to light.”11

In Jewish tradition a poor person’s coat is the last thing to part with. The Torah requires someone, who took a poor person’s only coat as collateral against a loan, to return it every evening so the poor person has a garment to sleep in.12 Yet to purchase oil in order to light a symbolic lamp in the window on Hanukkah is worth the indignity of selling your last coat or even going into debt. That level of self-sacrifice may be related to the Maccabean virtue of sacrificing their family’s comfort to defend the nation’s religious way of life.

Maimonides’ praise for the Divine-human military rescue celebrated by the Hanukkah lights is expressed in the priority Hanukkah oil takes over Shabbat wine for kiddush. The Rabbis required a Jew to sanctify Shabbat on Friday evening by saying kiddush (the sanctification of the day concluding God’s creation) and by joining this dedication ceremony of holy time to a toast over wine, a symbol of high culture. (Note that kiddush sanctifies the day, not the wine, and may be pronounced even without wine when necessary.)

If someone has only one coin and one is

10. 4:8
11. 4:12
Aaron: The Pursuer of Peace

While Mattathias and Pinchas are priests who define their jobs as “being zealous/jealous for God’s name” lest it be desecrated, the Hillel school of Rabbinic Judaism is famed for its preference for peace over truth and for pluralism over the monolithic truth of Shamai and his school of thought. It is no surprise that Hillel’s school preached a view of Aaron as the father of family peacemakers.

Mishnah: Hillel says, “Be among the followers of Aaron; for Aaron loved shalom and pursued shalom. He loved humanity and brought people close to Torah.”

Midrash: What does “love shalom” mean?

It means that we should bring harmony between each and every person in Israel, just as Aaron himself tried to bring harmony between each and every person. As it says, “The Torah of truth was in his mouth and unkindness was not on his lips. In peace and righteousness he walked with Me; and he prevented many from doing wrong.”

Rabbi Meir asked, What does “He prevented many from doing wrong” mean?

We could illustrate it as follows: Whenever Aaron encountered even someone of questionable reputation, he would stop and say “shalom.” On the next day, that same person might want to do something wrong, but would stop and think to himself: “What would happen if I run into Aaron? How could I look him in the face? When he says “shalom” to me, I would be ashamed. Consequently, that man would restrain himself from wrong.

Another example: If two people were feuding, Aaron would walk up to one, sit down next to him and say, “My child, don’t you see how much your friend is tearing his heart out and rending his clothes.” The person would then say to him/herself: “How can I lift up my head and look my friend in the face? I would be ashamed to see him; I really have been rotten.” Aaron would remain at his/her side until s/he had overcome resentment (kinnah).

Afterwards, Aaron would walk over to the other person, sit down next to him/her and say: “Don’t you see how much your friend is eating his/her heart out and tearing his/her clothes.” And so this person too would think to her/himself: “O, my God! How can I lift up my head and look my friend in the eye. I am too ashamed to see him/her.” Aaron would sit with this person too until s/he had overcome resentment. And finally when these two friends met, they embraced and kissed each other. Therefore, it is said of Aaron’s funeral, “And they wept for Aaron thirty days, all the house of Israel.”

How do we know that Aaron never made a man or a woman feel bad about him or herself?

Because it is written, “and all the house of Israel wept for Aaron.” Moses, however, rebuked the people with harsh words. Therefore, of him it is written, “and the children of Israel wept for Moses” — some but not all of Israel. Moreover, just think of how many thousands in Israel are named after Aaron. Were it not for Aaron’s domestic peacemaking, they would not have been brought into the world!

Moses was a judge and it is impossible for a judge to vindicate both litigants for he must exonerate the innocent and convict the guilty. Aaron, however, was not a judge but one who brought peace between human beings [and between God and Israel].

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13. Malachi 2:6
14. Numbers 20:20
15. Avot d’Rabbi Natan “A,” Chapter 12
16. Avot d’Rabbi Natan”B,” Chapter 25
God’s historic redemption of Israel from Greek persecution is in some sense more important than the kiddush over wine which commemorates God’s involvement in the creation of nature.

**Giving Priority to Shabbat over Hanukkah**

Maimonides, more than any other Jewish legal scholar, tried to promote the miraculous Divine-human military rescue of Israel celebrated on Hanukkah. Yet he concludes the Laws of Hanukkah and with it the whole Book of Festivals, with the “victory” of Shabbat candles over Hanukkah miracles.

“If one is confronted with the [simultaneous mitzvah] to light one’s household lamp [for Shabbat] and to light the Hanukkah lamp . . . then the [Shabbat] household lamp takes precedence because it contributes to shalom bayit (domestic peace and tranquility).

(1) The candles are a way “to honor Shabbat (Kibbud Shabbat) because no important dinner is held without light;”20

(2) Candles add to the enjoyment of Shabbat (Oneg Shabbat) since “one who sees the food enjoys it much more than one who eats it in the dark;”21

(3) “A candle contributes to family tranquility (Shalom Bayit) — for in a place without a lamp there is no peace since in the dark people trip and fall.”22 At a Shabbat table without the light to see each other’s faces there would be no social intercourse, no family integration.

On the other hand, **Hanukkah candles** may not be used for personal benefit, therefore making them the polar opposite of Shabbat candles, which must be used for the family’s benefit. Given that the same candle may not serve for both Shabbat and Hanukkah, when there is a shortage of oil (or of money for oil), then halachic priorities must be determined. The issue is important not merely in those rare cases of poverty, but in establishing a value preference between what Hanukkah and Shabbat candles represent.

Maimonides chooses to conclude the Book of Festivals by declaring that Shabbat candles, which stand for domestic peace, take priority over Hanukkah candles that proclaim a Divine-human military victory. The private realm of the home takes precedence over the public realms of politics and religion. The virtues of peace-seeking compromise must be preferred over the uncompromising idealism of the zealot.

For Maimonides, the virtues of peace-seeking compromise must be preferred over the uncompromising idealism of the zealot.

“After all, the Divine name is also to be erased [in the Biblical ritual of the wife suspected of adultery — sotah] in order to facilitate the making of peace between man and woman.

“Great is shalom (peace)! For the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world as it says in the Bible: ‘Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.”18,19

The legal problem raised by Maimonides is as follows: On the one hand, **Shabbat candles** must be placed on the table for their light to accompany the whole Shabbat meal (approximately 4 hours) in the family space. Though there is no Biblical commandment to light Shabbat candles, the Rabbis enacted this mitzvah giving it three rationales:

17. Laws of Hanukkah 4:13
20. Rashi, on T.B. Shabbat 25a
21. T.B. Yoma 74b 22. ibid.
The essence of Hanukkah’s heroism is epitomized in the phrase “the few against the many” used in the Rabbinic Hanukkah prayer *Al HaNissim*. Yet Judah, the brilliant and daring guerrilla warrior who led the Maccabees to military victories, the recapture of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Temple (164 BCE), was not mentioned in *Al HaNissim*. Rather the only one mentioned in this prayer is the priest Mattathias, Judah’s elderly father who only lived during the first year of the revolt (167-166 BCE). The *First Book of the Maccabees* also gives pride of place to Mattathias over Judah.23

Mattathias holds the key to the revolt because he raised the cry to arms of a minor priestly family in a provincial town (Modim) against the high priests of Jerusalem and the Greek Syrian empire. Mattathias is literally the father of the revolt in the sense that his five sons carried out his mandate over a 27 year struggle. After the death in battle of each son, he was replaced by the next in line — Elazar, Judah, Jonathan and finally Simon. Not only Mattathias’ faithfulness to his ancestral religion but his ability to engender loyalty and courage in his descendants is the key to the family’s heroism as an organic unit.

In focusing on Mattathias, Jewish tradition seeks to categorize him according to one or another model of a hero. For the Rabbinic prayer *Al HaNissim*, Mattathias is called a “High” Priest (though historically he was only a regular priest not from the familial

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23. Unlike the Second Book of Maccabees whose historian-writer focuses on Judah as a warrior hero.
dynasty of high priests). He is identified with the pure and innocent few who overcame the Greek Syrians — impure and wicked. For the early secular Zionists, such as Boris Shatz, sculptor and founder of the new national art institute Bezalel in Jerusalem in the early 20th century, Mattathias was a national hero choosing loyalty to his ancestral identity over the antisemitic Western empire. Shatz sculpted him with sword raised calling for revolt and celebrated his sculpture at a big Zionist Hanukkah party. For the American Reform curriculum writers who wrote “How a Jew Celebrates” in 1971, he was the priest defending religious freedom, not national independence or priestly purity. For them, Mattathias never glorified war, as those Zionists who glorified Judah the Maccabee did.

However, the First Book of Maccabees, (our first and best historical source, written in 125 BCE) portrays Mattathias in the Biblical tradition of the religious Zealot purging deviant, idolatrous Jews. For the Books of the Maccabees, Mattathias was comparable to a series of Biblical zealots. He acted as did Moses and the tribe of Levi, who after the incident of the Golden Calf, massacred 3,000 idolatrous Israelites. Mattathias was also comparable to Pinchas, the grandson of the High Priest Aaron, who speared a tribal leader of Shimon and his Midianite royal consort to stop an epidemic of idolatry. He was also similar to Elijah the arch-zealot, who challenged the authority of King Ahab whose wife Jezebel introduced royal idolatry into northern Israel.

The historian of the First Book of Maccabees describes Mattathias and reports (or constructs) the speech he made. The literary formulation resonates with echoes of Moses, Pinchas and Elijah at their most implacable, their most blood-thirsty and their most zealous:

Then the king’s officers who were forcing the people to give up their religion, came to the town of Modiin, to make them offer sacrifices. Many Jews, among them Mattathias and his sons, gathered together. Then the king’s messengers answered and said to Mattathias:

“You are a leading man, great and distinguished in this town, surrounded with sons and brothers; now be the first to come forward and carry out the king’s command as all the heathen and the men of Judah and those who are left in Jerusalem have done, and you and your sons will be distinguished with presents of silver and gold and many royal commissions.”

Then Mattathias answered and said in a loud voice:

“If all the pagans in the king’s dominions listen to him, forsake each of them the religion of their ancestors and choose to follow his commands instead, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live in accordance with the covenant of our ancestors. God forbid that we should abandon the Torah and the ordinances. We will not listen to the message of the king, or depart from our religion to the right hand or to the left.”

As he finished these words, a Jew went up before the eyes of all of them to offer

**PROVERBS ON ZEAL AND FANATICISM**

Typical of modernity, almost all these proverbs, drawn from contemporary anthologies of quotations, are one-sidedly critical of zeal, usually identifying it with the psychologically imbalanced fanatic. Only a few of the sources still identify zeal with idealism and passion for a higher cause.
sacrifice as the king commanded, on the altar in Modiin. And Mattathias saw him and was filled with zeal, and his soul was stirred, and he was roused to anger, and ran up and slaughtered him upon the altar. Thus he showed his zeal for the Law, just as [the biblical priest] Pinchas did to Zimri. Then Mattathias cried out in a loud voice in the town and said, “Let everybody who is zealous for the Law and stands by the covenant follow me.”

And he and his sons fled to the mountains and left all they possessed in the town.

Mattathias, like Moses at the worship of the Golden Calf, calls for zealous followers to execute idolatrous Jews. The words are almost identical.

And Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars, and forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised children that they found within the borders of Israel. And they drove the arrogant before them, and the work prospered in their hands. So they rescued the Torah from the hands of the pagan and their kings, and would not let the lawbreakers triumph.

When the time drew near for Mattathias to die, he said to his sons:

“Arrogance and reproach have now grown strong; it is a time of disaster and hot anger. Now, my children, you must be zealous for the Law, and give your lives for the covenant of our ancestors. Remember the deeds of our ancestors.

Pinchas, our ancestor, was rewarded for his intense zeal with the promise of an everlasting priesthood. Elijah for his intense zeal for the Law was taken up into heaven. And you must gather about you all who observe the Law, and avenge the wrongs of your people. Pay back the pagan for what they have done, and give heed to what the Law commands.”

Many phrases of First Maccabees intentionally echo the Biblical zealots who in turn echo God who describes himself as a zealous/jealous God in relation to Israel worshipping idols.

“I, the Lord, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me.

“You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”

Hence the era of “hot anger” mentioned by Mattathias refers to God’s anger. “Anger” and “zeal” are twinned in First Maccabees. Mattathias, like Moses at the worship of the Golden Calf, calls for zealous followers to execute idolatrous Jews. The words are almost identical.

“As soon as Moses came near the camp and

24. I Maccabees 2:15-28, 45-51, 54, 58, 67-68
25. Exodus 20:2-5

WHAT IS ZEAL?

A certain nervous disorder afflicting the young and inexperienced.

— AMBROSE BIERCE, AMERICAN AUTHOR

Zeal without knowledge is the sister of folly.

— JOHN DAVIES, ENGLISH JURIST

What we do, which in a calmer condition we would not do.

— ROBERT ZWICKEY

Fire without light.

— ENGLISH PROVERB

Violent zeal for truth hath an hundred to one odds to be either petulancy, ambition or pride.

— JONATHAN SWIFT, AUTHOR OF GULLIVER’S TRAVELS
saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the children of Israel drink it.

“Moses saw that the people were out of control — since Aaron had let them get out of control — so that they were a menace to any who might oppose them. Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come here!’ And all the tribe of Levi rallied to him. He said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.’ The tribe of Levi did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. And Moses said, ‘Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day — for each of you has been against son and brother and let God bless you today.’

Why did First Maccabees choose the zealous hero model? Obviously the First Book of Maccabees has its own ideological axe to grind. Written most probably in Hebrew by court historians of the newly established Hasmonean dynasty, First Maccabees seeks to frame Mattathias, the founding father of the revolt and the biological father of the remarkable Maccabean brothers, as a traditional leader who despite lacking the lineage of King David (the tribe of Judah) or the lineage of the High Priesthood (the family of Zadok = Sadducees appointed in the days of David) still has a claim to authority. The rebel who challenged not only Greek Syrian authority but the high priests of the line of Zadok who were ratified by the Seleucids (the family of Antiochus), must derive his legitimacy from another source.

In the Maccabean period Jews no longer believed their contemporaries could be true prophets of God, but they did experience genuine miracles. So the authority for the Maccabean Revolt could be bolstered by supernaturally miraculous victories. For example, Second Maccabees describes God’s miraculous support of the Maccabees defense of the Temple from desecration by the pagan Heliodorus who had come to pillage the Temple.

“While the Jews called upon the Almighty Lord to protect the (golden vessels of the Temple) that had been entrusted to them, Heliodorus was carrying out what had been decided upon. But no sooner had he and his guards arrived before the treasury than the Sovereign of Spirits caused a great spectacle so that all were appalled at the power of God and fainted with terror. There appeared a horse with a dreaded rider adorned with magnificent trappings. Rushing swiftly at Heliodorus, it struck him with its forefeet. This horse’s dreaded rider seemed clad in golden armor. Two young men also appeared to Heliodorus, remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed. They stood on each side of him and flogged him continually, inflicting many stripes on him.

“Heliodorus fell suddenly to the ground and was enveloped in deep darkness, and men picked him up and put him on a stretcher and carried him off. Thus the man who had just entered that treasury with a great retinue and his whole guard was now rendered helpless. The Greeks clearly recognized the sovereign power of God. So through divine intervention Heliodorus lay prostrate, bereft of all hope of deliverance, while the Jews blessed the Lord who had marvelously honored His own place. The Temple, which a little while before had been full of fear and commotion, was filled with joy and gladness.”

27. Simon the High Priest, brother of Judah the Maccabee and son of Mattathias the Hasmonean priest, was installed by the Jewish people and recognized as the supreme political and religious leader by both the Roman and Greek Syrian Empires, in 140 BCE.
28. II Maccabees 3:22-30
These zealots take the “law” into their own hands as violent vigilante volunteers confronting religious and political anarchy.

The Second Book of Maccabees describes supernatural miracles interspersed in the course of the Maccabean Revolt that in effect grant Divine legitimacy to the struggle. In contrast, the First Book of Maccabees attributes to Mattathias the rebel priest, a claim to authority derived from the tradition of zealots in the Bible who act without due process and without the support of the people and even without a direct command from God. These zealots take the “law” into their own hands as violent vigilante volunteers confronting religious and political anarchy. That is the tradition of the tribe of Levi. In relation to external enemies, Levi and Shimon kill the people of Shechem implicated in the rape of Dinah, and Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster beating the Hebrew slave.

Even more to the point, the tradition of Levi and especially of the priests within the tribe of Levi, involves protecting the monotheistic religious faith of Israel from insidious traitors leading the people as a whole to apostasy. When Moses — on his own initiative — called out: “Whoever is for God, join me!” and the tribe of Levi proceeded to kill 3,000 offending Hebrews at the Golden Calf, the tribe of Levi earned its special sanctity, its mission and its office as the servants of God and thereafter the defenders of the Mishkan (the desert’s portable sanctuary). When Pinchas, Aaron’s grandson, son of the High Priest Elazar, on his own initiative — speared Zimri, a leader of the tribe of Shimon, and Kozbi, a daughter of a leader of the pagan enemy people Midian, he earned the right to inherit the High Priesthood for all his descendants. The precise crime of Zimri and Kozbi can be defined in many ways and thereby the title “Zealot” = “Kanai,” that Pinchas earned, will be characterized in correspondingly different ways. In any case, it is Pinchas who epitomizes the zealous priestly tradition whose mantle Mattathias/
“Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. When Pinchas, son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Pinchas, son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion/zeal for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion/zeal. Say, therefore, I grant him My Pact of Peace. It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned/zealous action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.”

Despite the unequivocal Biblical praise for Pinchas’ behavior, later Rabbinic texts reflect the Rabbis’ profound ambivalence about the zealot. Should Pinchas be praised and emulated or censured and eschewed as an exception to the rule of law never to be imitated?

Let us explore the comparison of the Mattathias and Pinchas narratives and then examine briefly the Talmudic debate on the desirability of the zealot. Afterwards we will add some reflections on contemporary understandings of fanaticism and the policies of containment (or reinterpretation) necessary to handle such explosive “stuff” as Mattathias’ or Pinchas’ zealous acts.

**Comparing Pinchas and Mattathias**

The similarities of Pinchas and Mattathias lie in the way they kill an unholy pair — a Jew and the pagan tempter/temptress involved in this public act of desecration. The unholy act is also a form of political propaganda designed to undermine traditional religious authority and to speed even more the epidemic of pagan worship sweeping up the Jewish people. The pagan is involved in seducing the Jew, whether with sexual or financial gifts. No effective Jewish leadership is available — Moses and his assembly are in tears and the High Priest Jason and later Menelaus are collaborating with the state policy of Hellenization. The public nature of the vigilante violence of Pinchas and Mattathias is intended to call a stop to the paganization of the Jews. The vigilante is not an officially appointed leader in either case but he is a respected priest either because of his lineage — Pinchas is the son of Elazar, son of Aaron — or because of his elder status, as in the case of Mattathias. Both thereby earn the privilege of high priesthood for their descendants through taking the law into their own hands in an anarchic situation.

While Pinchas’ single act ends the crisis, Mattathias’ act incites a military revolt that is still far from victory. Pinchas acts in a situation where the women of Moab and

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“One who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.”
— Winston S. Churchill, British Prime Minister, World War II

“One who does what he thinks the Lord would do if only He knew the facts of the case.”
— Adapted from Finley Peter Dunn, American humorist

“(One who) is perpetually incomplete and insecure. He cannot generate self-assurance out of his individual resources — out of his rejected self — but finds it only by clinging passionately to whatever support he happens to embrace.”
— Eric Hoffer, Social Critic

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Midian are leading Jewish men astray by sexual allurement, however there is no direct threat of violent coercion against Jews who reject the attractions of paganism. Using prostitutes may be an unfair means but not a violent one. Mattathias, on the other hand, faces Greek Syrian soldiers who have already proven their willingness to use violence in Jerusalem and who constitute an implied physical threat in Modiin, even if they are offering honors and money to encourage resistant Jewish leaders.

Both zealots — Pinchas and Mattathias — are acting extraordinarily in their violence and in their unauthorized taking of the law into their own hands. In each case, their zealotry is legitimated only because of the crisis at hand.

In the context of a homogenizing superpower crushing religious freedom and national culture with the help of a coercive minority of wealthy Hellenist Jews, Mattathias could have been portrayed as a freedom fighter. However, the author of First Maccabees presents him as a zealot in the tradition of Pinchas, who became the guardian of God’s honor from desecration and shame.

“In those days Mattathias, the son of John, the son of Simon, a priest of the descendants of Joarib, removed from Jerusalem, and settled in Modiin. He saw the impious things that were going on in Judah and Jerusalem, and he said,

‘Alas! Why was I born to witness the ruin of my people and the ruin of the holy city, and to sit by while it is being handed over to its enemies, and the sanctuary to aliens?

‘Her Temple has come to be like a man disgraced,
Her glorious religious objects have been captured and carried off,
Her infant children have been killed in her streets,
Her young men with the enemy’s sword . . .
Her adornment has all been taken away.
Instead of a free woman, she has become a slave.
Behold, our sanctuary and our beauty has been laid waste,
And the pagans have profaned her!
Why should we live any longer?’
And Mattathias and his sons tore their clothes and put on sackcloth and grieved bitterly.”

What is common to both Mattathias and Pinchas is this strongly felt concern for God’s honor. However Pinchas’ case is harder to defend to a Western democratic audience, because Zimri’s sexual deviance is not portrayed as coercing other Jews to abandon their religion. In a liberal culture like ours that values the individual’s freedom of self-determination, Zimri could be seen as asserting his freedom to intermarry against the atavist establishment — Moses and God — without denying other Jews’ rights to remain traditional. Zimri could be crowned

32. I Maccabees 2:1-14

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A man who consciously over-compensates a secret doubt.
— ALDOUS HUXLEY, AUTHOR OF BRAVE NEW WORLD

Scratch a fanatic and you will find a wound that never healed.
— WILLIAM N. JAYME

The insecure person anywhere, at any time, who gives himself without reservation to any movement that promises him meaning through action.
— ROBERT ZWICKEY
as the champion of religious and marital freedom and Pinchas and Mattathias could be saddled with the title of violent vigilante enforcers of religious orthodoxy.

In fact, however, a close reading of the narratives of Pinchas and Mattathias shows that neither is modeling a “normal” means of punishing religious deviants and denying them religious freedom. Both zealots are acting extraordinarily in their violence and in their unauthorized taking of the law into their own hands. Their zealotry is legitimated because of the crisis threatening the existence of the collective defined by its traditional identity. While thousands of Jewish soldiers fraternize with enemy women, probably sent by their Midian and Moab leaders, and thousands die of a plague brought by God, the interests of the individual are overridden by the zealot Pinchas acting in defense of his polity. The zealous Mattathias faces a similar crisis in which Jews are abandoning Judaism not only voluntarily but under extreme duress to the point of torture and martyrdom.

Both the Hellenist Jew, who volunteered to make a sacrifice in exchange for Greek honors, and Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon who had intercourse with Kozbi the Midianite in public, are in effect leading a political revolt against the legally constituted society. Pinchas is defending the public order of Moses and the Ten Commandments mandated voluntarily at Sinai by the whole people. Similarly, Mattathias is trying to protect the legal status quo in which the Judean ancestral religion ratified by all the previous conquerors of Judea — the Persians, Egyptian Greek Ptolemies and Antiochus III. The Torah is the internationally recognized and binding Judean constitution, long before Antiochus IV and the Hellenist Jews revoked it one-sidedly. The unique political-religious crises and the special circumstances in which both Pinchas and Mattathias operated render their zealous behavior a historical curiosity rather than a model for emulation for our generation, an exception which does not establish a general norm praising zealotry in everyday life.

33. Exodus 24

**What is Fanaticism?**

- Zeal run wild.
  — Eugene E. Brussell

- False fire of an overheated mind.
  — William Cowper, English poet

- That temperament which can only repose in fixed sanctities.
  — Hilaire Belloc, English author

- There is only one step from fanaticism to barbarism.
  — Denis Diderot, French Encyclopaedist
Rabbinic Strategies for Defanging a Fanatic

The story of Pinchas becomes an especially dangerous legal precedent for any zealot, when it is codified by the Rabbis. The Mishna Sanhedrin naturalizes and authorizes zealous vigilante murder of a Jew who violates sacred standards (especially if there is no legal remedy for this act of desecration through the courts). However, the Talmudic Rabbis, after debate, did much to “defang” or neutralize the problematic implications of the Pinchas story and the Mishna’s ruling.

*Mishna*: If one steals the *kiswah* (a holy vessel from the Temple), or curses God by enchantment, or cohabits with a pagan (literally, a Greek Syrian) woman, he is assaulted (executed) by zealots. If a priest performs the Temple service while unclean, his brother priests do not bother to bring charges against him in court, but the young priests take him out of the Temple court and simply split his skull with hatchets.

It is unclear whether the Mishna is recommending vigilant action for all, permitting it for those who are so moved to defend Divine honor, or merely offering an amnesty *post facto* to those swept into violence by their impassioned identification with the defiled sacred objects. However, the Jerusalem Talmud brings an equally ancient source from the Mishnaic period that suggests “the Rabbis (sic) in Pinchas’ era” wanted to censor him and excommunicate him for his dangerous behavior:

“Pinchas acted without the approval of the Rabbis and Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazi says they sought to excommunicate him, however the holy spirit intervened and declared: “Pinchas and his seed shall have an eternal covenant of priesthood.”

Some of the Talmudic Rabbis expanded this positive precedent-setting power of Pinchas’ behavior. The Babylonian rabbi, Shmuel, explicitly commends Pinchas’ disregard of due process and of hierarchical rabbinic authority. Pinchas was justified in stepping in — without waiting for Moses and the assembly to act or even to delegate their authority to him — because God’s name was being actively defamed. Preemptive action in the midst of desecration should not be delayed out of deference to traditional legal authority.

Shmuel said: “Pinchas saw” that, “There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord” which means whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one’s teacher [following due process by consulting with one’s teacher, the higher authority, is not necessary or even desirable].

However, the dominant Talmudic view that eventually determines recognized Jewish law follows the innovative policies of containment of Rabbi Yochanan and Rav Hisda.

Rav Hisda said: If the zealot comes to take counsel [asking whether or not s/he should act as a vigilante to punish the transgressors enumerated in the Mishna], we do not instruct him/her to do so.

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34. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 81b
35. Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin Chap. 9; Numbers 25
36. Numbers 25:7          37. T.B. Sanhedrin 82a
38. Eretz Yisrael, 3rd century CE
39. Babylonia, 4th century CE

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Fanaticism is only loyalty carried to convulsive extreme.

— WILLIAM JAMES, PSYCHOLOGIST

Fanaticism is religion caricatured.

— EDWIN P. WHIPPLE

— ANONYMOUS
Rabbah son of Bar Hana said in Rabbi Yochanan’s name: If the zealot comes to take counsel, we do not instruct him to do so. What is more, had Zimri ceased his forbidden intercourse with his foreign mistress and only then Pinchas had killed him, then Pinchas would have been [prosecuted by the courts as a murderer and] executed on Zimri’s account. Had Zimri turned upon Pinchas [during the forbidden act] and killed Pinchas [in self-defense], then Zimri would not have been liable to trial and execution, since Pinchas once the man has withdrawn from the woman, he may not be slain, and should the zealot slay him nevertheless, the zealot incurs the death penalty for it. Should the zealot come to request permission from the court to slay the violator, the zealot is to be given no instructions, even if the act is still in progress. And not only this, but should the zealot come forth with the intention of slaying the violator, and should the man elude him and kill him in order to save himself, the man may not be put to death on account of killing the zealot.”

In summary, the dominant halachic view, that of Rabbi Yochanan in Eretz Yisrael and Rav Hisda in Babylonia, restrict Pinchas’ window of legitimate zealotry by establishing the following conditions:

(1) The zealot may act neither preemptively nor punitively. Neither before nor after the desecrator has completed his act of desecration may the zealot act. It is only in stopping the desecrator in the midst of the violation that the zealot may act. Thus Pinchas had to spear Zimri and Cozbi in the act of intercourse, otherwise due process and duly appointed authority are to be applied.

(2) Even in the act of stopping desecration in progress, the zealot is considered to be acting outside the law. The desecrator therefore has every right to kill the zealot in self-defense. If Zimri had managed to kill Pinchas, then he would have been within his legal rights.

(3) The zealot must walk a tightrope to be legally exempt from the consequences of his religiously motivated murder. He cannot consult with Rabbinic authority. Once the zealot consults, the Rabbis do not teach him or authorize him to act even within the range of what is permitted. Only after the fact does the

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was a pursuer [an assailant seeking to take his life who did not have the authority of a law enforcement officer].

Maimonides summarizes the reductio ad absurdum legal limits placed on zealots trying to imitate Pinchas. He shows that the law places so many restrictions on the zealot so that the law becomes intentionally absurd and inapplicable:

“In the case of an Israelite who has intercourse with an idol-worshipping woman in public, that is, in the presence of ten or more Israelites, whether by way of legal marriage or by way of harlotry, should zealots fall upon him and slay him, they are worthy of commendation for their zeal. This is a rule given to Moses from Sinai, as evidenced by the incident of Pinchas and Zimri.

“The zealot may assault the violator, however, only during the act of intercourse, as in the case of Zimri, as it is said, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman through the private parts.”

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40. the 12th century philosopher and jurist
41. Numbers 25:8
42. Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Book of Holiness, Laws of Forbidden Relations, Chapter 12:4-5.
Mishna serve to exempt zealous impassioned behavior from punishment.

(4) If the zealot accidentally oversteps the bounds — striking too early or too late — the zealot becomes culpable as a murderer to be prosecuted by the same religious law he claimed to be defending. Not only is the zealot punishable but he is also guilty religiously rather than lionized as a hero.

In short, Rabbi Yochanan, Rav Hisda and Maimonides reduce the possibility of emulating Pinchas ad absurdum, to zero. Only one confident of receiving the extraordinary protection of God, as Pinchas received (according to the midrash), dares act as a vigilante. These Rabbis clearly praise a legal mind over a zealous one; due process over taking law into one’s hands; weighing one’s behavior rationally over impassioned anger to defend God’s honor.

One modern rabbi adds that zealots must be cautious in checking the purity of their motivation. That is why the Rabbis frowned on zealots since one could never be sure they were not moved by impure motives.

In summary, the Jewish narrative tradition still tells stories praising historic zealots like Pinchas and Mattathias, but the dominant Jewish legal tradition neutralizes these precedents, rendering them obsolete and illegitimate as ongoing models. While freedom fighters like the Maccabees remain heroes worth emulating today, insofar as they were also zealots coercing other Jews into observance, their model was problematic for the Talmudic rabbis as it is for many of us today.

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43. Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of the 19th century Torah Temima

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APPENDIX

OUR WESTERN AMBIVALENCE ABOUT FANATICS: THREE DEFINITIONS OF THE ZEALOT

In the Biblical and the Christian traditions, martyrs and zealots have often held places of honor. However, the rationalist French Enlightenment inaugurated a period of criticism of the impassioned zealot in the name of reason. Later the democratic tradition distanced itself from the zealot as one who threatens the religious liberty of others. As we have seen, the dominant Jewish legal traditions have also sought to constrain the zealot who takes the law into his/her own hands. Each critique understands the zealot in different terms. Clarifying these distinctions will allow us to understand Mattathias and his heroism in a nuanced way. Here are three different definitions:

1. The Proactive Fanatic

The French Enlightenment thinker Voltaire invented the term fanatic as a pejorative term for anyone motivated by religious zeal who sought to use the state’s power to coerce religious observance. The Catholic Church was the state church in France before the French Revolution. Adapting the Latin term “fanum” meaning sacred or priestly, Voltaire attributed irrational coercive passion to all religious belief and advocated an enlightened skepticism. The fanatics lack critical judgement due both to their emotional passions and their superstitious dogmas. They are proactive in their missionary desire to force their notion of salvation on others. (Interestingly enough, the word “fan” — as in sports fan — derives from this collective fanaticism.)

In Protestant England the term for a fanatic was “enthusiast,” meaning literally one whom the divine (or the demon) has entered (en-theos). Often this was accompanied with ecstactic behavior like shaking (as in the Shakers of Ohio) and speaking in tongues. “Enthusiasts,” in this old fashioned religious

44. 18th century 45. 17th-18th century
sense of the word, like zealots in all periods, often feel themselves to be instruments of God rather than pursuers of self-interest or promoters of a merely human doctrine.

Later, in the Romantic Era of the 19th century, when reason was less valued and passion became a commendable trait, the word “enthusiasm” began to take on a positive connotation rather than a fanatical one.

With the secularization of the state and the decline of religious belief (or its contraction into the private realm), thinkers in the West expected the end of public zealotry, which had always been associated exclusively with religious ideologies. However, early 20th century secular religions of redemption, like fascism and communism, offered a new field for zealous proactive coercive ideologues. No private space was respected, for the true believers sought to “indoctrinate” or to “liberate” individuals from false beliefs or “false consciousness.” After the collapse of these grand secular ideologies there has been a resurgence of fundamentalist, often millennial religious groups along with fanatical nationalisms that reject all pluralism — whether ideological or ethnic.

**The Hot-blooded Youth**

Since “fanaticism” crops up in all kinds of ideologies and eras, psychologists and social scientists have suggested that the zealot is not a product of a certain kind of pathological belief, but of a particular kind of personality disorder or sociological disorder. This view goes back to Aristotle who identified zealous behavior with “hot blooded” young people whose emotions rule their minds. More generally, adolescents and others who are in transition or insecure, because they are in liminal (borderline) situations, seek absolutes of black-and-white, of homogeneous communities, of dogmatic certainties. The young idealists may seek purist causes to which they can dedicate or sacrifice their lives. Such personalities, age groups or social groups have a low tolerance for doubt and for pluralism since they need a high degree of psychological security. Of course, these psychological portraits of zealots are not ones that the zealots would agree to as the key to their self-understanding.
The Reactive Defender of the Sacred Community

The self-understanding of most zealots — especially Pinchas and Mattathias — is neither as proactive ideological missionaries nor as insecure psychological misfits. Rather, they believe themselves to be reactive defenders of what is sacred to their community when the community and its sancta are being threatened and desecrated by unscrupulous forces. They are defending God’s and the community’s honor which has been affronted intentionally by aggressive missionary forces that violate the law and cause anarchy. Notice that the zealot’s enemy is portrayed as the coercive missionary using extra-legal means to conquer what has been the traditional, taken-for-granted authority. However, the traditional leadership has collapsed and is no longer capable of meeting the enemy. Compromised by self-doubt or traditional rules or a fear of confrontation, the conservative leadership is unable to mount a counter-revolution to the insidious forces of revolution from within and without. The zealot is often most incensed by traitors-from-within, former spiritual brothers who are undermining society from within, spreading the heretical poisons introduced by foreign bodies turned into cancers.

The terms, zealot (Greek) and kanai יַקָּנָא (Hebrew), reflect this reactive stance. Zealous and jealous share the same root both in Greek and Hebrew. God declares himself a “jealous God” in the Ten Commandments in forbidding Israel to whore after other gods. The language is taken from the “jealous husband” law. Therefore Pinchas is “zealous/jealous” for God, presenting Divine anger at the indignity of being jilted and betrayed by Israel, his covenantal spouse. Mattathias’ zeal is explicitly compared to Pinchas’, and it results from his identification with God’s disgrace caused both by traitorous Jews and by foreign invasion of the Divine realm. The women of Moab and Midian in the Bible, like the Greek Syrian officers in the Maccabean period, have lured Israel into apostasy by appealing to their sexual or social climber instincts. The political leadership — Moses and his “weeping” assembly, and even worse, Menelaus the so-called high priest or Quisling (one who collaborates with the invader) — have been rendered impotent or worse, co-opted.

Only a zealous outsider, like a pure and traditional priest, can fulfill the priestly mission to guard God’s sancta and save the day by going beyond the law. Public desecration that is designed to demoralize the Jewish public and its leadership must be met by a reactive counter desecration — spearing Zimri and Kozbi in a parody of their illicit prostitution, and sacrificing the Greek and the Jew in a parody of their idolatrous worship.

Three Strategies of Containment

These three definitions or characterizations of the zealot imply three different strategies of containment of this troubling phenomenon:

1. The proactive fanatic needs to be countered with a dose of skepticism about belief in general, with a pluralism of truths and with the importance of the individual freedom to err while in pursuit of ultimate truth.

2. The hot-headed youth in pursuit of absolutes might be restrained, if other sources of psychological and sociological security were provided — a caring support group for primary identification without extremist views.

3. The reactive defender of the sacred community who sees the other as a threat, must be reassured that the traditional, sacred values s/he believes in will not necessarily be undermined by deviance. Pluralism must actively defend and reassure traditional minorities as well as liberal ones in order to make the zealot feel less threatened and decrease the urge to take the law into one’s own hand in a crisis.
3.

HOW HANUKKAH BECAME A HOME HOLIDAY


by Noam Zion

THE ANCIENT AND THE MODERN INDEPENDENCE DAY PROCESSION

The original Hanukkah founded by the Hasmonean dynasty was probably not celebrated at home with the lighting of the family menorah. As described in the historical Books of the Maccabees (c. 125 BCE), the original festivities involved a victory march. “They celebrated for eight days . . . carrying palm branches.”* (The palm branch is both a Jewish symbol of Sukkot and perhaps a Greek symbol of the goddess of victory, Nike, who later gave her name to sports shoes in the 20th century.)

Perhaps the festival was not fully formed in 164 BCE when the Temple was first recaptured and rededicated. Maybe only in 152 BCE when Judah’s brother Jonathan became the High Priest or in 140 BCE when his other brother Simon became High Priest and dynastic prince of a recognized autonomous state, did this ancient Israeli Independence Day gain its ritual form as a public celebration of the founding of a new and renewed political-religious-national order.

The festival, which does not even have its own name in the First Book of Maccabees, seems to follow the Greek model of days that commemorate military victories, especially ones that founded a new political dynasty like the Maccabees. Elias Bickerman, the historian, notes that the Bible has no holidays established by political leaders and no commemoration of military events. Therefore Hanukkah itself is a Hellenist-style innovation.

If we search for a modern parallel to Hanukkah as a “State Holiday of Independence,” the Zionist entity of the 20th century comes to mind immediately. It is no surprise that in the 1930s and 1940s the rising secular nationalist Zionist movement in Israel adopted Hanukkah as its central holiday.† Theodore Herzl concluded his book, The Jewish State (1896), with the visionary prophecy, “The Maccabees shall rise again,” in the same spirit in which Greek and Italian 19th century nationalism envisioned a rise of their modern nation-state in the image of the ancient glory of Athens and Rome. (Note that modern Greece hosted the renewed Olympics in the same year, 1896.)

48. II Maccabees 10:7
49. see Ehud Luz and Eliezer Don-Yehiya’s article on page 10
The Menorah in the Ancient Temple.
In this engraving, we have a peek into the inner sanctum of the Temple through a raised curtain revealing the twelve showbreads, the altar of the incense, and a giant seven-branched menorah.
(Illuminated Manuscript of Josephus, Amsterdam, 1704)

Yisrael in the 1920s-1930s the form of celebration for the new nationalist Hanukkah was public parades often by torchlight, youth movement pilgrimages to the graves of the Maccabees at Modiin and the creation of the Maccabia international sports competition. After the establishment of the state in 1948, the public Hanukkah candle lighting began at the graves of the Maccabees at Modiin with an Olympic-style runner carrying a lit torch to the Knesset with intermediate stops — including the Israeli President’s home.

In the 1930’s everyone was asked: what “bricks” have you contributed to rebuilding the “Temple,” the Third Commonwealth, meaning metaphorically, the new Jewish political entity. Note that the Hebrew word for Temple is “sacred house,” Beit Hamikdash, and that the British Mandate’s term for the renewed settlement of Jews in Israel is the “Jewish National Home” (Balfour Declaration, 1917). To celebrate the emergence of Jewish consciousness from the home to the streets, from minority status to a claim to be an autonomous majority, the place of the menorah (later the national emblem of the State of Israel) was atop Jewish public buildings, not only in private homes on the window sill.

The proper Zionist name for the holiday was “The Festival of the Maccabees (or of the Hasmoneans),” not “Hanukkah” which means “Rededication of the Temple.”

Now let us return from the modern counterpart to the ancient context of the Maccabees and later, the Rabbis.

A Temple Rededication Ceremony
In addition to the victory parades of the ancient Maccabees that celebrated their political independence, the original holiday also took the form of a Temple Rededication Ceremony. In the Second Book of the Maccabees, which quotes from a letter sent circa 125 BCE from the Hasmoneans to the leaders of Egyptian Jewry, the holiday is called “The Festival of Sukkot celebrated in the Month of Kislev (December),” rather than Tishrei (September). Since the Jews were still in caves fighting as guerrillas on Tishrei, 164 BCE, they could not properly honor the eight day holiday of Sukkot (and Shemini Atzeret) which is a Temple holiday, hence it was postponed until after the recapture of Jerusalem and the purification of the Temple. This — not the Talmudic legend of the cruse of oil — explains the eight day form of Hanukkah. The use of candles may reflect the later reported tradition of Simchat Beit HaShoeva, the all-night dancing in the Temple.

To celebrate the emergence of Jewish consciousness from the home to the streets, from minority status to a claim to be an autonomous majority, the place of the menorah in modern Israel was atop Jewish public buildings, not only in private homes on the window sill.
on Sukkot which required tall outdoor lamps to flood light on the dance floor of the Temple courtyard.

“They celebrated it for eight days with gladness like Sukkot and recalled how a little while before, during Sukkot they had been wandering in the mountains and caverns like wild animals. So carrying lulavs . . . they offered hymns of praise [perhaps, Hallel] to God who had brought to pass the purification of his own place.”

The connection between Sukkot and Hanukkah (as the Rabbis later called it) goes beyond the accident of a postponed Sukkot celebration. Sukkot is the holiday commemorating not only the wandering of the Jews in the desert in makeshift huts but the end of that trek with the dedication of the First Temple (i.e. the permanent Bayit/ Home of God in Jerusalem by King Solomon circa 1000 BCE).

“King Solomon gathered every person of Israel in the month of Etanim [Tishrei] on the holiday [Sukkot] in the seventh month . . . for God had said, ‘I have built a House for my eternal residence.'”

The medium is the message, and the new Rabbinic household ceremony offers us a new interpretation of Hanukkah, transforming it from the “Rededication of the Sacred House,” the Temple, to the “Rededication of the Family Sanctuary.”

Thus the Maccabean rededication celebration is appropriately set for eight days in the Temple.

The Rabbis’ Home Hanukkah

After the brief review of the two rationales and two forms of celebration taken by the original unnamed Maccabean festivities of the 25th of Kislev, the Rabbis’ decision to make Hanukkah a home holiday is all the more amazing. It would have been so much more appropriate to commemorate a national victory in the streets and a Temple purification in the Temple courtyard. After losing the Temple and political independence, the ceremonial lighting of the menorah would still have found its natural place in the synagogue. (Yet it is only in the Middle Ages that a new custom originates and it becomes customary to light a menorah in the synagogue on Hanukkah, even though the halacha is still that only home candles are an adequate fulfillment of the candle lighting obligation.) While no historical source (neither the Books of the Maccabees, Josephus nor Philo) mentions anything about home candle lighting in relationship to the original Hanukkah, the Talmudic Rabbis (2nd-5th century CE) assume that the only obligation is to light a lamp on one’s doorstep (or window sill). One lamp must be kindled for each household just at dusk in order to publicize the miracle for the passersby on their way home from the market place.

Why then did the Rabbis make this Temple holiday into a home holiday? Was that the oral tradition since the days of the Maccabees or was it an innovation after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE)? Whatever the historical development of this custom, the home-based form of the holiday expresses a particular spiritual message. “The medium is the message,” and the household ceremony offers us a new interpretation of Hanukkah, transforming it from the “Rededication of the Sacred House,” the Temple, to the “Rededication of the Family Sanctuary.” Let us suggest some possible rationales for this innovation, one we still observe, the family candle lighting at home.

First, the Rabbinic candle lighting is a liminal ceremony, meaning it occurs at the threshold (“liminos” in Greek) in two senses. In space, the doorway is the border and the gate between home/street, private/public, family/national. In time, dusk is

50. II Maccabees 10:6-7 51. I Kings 8:2,12
the border between day/night and light/darkness with all their metaphoric significance. The Rabbis required that each household “publicize the miracles of Hanukkah” by sending a message from their home to the public sphere, the market place. It seems more than a coincidence that when the Greeks tried to force every Jewish family to renounce its Judaism and to proclaim its loyalty to Hellenist culture, religion and politics, that the doorstep was the location chosen.

“At the doors of their houses and in the squares they burned incense52 [to the pagan gods].”

In short, the Greek persecution was aimed not only at the Temple and not only at requiring notables like Mattathias to offer sacrifices on public altars, but struck at family Judaism. Circumcision, Shabbat and Kashrut (or at least eating ritually pure foods) were the target as well. Many rank and file Jews defended their family’s Judaism even to the point of martyrdom. The martyrdom of the scribe Elazar and of Hannah and her seven sons is a personal “bearing witness” (martyr in Greek means to bear witness) to the public persecutors that God, not Antiochus, is the final authority.

Therefore the Rabbinic “publicizing of the miracle,” house by house is more than a clever advertising campaign to spread information. It is a family bearing of witness to the public that we are a family loyal to Judaism. When the Rabbis encouraged individuals to go beyond the minimum requirement of one lamp per house and to light one lamp per individual, they mandated individuals within each household to voluntarily reiterate their personal commitment to the family’s public declaration of faith.

In ancient Hellenist and contemporary Western civilization the public realm usually overshadows the private, the street values invade the home in the name of “enlightenment.” If you will, in contemporary terms the light of the TV spreads its messages within the home sanctuary. However it is the family of the Maccabees, one family, a father and five sons (parallel to Hannah and her seven sons), who rejected the external light and declared their loyalty to their ancestral “lights.” The inside triumphed over the outside, the ancient over the so-called modern, the family values over the enforced fads of up-to-date society. Thus it makes sense for the Rabbis to sanctify Hanukkah as a home holiday.

Let us add a second note about the Rabbinic form of observance. The candles are lit one at a time in mid-winter at the darkest point of the cycle of the moon (the 25th of Kislev when the moon is just disappearing and then beginning as a new moon to reappear on the 1st of Tevet and then to wax slowly). This occurs also at the darkest phase of the solar cycle, the winter solstice (of the northern hemisphere). Unlike holidays of redemption like Sukkot, Purim and Pesach, which are celebrated at the full moon and at the fall and spring solstice, Hanukkah reflects the beginning of the redemptive process, not its completion. Historically the 164 BCE rededication of the Temple takes place only at the beginning of the 25 year struggle for political independence, when many “dark days” still lay ahead.

The Rabbis’ Hanukkah celebration marks the miracle of a new beginning in the historical and natural cycle, so Hillel’s form of adding one light each night reflects that process as it waxes gradually, as each person adds to the light of the previous day.53 The Rabbinic Hanukkah which is celebrated in the home focuses on the power of family values to stave off the outside influences of the street, in this case Hellenism, and ultimately to transform the public space by the light that shines from within the house. This is a faith that begins, like the winter solstice, in darkness but has the power to generate unexpected illumination for the whole world.

52. I Maccabees 1:55
Scene I

The Time: A Shabbat morning, sometime in the year 164 BCE.
The Place: A series of large caves in the Judean Desert, just east of Jerusalem.
The Situation: About 200 Jewish families, husbands, wives and children, have fled the Hellenist persecutions of Jewish practices in Jerusalem and have taken refuge in the desert caves. But they have been discovered. A cohort of Greek soldiers has surrounded the entrances to the cave. The Greek commander calls out to the Jews: “Enough! Come out and do as King Antiochus commands, and you will live, you and your children!” The Jews were well-armed. They had chosen the caves as a perfect refuge, easily defensible against a large force. But there was one problem. Today was the Shabbat, the holy day of rest. Any secular activity, let alone warfare, was totally anathema to the sanctity of the day. In Jerusalem their persecuted comrades had given themselves to torture and death rather than desecrate the Shabbat. Why should things be different here?

Confidently, the Greeks awaited a reply. They had cleverly chosen the Shabbat for the attack. They knew the insane religious scruples of the Jews — they wouldn’t fight. They must surrender.

A reply was shouted out: “We will not come out nor do as the King commands and break the Shabbat!”

The Greek soldiers moved forward, climbing the steep cliff walls. Not a stone was thrown by the defenders; no effort was made to block up the hiding places. When the Greeks entered the caves they found mothers, fathers and children huddled together, praying. The Greek swords began to hack right and left. With their last breath the Jews called out: “Let us all die guiltless. We call heaven and earth to witness that you destroy us unlawfully.” Then silence. A thousand people lay dead.54

54. Based on I Maccabees 2:29-38

Scene II

The Time: A few days later.
The Place: Camp of Mattathias and his guerrilla fighters, somewhere in the hills of Judea.
The Situation: Word had just arrived of the massacre in the caves. Weeping and cries of despair from the soldiers. Dozens of brave Jewish families destroyed without mercy! But beyond the grief lies a deeper fear — facing the dilemma of fighting on Shabbat can no longer be put off. A council is held chaired by the rebel priest Mattathias:

• “Our whole struggle is for the holiness of Torah. If we profane the Shabbat, our fight is meaningless!”
• “If we do as our brothers have done and refuse to fight, our entire people will be destroyed. There will be no one to keep the Shabbat!”
• “We must have faith in God. He will hear our cries and deliver us as He did in Egypt, and as in our exile He saved Daniel even in the lions’ den!”
• “We cannot rely on miracles. We fight for God’s cause and He will help us. God expects us to fight like Joshua, Gideon, and David. They didn’t wait for miracles.”

“On that day Mattathias and the government-in-exile reached this decision: If anyone attacks us on the Shabbat, let us fight against him and not die, as our brothers and sisters died in the hiding-places.”55

55. I Maccabees 2:40-41
Let us review this unique tradition of Biblical warfare and then see how it may have influenced both the desert martyrs and the Maccabean warriors. Then we will see how their descendants, the Hasmonean dynasty and in their wake the later Rabbis opt for the Davidic tradition of “normal” warfare.

God appeared first to Israel as a “Man of War” at the Red Sea, annihilating Egypt’s war-chariots and cavalry. “God will fight for you, and you may be still,” declared Moses to the frightened people, cowering at the approach of Pharaoh’s army. In the desert the Jews took up arms to defend against Amalek, but only when Moses raised his arms were they victorious. Addressing a people about to enter the land of Israel, the Book of Deuteronomy codified for all time the central Biblical religious concern about military power — the fear that its use could lead to a sense of self-sufficiency without God, to a feeling that “my power and the strength of my hand have achieved all these mighty deeds.” Deuteronomy’s antidote is a series of laws: A priest addresses the army before battle, reminding them that God’s aid is what secures the victory. The army is deliberately kept small: those who are afraid are sent home along with those whose minds are on a newly built house, a newly planted vineyard or a newly betrothed bride. Special laws of sanctity attach to the army’s camp as a reminder that “The Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you, and to hand over your enemies before you.” And the King, the commander-in-chief, is prohibited from maintaining a large-scale cavalry or a large financial war-chest and from marrying many wives, the key to military and diplomatic alliances in ancient times. The Jewish army was to remain a popular militia sufficient for self-defense, but inadequate for empire-building.

The Biblical concern with the religious arrogance of military power is made explicit in the story of Gideon. Gideon, appointed by God to fight the Midianite invaders and their huge army, gathers together a force of 32,000 volunteers. He is then told by God: “The forces you have are too numerous for Me to give over Midian into their hands — lest Israel boast...
before Me saying, ‘My own hands have rescued me!’” Gideon, at God’s command, tells all who are afraid, to go home — and 22,000 leave! The remaining 10,000 is further culled to a mere 3,000 warriors, and with those Gideon defeats the enemy, his soldiers shouting “The sword of God, and of Gideon!”

But the people grew tired of spontaneous leadership and ad-hoc militias. They demanded a king and an organized army. Saul, the first king, took some initial steps, and then David, his successor, vigorously established an empire, conquering neighboring peoples, and professionalizing the army.

The policy of making military alliances came under withering critique by the prophets, who saw the reliance on military power as symbolic of the people’s straying from God.

His son Solomon was “a man of peace,” but he preserved that peace by establishing huge standing forces, including professional cavalry and charioteers. Solomon was also militarily allied to Egypt. All of this was in gross violation of the Deuteronomic Code on kingship. The heavy taxation required to maintain such a force split Solomon’s kingdom in two after his death, but the tradition of kings leading large standing professional armies continued.

Ultimately this policy came under withering critique by the prophets, who saw the reliance on military power as symbolic of the people’s straying from God. “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, they rely on horses, and put their trust in chariots for they are many and in horsemen they are very strong! They do not rely on the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!” thundered the prophet Isaiah. The prophet’s recommendation is: “In ease and rest shall you be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength — but you did not wish it.” The sentiment is echoed by Zechariah, the prophet of the return to Zion after the Babylonian exile: “Not by might nor by force — but by My spirit, says the Lord” — the words read out to this day in the Haftorah of the Shabbat of Hanukkah!

Second Temple Models: Martyrdom or Self-Defense?

The Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE brought on a change of heart. Jewish military power and alliances had proved to be “a broken reed.” When Jews in Babylon were threatened with persecution they dealt with it in a new way — martyrdom. Stories began to be circulated about Daniel in the lions’ den, about the three Jewish leaders who were cast into a fiery furnace and were not burned. These stories received their final literary forms in the book of Daniel, a book, many scholars maintain, which took its final form during the persecutions of Antiochus. The message of the book to the suffering Jews of Judea was clear — remain steadfast in refusal to bow to foreign gods, risk your life and miraculous salvation will come eventually. To reinforce this message the book of Daniel ends with an apocalyptic vision — all the persecutions are part of the drama of “the End of Days.” The date for the final upheaval has been sealed and is near: “Happy is he who waits.”

This was the background of those Hasidim — pious families who took refuge in the desert caves. They were not pacifists or total religious quietists like latter-day Quakers or Amish. They had arms and were willing to defend themselves — but not on Shabbat. The observance of Shabbat was what distinguished their warfare from secular warfare. It showed decisively that their ultimate trust was not in their weapons, but in God — and this demanded vivid physical proof. When the crunch came, they chose martyrdom — calling heaven and earth to witness their loyalty. Such dramatic manifestations must ultimately call forth the divine mercy.

The Hasmonean fighters with Mattathias faced the same dilemma — but responded differently. They shared the cultural and religious world of the desert martyrs — but the extreme nature of the crisis, the sense that the very survival of Torah was at stake, called forth a new decision: the decision that God’s warriors would fight on the Shabbat — but only to defend themselves. This decision meant that military force could be used in the real world — without necessarily leading to the arrogance of “the strength of my hand.”

One sees this concern in the actions of Mattathias’ successor — his son, Judah the Maccabee. Before battle Judah called his troops together. They fasted and brought out the Torah scrolls. Those afraid to fight or newly betrothed, etc., were sent home, according to Deuteronomy 20:5-8, in spite of the fact that the Jews were already numerically inferior to their enemies. Then Judah, as priest, addressed the troops, reminding them of Biblical examples of God’s miraculous deliverance of the strong into the hands of the few. Then after fasting, prayer and exhortation — Judah cleverly made use of every ruse and tactical ploy to outsmart the Greek commanders and achieve victory. It is fitting therefore that Judah and his victories should be commemorated on Hanukkah with the emphasis not on military prowess — but on their pure, religious motivation symbolized by the kindling of the menorah lights.

In using military power to further God’s cause, the Maccabees had crossed their Rubicon. From then on they played the diplomatic game with increasing skill — finally achieving political independence after a struggle of over 20 years. The Hasmonean successors maneuvered less skillfully or more brazenly, and the Hasmonean state succumbed to Rome. Significantly, Josephus relates that the Jews defending the Temple Mount against Pompey’s Roman soldiers in 63 BCE would defend themselves on Shabbat if directly assaulted — but would not prevent the Romans from raising earth-works around the Temple Mount on Shabbat. The Romans took advantage of this Jewish scruple, and in Josephus’ opinion only this allowed them to conquer the fortified Temple Mount.68

The Rabbinic Tradition: Legitimizing Military Power

Perhaps this is what led to a further change — the legitimation of offensive military operations on Shabbat. In Rabbinic literature this legitimation is ascribed to Shamai the Elder (Hillel’s intellectual sparring partner), who lived under the Roman-Herodian rule while the Temple still stood (20 BCE). Shamai interpreted Deuteronomy 20:20 — “And you shall build the siege against the city which is making war on you — until you reduce it.”

67. I Maccabees ch. 3-4
68. Jewish Wars I, 146
Shamai noted that the end of the verse “until you reduce it” is unqualified, and he commented — “even on Shabbat.” Thus offensive war could be pursued, and as later legal discussions made clear, even initiated — on Shabbat. Indeed this is what took place during the great Jewish Revolt against Rome (66-70 CE). The Jews attacked the Romans mercilessly on Shabbat the same as any other day, giving the Romans no advantage. There is no record of any Rabbinic criticism of this practice.

With the Temple destroyed and Jewish military power crushed, we might have expected the Jews to revert to a position preferring martyrdom over fighting. But this is not what happened. The post-Maccabean tradition was too strong. Instead the Rabbis systematically worked out a legitimation of Jewish military power, taking David as their paradigm, not Gideon. The Deuteronomic restrictions on the king’s aggrandizement of horses, money, etc., were held to apply only to the king’s private use, not to the accumulation of resources for the state. The Babylonian Talmud specifically says the king may maintain a surplus of horses and monies for security needs, and need not be limited by any religious concerns about minimalization.69 Halacha allowed active war to be continued on Shabbat — including pre-emptive offensive action, if an enemy attack seemed imminent.70

However while the Rabbis in theory legitimized “realistic” war waged by the ruler of a powerful Jewish state even on Shabbat, in practice they took up the Book of Daniel’s position — waiting for a supernatural divine redemption.71 This was the traditional Diaspora position, threatened occasionally by messianic activism, and overthrown in the hearts of most Jews by secularization, political Zionism, and finally, the Holocaust. Zionism and the State of Israel have led to the re-emergence of the Maccabean tradition. The Israeli army suspends training and other non-operational activities on Shabbat, while maintaining total military vigilance and, when deemed necessary, initiating military action on Shabbat. All this is done with the blessing of the Army Rabbinate, and with the full cooperation of Shabbat-observing soldiers and officers. At the same time, in its prayers for the soldiers’ welfare, the religious community affirms that military power alone is not what brings security. Victory is ascribed to God’s help — but God is conceived of as acting through human agents. If the religious/secular polarization is a deep-seated threat to Israel’s existence — the ability of religious and secular soldiers to live side by side on Shabbat in the Israeli army, each carefully distinguishing their military duties as soldiers from their own individual “leisure time,” is a bright and encouraging phenomenon.

Two Competing Conceptions of Shabbat

The Maccabean decision can also be seen as a turning point in the understanding of the Shabbat. The Shabbat celebrates God’s refraining from Creation. After six days of activity, it is the hallowed day of rest. However this can be understood in several ways. One can view Shabbat as the anti-thesis of creation, a day of rest and harmony, a day of quiet protest against the jostling, uprooting creativity of the human race and their aggressive dominance over nature. Shabbat can also be a leap into another dimension of reality, “a taste of the world to come,” a fundamentally other-worldly experience.

In this conception, Shabbat must not
compromise with life. Shabbat announces a superior ethic, one of total dedication to God through total renunciation of the demands of the world. This is how many Jewish sectarians saw Shabbat, from the Qumran Dead Sea sect to the literalist Karaites of the Middle Ages. On the sectarian Shabbat no use of fire or light was permitted. It was a day of abstinence, of sitting in darkness and eating cold food. One could leave the house only to attend synagogue. From such a perspective it is easy to see how preserving the Shabbat could take precedence over the preserving of human life for the martyrs of the Maccabean period.

Rabbinic Judaism, which emerged from the Pharisaic movement, took a different path. The Rabbis upheld not only the strict Torah prohibition of work on Shabbat, but also the demand of Isaiah the prophet that the Shabbat be a day of joy and honor. In explicit opposition to their Sadducean opponents, the Rabbis ordained the lighting of candles just before Shabbat — and explained that the purpose of the candle-light meal is “shalom bayit,” peace in the home, the intimate enjoyment between husband and wife. Three full meals were Rabbinically ordained for Shabbat, as well as sexual relations between the couple. One must wear fine clothes, use the best dinnerware and thoroughly clean the house and oneself beforehand. Shabbat became a celebration of creation, of life itself. Not only work and creative activity were important, but rest and enjoyment as well. Shabbat was not world-denying, but world-affirming — the created world is “very good” and can be sanctified. It is a day to step back and appreciate, to become aware of what we have and not what we lack, to spend a day feeling as if “all one’s work has been completed.”

On the sectarian Shabbat no use of fire or light was permitted. It was a day of abstinence, of sitting in darkness and eating cold food.

Shabbat and the Sanctity of Life

In this atmosphere it is clear that loyalty to Shabbat cannot violate human life. Indeed the Rabbis ruled that even the slightest doubt as to whether a life-threatening situation existed, required the suspension of normal Shabbat prohibitions. The Talmud ruled that if either a sick person or a doctor felt that life was endangered — the Shabbat must be suspended. The opinion of two doctors who felt danger existed took precedence in Jewish law over the opinions of 100 doctors who felt otherwise.73 Similarly the Talmud ruled that even if 100 doctors believed there was no danger, if the sick person maintained that s/he felt endangered, then the Shabbat must be suspended — “for the heart knows its own trouble.”74 The actions in violation of the Shabbat were not to be shunted off to gentiles, children, women or ignorant people. In life-threatening situations, they were to be performed by “the great ones of Israel” to show one and all that in this case the mitzvah is to violate the Shabbat.75 The Jerusalem Talmud was even more emphatic: “[In life-threatening situations when the Shabbat must be violated] the one who acts quickly is praiseworthy, the Rabbi who is asked his opinion deserves blame, and the one who asks the Rabbi is a spiller of blood.” The commentators explain that the Rabbi deserves blame because he did not sufficiently educate his congregation that if any possibility of endangerment exists, one must immediately call a doctor or an ambulance — and not waste precious time seeking Rabbinic permission.

The Talmud relates that once the great Rabbis of the early 2nd century were walking along the road and the following question was put to them: “From whence do we learn that even doubtful danger to life suspends the Shabbat?” The Talmud records seven learned answers to this question, each Rabbi citing a

72. Isaiah 58:13 73. Shulchan Aruch O.H. 618:4
74. Proverbs 14:10, T.B. Yoma 83a 75. T.B. Yoma 84b
76. T.B. Yoma 85a
different proof-text. The impression is however, that these texts are cited after the fact. The suspension of Shabbat prohibitions in order to prevent even a possible threat to human life had been decided long ago and had become an essential part of the Rabbinic ethos.

Even so, two of the answers given are especially noteworthy. “Rabbi Yonatan ben Yosef said: ‘For the Shabbat is holy unto you’ — it is handed over into your hands, and you are not handed over into the Shabbat’s hand.” Here we have the fundamental principle: holiness must serve human needs, and not the other way round. The other answer is

The fundamental principle is that holiness must serve human needs, and not the other way round. “You shall observe my statutes and my laws which a person must perform and live by them’ — and not die by them!”

given by a Babylonian scholar, Shmuel: “You shall observe my statutes and my laws which a person must perform and live by them” — and not die by them! Shabbat, and mitzvot in general, come to affirm life, not cause death. And in the summation of the Talmudic discussion, flaws were found in all the proof-texts — except for that of Shmuel — “and live by them.”

It was left to the great codifier of Jewish law, Maimonides, to sum up this great principle. Maimonides’ legal language is famously terse and to the point — but on the issue of violating the Shabbat to preserve life, he suddenly becomes expansive and passionate:

It is forbidden to hesitate in violating the Shabbat for the sake of a sick person whose life is in danger, as it is said: “That a person must perform and live by them — and not that one should die by them.” Thus you have learned that the laws of the Torah are given, not as an act of Divine vengeance to the world — but an act of mercy, loving-kindness and peace for the world. And those sectarians [the Karaites] who say that this is desecration of Shabbat and forbidden — of them it is written “Also I have given them statutes which are not good, and laws they cannot live by.”

The Karaites, like other sectarians before them, were filled with genuine religious zeal. Theirs was an ideal of self-sacrifice, of self-immolation, and the rigorous understanding of Shabbat gave this practical expression. Better to die than to violate the Shabbat. But, according to Maimonides, they had missed something fundamental about the relation of God to Israel through mitzvah. Shabbat, the holiest day, was to be suspended if it threatened life. God’s law comes not to crush humanity, not to overwhelm people with Divine majesty, but to ennable and enhance human life. And this, stresses Maimonides, is symbolic that “all the laws of Torah are not vengeance in the world — but mercy, loving-kindness, and peace in the world.”

77. Exodus 31:14
78. Leviticus 18:5
79. Ezekiel 20:25
80. Maimonides, Laws of Shabbath 2.3, Mishne Torah
81. The writer might be accused of ignoring the Rabbinic laws which do mandate martyrdom in certain situations. Without going into detail, it may be said that the Rabbis made “and you shall live by them” into the fundamental rule regarding mitzvah, and all exceptions had to prove their validity. Exceptions were established for three basic prohibitions considered so heinous that one should die rather than violate them: idolatry, adultery/incest, and murder. There were also special stipulations for times of intense religious persecution when dramatic steps were called for. But these were reactions to exceptional situations created by evil oppressors, in contrast to the fundamental rule, as Maimonides understood it.
Although the Biblical and Rabbinic theory and practice of war share a great deal with the principles common to their period, there are several features of Jewish law and thinking about war which offer us alternative insights. A few examples:

1. Channeling the Soldier’s Sexual Power: “The Captive Woman”

By the ancient laws of war women were considered war booty to be used and disposed of in any way the captor saw fit. Rape, systematic extermination, enslavement and sale were typical. The Torah, however, explicitly limits the soldier’s choices: either make her your legal wife with full rights or let her go. A thirty day “cooling off” period provided for a transition for the soldier and his female booty, allowing her to mourn her lost parents and to prepare to marry her captor. During the mourning period the grieving woman looked so unattractive that the captor might well decide to let her go free. The Rabbis understood the Torah’s willingness to allow the soldier to take sexual advantage of the captive in highly limited fashion, as a necessary concession to yetzer hara, the evil instinctual inclinations released by war. They further required that the woman captive convert by free consent before any marriage could be performed, thus re-enforcing the dignity and freedom of a captive woman who by the “normal” laws of war was merely sexual booty.

2. Ecology Versus the Scorched Earth Policy of Warfare: “Don’t destroy the trees”

Fruit-bearing trees are not to be cut down during a siege. From this Biblical law the Rabbis learned the prohibition of wanton destruction of any natural resources — whether in war situations or in normal domestic relations.

3. Morale and Motivation in War: “The Speech of the Priest”

The priest addressed the army before battle reminding them of the holy cause they were fighting for, and warning them that success depended on their righteousness in the eyes of God. Spiritual and moral motivation, not the desire for glory or loot, was considered an essential part in the education of a soldier.

4. The Duty to Disobey Unjust Orders

The Rabbis praised Avner and Amasa, King Saul’s senior officers, for refusing his direct order to massacre the priests of Nov whom Saul unjustly suspected of aiding David’s escape from Saul’s assassins. Later when David was king, David’s general, Yoav, was excoriated by the Rabbis for obeying David’s orders to deliberately place Uriah (Bat-Sheva’s cuckolded husband) in a place of extreme danger on the battlefield. Jewish law held that any command by King or officer in violation of the Torah was null and void and must be disobeyed. That is still the law in the Israeli army today. Any soldier who chooses to obey an obviously immoral order, such as shooting unarmed civilians, may be tried for a crime even though s/he was “only following orders.”

5. Pursuing Peace Precedes Conducting War

God directly commanded Moses to attack Sihon who barred the entrance to the land of Israel. Instead, Moses sent messengers requesting peaceful passage. Only when Sihon refused and attacked Israel did Moses conquer him. The Rabbis saw this as a praiseworthy act of “seek peace and pursue it” — not only being prepared to make peace, but to actively seek it out and foster it. According to the midrash God was delighted at Moses’ “disobedience” — and learned from Moses to establish a permanent law: “When you approach an enemy city to make war on it, first call upon it to make peace.”

82. Deuteronomy 21  83. Deuteronomy 20
84. Deuteronomy 20  85. Deuteronomy 2
86. Psalms 34:15  87. Deuteronomy Midrash Rabbah 5:13
88. Deuteronomy 20:10
Mothers Martyred.

“Jewish mothers with newly circumcised babies are flung headlong from battlements by occupation troops. The women who had circumcised their children were put to death under the decree, hanging the babies around their necks, and destroying their families and the men who had circumcised them.” (I Maccabees 1:60, 61)

(Copper etching from an early 19th century French Bible)

In the modern western world, the psychological climate discourages total commitment and martyrdom. Individuals willing to martyr themselves for a cause strike us as irrational and motivated by psychological problems. Their convictions do not appear to be the expressions of free will and considered judgement. In an age of loosening communal and family ties, the individual who is irrevocably committed to particular convictions seems needlessly inflexible.

In addition, so many people have been sacrificed for what appear to be stupidities, that there is considerable suspicion about the sacrifice of life for any cause. This is the age of the “martyrs of Jonestown” and the bloody martyrs of Khomeini. Consequently, the act of sacrifice often generates in us a feeling of despair at the waste of precious life. This is particularly true in an age when “conviction contests” have become too dangerous. The stakes are too high. Viewing adversaries as representatives of Evil Empires may bolster our morale, but it creates the conditions for a

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THE MARTYR’S CONVICTION

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by Eugene Wiener

This is [an essay] about the linkage between convictions and the willingness to die for them, between the belief in a cause and the willingness to commit oneself totally to it. Conviction is necessary in human life. It gives meaning to the course of human existence and provides answers to the central questions of life.

In the modern western world, the psychological climate discourages total commitment and martyrdom. Individuals willing to martyr themselves for a cause strike us as irrational and motivated by psychological problems. Their convictions do not appear to be the expressions of free will and considered judgement. In an age of loosening communal and family ties, the individual who is irrevocably committed to particular convictions seems needlessly inflexible.

In addition, so many people have been sacrificed for what appear to be stupidities, that there is considerable suspicion about the sacrifice of life for any cause. This is the age of the “martyrs of Jonestown” and the bloody martyrs of Khomeini. Consequently, the act of sacrifice often generates in us a feeling of despair at the waste of precious life. This is particularly true in an age when “conviction contests” have become too dangerous. The stakes are too high. Viewing adversaries as representatives of Evil Empires may bolster our morale, but it creates the conditions for a


Rabbi Eugene Wiener is a sociologist in Haifa University.
showdown which could destroy the world.

How can anyone still believe in causes when the twentieth century has been witness to a series of the most horrendous mass murders in the name of worthy principles? People are rightfully suspicious of the moral demands of causes. For modern sensibilities, the martyr’s dramatic struggle between good and evil, between victory and defeat, appear to be the conflicts of the stage, not the stuff of everyday life.

However, it is our contention that, without the element of conviction, it is difficult to create a world we ourselves can value. It is our thesis that culture and values are only plausible when there is the possibility of dying for them. Although convictions arouse our deepest suspicions and represent a great danger to the human life, we cannot construct worlds of meaning without them. These are the martyr’s dilemmas. This is also the predicament of modernity, for strong value convictions are simultaneously essential for the human spirit and yet dangerous to the human community.

The Roots of Western Martyrdom: The Willingness to Die for a Cause

Martyrdom first entered the arena of western consciousness during the ancient encounter between Greek and Israelite culture. Martyrdom was originally developed by the Israelites in response to the religious persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (167 BCE).

Considering the significance of the Mosaic code to the Israelite society, the willingness to die is not too difficult to understand.

(1) First, the Mosaic action-guide was perceived as a sacred covenant between God and his chosen people.

(2) Second, the prescriptions of the code were intimately linked with a comprehensive interpretation of reality, including a cosmology of the structure of the universe and a cosmogony of its origins.

(3) Third, the code was tied in with a proud national heritage and a sense of collective identity. In short, the Mosaic law was the axis upon which the Israelite’s world revolved. Through the observance of its ordinances, one attained meaning, order, dignity, identity and sanctification and forsook a chaotic, meaningless and polluted realm. Martyrdom is a response to the challenged integrity of the group. The act of the martyr proclaims that life is not worth living if the values of the group are denied.

(4) It is important to note that at the time of the Antiochan suppression, there were strong apocalyptic currents circulating among the Judean populace. Many Jews believed that the persecutions were merely a final drama before the eschaton [the end of the world which is marked by a violent final judgment day]. At that time the “remnant of the faithful” would be delivered, while the apostates and the heathens would be smitten. In addition, the Antiochan persecution prompted the Israelite writers to speak of collective resurrection for those who die in defense of the law.

(5) Another view which undoubtedly contributed to the plausibility of self-sacrifice was the notion of a battle between opposing deities. This concept, taken over from Iranian religion, may have led some Israelites to see their persecutors as messengers of an evil force opposed to God. In the last chapter of Daniel, Antiochus himself is seen not merely as a hostile ruler but as a contrary power to God. He was cast for a supernatural, demonic role, the first antichrist. In the writer’s view, the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism becomes part of a cosmic drama, at the end of which the
victims would rise from the dust of the earth and shine as stars in the heavens and their opponents, the Hellenizers and apostates, would awaken to shame and everlasting contempt. Judgement would award each according to his merits.

(6) [The choice of martyrdom was not passive or pessimistic, but active and optimistic. It was expected to turn the tide in favor of one’s camp either by arousing God’s vengeance on the perpetrators or by appeasing God’s anger at his people that had led God to abandon them to the persecutor’s wrath.]

[In the Testament of Moses, written in this same period, the main character, the martyr Taxo, tells his children: “Let us fast for the space of three days, and on the fourth let us go into a cave which is in the field and let us die rather than transgress the commands of the Lord of Lords, the God of our ancestors. For if we do this and die, our blood will be avenged.” In addition, the Maccabean martyr was viewed as an innocent sacrificial offering designed to atone for the sins of the people. The idea of vicarious atonement through sacrifice had been firmly established in the consciousness of the Israelite populace through the rituals of animal sacrifice in the priestly code. Vicarious atonement is based on a fairly simple metaphysical assumption. It is presumed that sin produces divine anger, which inevitably leads to punishment. Through the ritual of sacrifice, God’s anger is directed away from the sinner toward an innocent, whose vicarious suffering absorbs the sinner’s punishment. Given all these ideas circulating in the Judean orbit, Antiochus clearly erred when he forced Israelites to choose between forsaking their law or dying for it. By forsaking the law, the Israelite stood to lose both his present world and his hopes for the future. By sacrificing oneself for the law, one could die a holy and meaningful death, thus assuring oneself a happy future in the age to come.

The Greek Motif in Jewish Martyrdom

From the world of the Judean nationalists, we now shift to the Hellenist Jews living on the periphery of Palestine several generations after the Maccabean insurrection. Unlike their compatriots in Judea, the Jews living in Antioch [in Syria] and Alexandria [in Egypt] lived as a tiny minority in a world dominated by Hellenism. Within this context, the Jews carved out a “cognitive compromise” with their polytheistic neighbors. “Hellenistic Judaism” was the compromise produced by a creative synthesis between Greek and Israelite culture. We find several works written by Hellenist Jews recounting the events of the Judean revolt. It is in these works that the concept of martyrdom first comes to fruition. In the mindset of Hellenistic Jews, three key social types contributing to the emergence of martyrdom can be isolated. The first is the figure of the warrior-athlete, a heroic individualist who faces pain and even death in order to overcome his opponent. The second is the philosopher (exemplified most perfectly by Socrates), who stoically stands by his rational principles, regardless of the personal expense. Finally, there is the tragic figure (e.g. Antigone) who chooses to die rather than forsake a normative principle. These ideas circulating in the Judean orbit, Antiochus clearly erred when he forced Israelites to choose between forsaking their law or dying for it. By forsaking the law, the Israelite stood to lose both his present world and his hopes for the future. By sacrificing oneself for the law, one could die a holy and meaningful death, thus assuring oneself a happy future in the age to come.

90. IX:1-7 91. p. 41
The Confrontation that creates the Martyr  

**by Eugene Wiener**

Classical martyrdom is often accompanied by a dramatic confrontation between a ruler with visions of his own divinity and a group with deviant convictions. Martyrdom and self-sacrifice flourish when rulers make megalomaniacal demands for displays of total loyalty from their subjects. These demands produce anger and counter-displays of loyalty to convictions which are forbidden. It is the centrality of the villain as tyrannical persecutor which is used to explain the role that Antiochus, Caligula, Hadrian, Decius and Diocletian played in the development of Jewish Hellenistic and early Christian martyrdom.92

A martyrlogical event, in the ideal sense, requires a confrontation between two types of individuals or groups. There is generally a dissenting, deviant, non-conforming person or group, with an alternative set of convictions and a dominant powerful person or group willing to exercise its power. Martyrdom as an event is created out of the confrontation between the two.

From an examination of the classical sources, the components of an ideal martyrlogical confrontation include the following elements [in the ideal scenario]:

1. A dissident individual is threatened with punishment if he or she persists in holding certain beliefs and convictions and behaving in ways that are proscribed by the ruling powers.

2. The confrontation with the ruling powers, who persecute the dissident individual, takes place in a public setting.

3. The individuals who are to undergo the agony of the test make a statement justifying their persistence in the proscribed belief or practice.

4. The persecutor states his willingness to desist in applying punishment for non-conformity to established norms if the martyr will only recant and renounce his convictions.

5. The martyr issues a statement of defiance, which affirms the preference of death to the betrayal of the espoused cause or principle.

6. The established powers question the sanity or wisdom of the martyr-designate.

7. The martyr rejects the services of mediators who attempt to blur the sharp differences between the victim and the persecutor(s).

8. The martyr rejects all devices designed to achieve the ruse of symbolic betrayal of his cause and create the impression of his subordination to the persecutors.

9. The martyr restates the purposes and convictions that justify the sacrifice of his life.

10. The sufferer issues a profession of faith coupled with an expression of hope for his ultimate vindication.

11. The martyr-designate is put to death.

Then the martyrlogical narrative — a literary tradition — immortalizes the martyr’s story and makes it the basis for teaching group norms, as on Hanukkah.

92. Tcherikover, 1959

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three images, together with the Greek notions of an afterworld and a disembodied soul, were the crucial elements of consciousness needed to consolidate the figure of the martyr.

It is thus hardly a coincidence that the first martyrlogies were created by Hellenistic Jews. [In Second Maccabees, Elazar the elderly scribe chooses a painful martyrdom on the wheel of fortune rather than eat unclean foods.]

Making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his age which he reached with such distinction and his admirable life even from his childhood, and still more of the holy and divine legislation, [Elazar told his persecutors] to send him down to Hades at once. “For,” said he, “it does not become our time of life to lead many young people to suppose that Elazar, when ninety years old, has gone over to heathenism, and to be led astray through me, for the sake of this short and insignificant life, while I defile
and disgrace my old age. For even if in the present I escape the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore by manfully giving up my life now I will prove myself worthy of my great age, and leave to the young, a noble example of how to die willingly and nobly for the sacred and holy laws.  

Elazar is portrayed as a true “philosopher,” patterned after the figure of Socrates, and Hannah is described in terms reminiscent of the Greek Iphigenia. The actions of the martyrs are depicted as a battle on behalf of virtue, or an athletic contest to be endured. The moral of the book is that the Jews are a nation of martyr-heroes with deep religious convictions. In [Hellenistic] Judaism, the combination of philosophy and martyrdom is seen as the most genuine form of Jewish heroism. The martyr’s decision to sacrifice his or her life is often based on a rationally grounded belief that the principle he or she represents will live because of the sacrifice.

The martyr is held up as a role model for all Jews suffering from persecution. He or she is seen as a virtuoso of religious conviction who will be rewarded with eternal glory in the afterworld. The martyr’s death is perceived as an innocent sacrifice, which will atone for the sins of the Israelite people and thereby expedite divine deliverance.

Our Modern Ambivalence about Martyrdom: The Psychologically Self-Absorbed Individual versus the Self-Sacrificing Hero of Conviction

Unlike the classical examples of martyrological conviction, which we have discussed, contemporary western man has been characterized as preoccupied with the self. Indeed, as community structure and family bonds weaken, it is the self, which is regarded as the new center. For contemporary man it is important to develop a mindset, which tries to keep options open at all times and thereby avoid commitments.

93. II Maccabees 6
According to this point of view, there are no absolute or intrinsic hierarchies of goals and values and it is important to maintain multiple perspectives. Psychological clarity about oneself supersedes commitment to any societal value.

This ideal of ‘hanging loose’ and seeing the self and its dictates as the center is echoed in psychological climate which discourages commitment and the media present us with a constant debunking, so that frequently, yesterday’s cause is today’s fraud.

It seems to be particularly difficult to believe in causes nowadays. The psychological climate discourages commitment and the media present us with a constant debunking, so that frequently, yesterday’s cause is today’s fraud.

some of the popular forms of therapy. It is summarized in Fritz Perls’ Gestalt Therapy Prayer:

I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations. And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you and I am I. If, by chance, we find each other, it’s beautiful. If not, it can’t be helped.

What this “prayer” connotes is a firm denial that we are here to live up to each other’s expectations. Unlike the martyrs who sacrifice their lives for the group and its convictions, we are not here to live up to traditions handed down to us through culture or religion. Quite the contrary, the only worthwhile struggle is to free ourselves of each others’ grasp, in order to turn around and “by chance” find each other again. According to the analytical attitude, for modern man the highest good is an affirmation of “my thing,” and the ability to reject what is asked and found unsuitable. With this solipsistic faith in the centrality of the self, there can be no certainty that meaningful connections can be made with others.

In a hypothetical meeting between a martyr and a psychologically oriented individual with an analytic attitude, one finds a meeting between two individuals with very different commitments. Most immediately blatant is the contrast between a commitment to knowing and feeling one’s inner essence, and a commitment to the fulfillment of a moral purpose. The dispute between them would be over “self” or “cause” as the central object of conviction. To the psychological personality, clarity about oneself supersedes devotion to an ideal as the model of right conduct. From his perspective, the martyr appears to be fanatically escaping from the self-examination which should be his major preoccupation.

The martyr appears in his eyes as a fanatic with unresolved psychological problems, which have forced him to close his options. The martyr’s conviction represents a premature closure. Perhaps a better cause will come along tomorrow. Perhaps the cause will be discredited or demonstrated to be a psychological aberration, a fraud or a dangerous illusion. Besides, why be so morbid and give up the good things in life?

For the martyr, of course, the cause is the central issue, not the options available or the process of identifying with that cause. The martyr would see the psychological man as hopelessly fragmented and in search of guidance from a fickle self. He is unstable and set on a quest, which is doomed to failure. When nothing is held dear and all options are open, there are no absolute values with which to give meaning to the world. Although maintaining open options appears to represent such a choice, it is a choice which lacks moral vigor. The good that such a position affirms has no specific content and has no staying power against evil other than the commitment to free options. In addition, a concentration exclusively on the self as life’s quintessential project precludes all other commitments, because the layers of the self do not lead into the world, but just ever deeper into the self.

Although the martyr is generally depicted
as other-worldly, from this interchange it appears that this is not the case. The martyr’s path must lead through this world even though its destination is posthumous existence. It is the psychological man who, in the end, is more world-denying. In reality, the self is as much an abstraction and a mystic entity as the world to come. No one has ever seen or touched the self, and it is a social convention which barely existed for much of recorded history. The irony is that the project of psychological man, although self-affirming, is ultimately world-denying, while the martyr, who is self-denying, is ultimately world-affirming.

The martyr is not a pluralist, nor a relativist, particularly when it comes to his own convictions. It is not objective detachment, which the martyr seeks, but passionate commitment—to be possessed by some great and transcendent purpose. The psychological personality, on the other hand, seeks to survive and is skeptical about the worth of ultimate commitments. These are two very different worldviews and life perspectives.

**Maimonides on Martyrdom:**

**When to Defy and When to Compromise**

Surprisingly, the mourner’s kaddish is based on the mitzvah of kiddush hashem (sanctifying God’s name in the world) — if necessary, by martyrdom. Our God exists independent of the world, yet the Divine concern to create a just and holy civilization on earth makes God dependent on human cooperation. The name of the Creator is profaned if the creation is corrupt, ruled by cruel and idolatrous tyrants. However, when human beings undertake to accept God’s law; God’s kingdom of justice on earth, then God’s name is sanctified and God is in effect the actual ruler of the world.

We mourn the death of any human being who embodied the image of God and upheld the Divine values in God’s kingdom on earth by reinforcing the now weakened kingdom of holiness embodied on earth.

In a world that neglects the Divine plan, then it is the Jewish people as an exemplar of humanity that is commanded to keep the ideal going by voluntarily embodying this idea. When tyrants try to force us to violate basic values of human life, sexuality and worship, then one must be willing to become a “martyr,” literally to bear witness to our loyalty to God’s law over corrupt human authority. However in all other areas when saving one’s life means compromising Jewish practices, then we are commanded to transgress Jewish law and to live, as long as that does not involve rape, murder and idolatry.

In the days of Antiochus and of Hitler, however, the tyrants sought not only to use Jews to kill and to rape, but they sought to abolish Judaism and wipe out God’s name. In those cases martyrdom is an obligation whatever the transgression involved.

**Maimonides:**

**The Laws of Martyrdom — Definitions and Restrictions**

All the members of the house of Israel are commanded to sanctify the great name of God, as it is said, “But I will be sanctified among the children of Israel.” They are furthermore cautioned not to profane it, as it is said, “Neither shall you profane My holy name.”

How are these precepts to be applied? If an idolater coerces a Jew to violate any one of the commandments mentioned in the Torah under the threat that otherwise the Jew will be put to death, the Jew is to commit the transgression rather than suffer death; for concerning the commandments it is said, “which, if a human does them, s/he shall live by them:” — and not die by them. That means that if one suffered death rather than commit a transgression, one is to blame for one’s own death [because in most cases it is a mitzvah to prefer life over observance].

This rule applies to all the commandments, except the prohibitions of idolatry, adultery or incest, and murder. With regard to these: if a Jew is told: “Transgress one of them or else you will be put to death,” the Jew is to commit the transgression rather than suffer death.

The above distinction only holds good if the idolater’s motive is personal advantage; for example if the idolater forces a Jew to build him a house or cook for him on the Sabbath, or forces a Jew to cohabit with him, and so on.

But if the idolater’s purpose is to compel the Jew to violate the
Our Nostalgia for Martyrs

It seems to be particularly difficult to believe in causes nowadays. The psychological climate discourages commitment and the media present us with a constant debunking, so that frequently, yesterday’s cause is today’s fraud. Widespread skepticism is not only a response to the media, but to both the history of the 20th century, with its mass murders and final solutions, and to an awareness that the stakes are too high for an apocalyptic showdown between antagonistic convictions. Nothing

There are other things that are a profanation of the Name of God. When a person, great in the knowledge of the Torah and reputed for piety, does things which cause people to gossip, even if the acts are not express violations, one profanes the Name of God. As, for example, if such a person makes a purchase and does not pay promptly, provided that one has means and the creditors ask for payment and one puts them off; or if one indulges immoderately in jesting, eating, or drinking . . . or if one’s mode of addressing people is not gentle, or one does not receive people affably, but is quarrelsome and irascible.

The greater a person is, the more scrupulous one needs to be in all such things, and do more than the strict letter of the law requires. And if a person has been scrupulous in one’s conduct, gentle in conversation, pleasant toward fellow-creatures, affable in manner when receiving them, not retorting, even when affronted, but showing courtesy to all, even to those who treat one with disdain, and if one conducting one’s commercial affairs with integrity and devotes oneself to the study of the Torah . . . and does more than one’s duty in all things (avoiding, however, extremes and exaggerations) — such a person has sanctified God, and about such a person the Bible says, “You are My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be praised.”

ordinances of the religion, then if this took place privately and ten fellow-Jews were not present, one should commit the transgression rather than suffer death. But if the attempt to coerce the Jew to transgress was made in the presence of ten Jews, one should suffer death and not transgress, even if it was only one of the remaining commandments that the idolater wished the Jew to violate.

When one is commanded to transgress rather than be slain, and suffers death rather than transgress, s/he is to blame for his death.

When one is commanded to die rather than transgress, and suffers death so as not to transgress, he sanctifies the name of God. If one does so in the presence of ten Israelites, he sanctifies the name of God publicly, like Daniel, Hananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues. These are the martyrs, above whom none ranks higher. Concerning them it is said, “But for Your sake are we killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” And to them also, the text refers, “Gather my saints together to Me, those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice.”

seems worth such a risk.

And yet, without convictions we cannot live a life of meaning. Without a dedication to values neither culture nor religion is plausible, and our doubts about the purpose of life go unanswered. **Without our convictions, we are less than human.**

One could, in fact, make a case that **martyrs are particularly valued in a world that has become susceptible to the ethic of self-interest and personal fulfillment.** As moral certainties crumble under the influence of the therapeutic society there is a nostalgia and growing fascination with those who sacrifice their lives willingly for their convictions. As we feel ourselves becoming morally impoverished we tend to idealize those who had proven their moral courage.

The therapeutic era can be seen as a form of disenchantment with all causes beyond the individual. The retreat to self as the context in which to find the highest good is born out of a disappointment with causes. Introspection, the exploration of the inner world of feeling, the cultivation of private states and the communication of these inner space discoveries to others who value them, become the essence of life. But what follows is disappointment. For however much the subjective world is changed and enriched by insight and however much one’s personal sphere of social engagements become more satisfying, the world at large remains much the same. In the end it would appear that there is no way to make things a bit better in the world than by formulating a goal and devising a method to achieve it.

In this task, martyrs and other people of conviction have much to teach us. However, if their enthusiasms do not include self-awareness and self-respect they cannot become models of behavior for those in the enlightened world. The best of the martyrs from the past teach us how serious and fateful our duties are, while the behavior models of the therapeutic world teach us our personal rights to happiness. This would appear to be our situation. We move between these two worlds, uncomfortably sensing the disparity between them, for they are indeed very different. Both personal rights and personal duties are necessary to maintain a balance which we can sustain. We don’t seem to have much of a choice.

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**The Martyrdom of Hannah and her Seven Sons.** (II Maccabees 7:20-23)

*by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1860)*
Interestingly enough, it is easier to reconcile religion and science today than ever before. Both religious and scientific beliefs have changed greatly since the Middle Ages. We have completely rejected the Aristotelian science taken for granted then and replaced it first with Newtonian and then with Einsteinian physics. Today many scientists would qualify the “lawfulness of nature” by saying these are merely useful hypotheses, partial models that help predict physical events, until we come up with better models. It is thought best to use multiple models simultaneously even if they appear intuitively contradictory (like the particle and the wave theory of light). Today our picture of reality as law abiding is less secure. Miracles are not as inconceivable as they once were when we took the scientific picture of the world literally.

Still our street-sense as moderns tells us that it is irrational and unhealthy to educate our children that a benevolent God creates anomalies in nature (like splitting the Red Sea) specifically to help the chosen people. It is not only the “belief in miracles” that threatens “our belief in nature” but the kind of person we imagine believes in supernatural occurrences seems weird whether s/he is an ultra-Orthodox Jew, a born-again Christian or a New Age occultist. To open up ourselves and our children to a life-giving faith in God’s surprises means not only holding scientific hypotheses with less self-confidence, as in fact many scientists do today, but to ask what the faith in “other dimensions” will do to our everyday life. What kinds of miracle beliefs do we wish to explore and what kinds of believers are dangerous and crazy?

Let me map out some of the possible

Candle lighting on Hanukkah is about proclaiming the miracles that occurred. But how do we explain miracles to ourselves, let alone to our children? As modern “believers” in the scientific lawfulness of nature (even if we do not “understand” the theory of relativity and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle or how electro-magnetic fields pass through our houses and our bodies bringing us television images), we are usually embarrassed by traditional “believers” in supernatural interventions into the natural world. Yet we know that since the Middle Ages when the Greek understanding of the lawful structure of nature was accepted by religious people, the belief in God has meant both that God created the world order and the God can at will violate that order. The world as seen by the scientist is not “the whole truth,” and other dimensions exist that sometimes encroach on our orderly world. To believe in miracles is to believe in these other dimensions, yet how do we reconcile religious beliefs with scientific ones?

An ancient ceramic cruse of oil and lamp (3rd-4th century CE)
approaches to miracles and on such a map you may be able to locate your own beliefs. I too will express my preferences. Today’s science and philosophy cannot totally exclude any of these views of miracles, so it is a matter of choice which one we want to adopt when “proclaiming the miracle of Hanukkah.” Rejecting certain options will be as important as adopting others, as we sort out our beliefs.

What kinds of miracle beliefs do we wish to explore and what kinds of believers are dangerous and crazy?

Option #1

Public miracles usually violate the laws of nature because that is how God teaches us to look beyond the physical to a higher realm of reality.

Korah, Datan and Abiram, the desert rebels, accused Moses of making up the whole project of the Promised Land, of pulling off a Wizard-of-Oz hoax on the whole people. Then Moses called upon God to “prove” that he had been chosen, by “making a miraculous creation” like the earth opening its mouth to swallow them up. In fact, earthquakes do occur, but not usually when predicted in advance to prove a point at a particular time. The miracle is not necessarily a violation of natural law, but it is a “sign” felt by the people to be a decisive message from another dimension. Miracles of this sort, like Moses turning his staff into a snake before Pharaoh, come to establish credibility, to prove a point, to end speculation.

One might object to such miracles on several grounds:

1. Uncertainty is preferable in the realm of faith since it refers faith to one’s personal choice rather than “forcing belief” on us by powerful and threatening “tricks.”

2. The relative certainty of the natural order is more reliable in most cases. One should not build a worldview on bizarre exceptions.

(3) To cite supernatural miracles is to open up the field to charlatans who claim authority for their dangerous belief systems based on exotic so-called miracles.

Personally speaking, I do not believe literally in the supernatural variety of miracles as actual occurrences in the present or the past. Even if they occurred, I do not think they would “prove” something to me, that is, convince me of a certain religious worldview. Yet they do make great stories and they do teach lessons in a dramatic, literary way that I appreciate because I deeply believe that what appears invincible (like Pharaoh at the Red Sea or even a powerful cancer) can sometimes be vanquished in unpredictable ways. “God” is my name for that surprising power when the forces of good are victorious. I choose to believe in that God of surprising moments of reversal, but I also choose to be skeptical of particular “tricks,” as I see them, which strike me as trivial, even if I cannot explain them away scientifically.

Option #2

Private miracles, the hidden coincidences, that sometimes change the direction of our lives because of amazing timing, are guided by Divine destiny.

The concept of the “hidden miracle” is developed by Nachmanides (13th century Spain) in his explanation of the ups and downs and ups again of Joseph’s life in the Bible. Even though God never speaks to Joseph — not even in dreams — and never violates any laws of nature to cast him down into the pit via his brothers’ jealousy or to raise him up by his ability to analyze the future and make a plan to preempt a famine, Joseph is convinced, in retrospect, that it is the hand of Divine destiny that has shaped his roller coaster existence and given it meaning.

But one might object on three grounds:

1. You cannot “prove” the existence of an invisible hand of God, because it is only a

100. Numbers 16
One might become passive awaiting God’s miracles whether public or private. Living in a world of existential uncertainty offers more moral grandeur and harsh honesty than the childish world of Divine providence.

Personally, I have great respect for an existentialist Camus-like stand that there are no Divine safety nets and that accidents may determine one’s fate in the most indifferent way. Yet in a world of uncertainty I do not want to be dogmatic either in accepting or denying the possibility of personal, private miracles. It is a matter of interpretation and it is not provable one way or the other. When I choose to interpret coincidences as miracles, as a personal sense of destiny, then it gives me a strength to make meaning out of my life. I feel like Queen Esther who decides to reveal her Jewishness to the King in order to appeal to save her people from Haman, because “who knows if just for this opportunity I became queen.” We, like Esther, cannot know for sure but we can wager on the possibility that God has

**The God of Surprise!**

Central to the Exodus story and the Pesach seder is the recounting of the ten plagues. As moderns educated in natural science, the lawful order of the world, the story strikes us as childish, as primitive, as mythological. Yet we may be missing the point of these extraordinary events if we understand it as ancient superstition. Instead the miracle is a symbol of spontaneity in history, a faith in the changeability of oppressive regimes. What appears as fate, the necessity of a small people subject to an invulnerable empire, is revealed as an illusion. The language of the supernatural miracle is the Bible’s way of undermining the acquiescence of humans to the “way things have to be,” to the political “facts of nature” created by powerful dictators.

There is an unpredictable Power present in the universe. For a people arising from helplessness, utter destruction and complete impoverishment, the movement from Egypt to the desert was a radical leap. It was not a steady process, not a gradual development. The plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea signaled the breaking in of Power that confronted tyrannical hegemonies, which refused to accept ultimate divine Sovereignty.

Belief in miracle is the basis of the “hope model” of Judaism. Exodus becomes a call to revolutionary hope regardless of the conditions of history. The act of protest against their environment can occur, because the Jews possess a memory bank that structures what they think is possible. The Exodus becomes vital, because it tells people that they are able to hope. The order that people observe in the cosmos is not irreversible. Tomorrow will not necessarily be like today.

Belief in the doctrine of creation reinforces the belief in miracle. Creation means that the world that came about at a certain moment could be recreated in a new constellation if God so wills it. Spontaneity and surprise characterize divinity. Not everything is a recurring pattern. The cosmos is not a Nietzschean wheel of eternal recurrence. Creation and the miracles of Exodus protest against the despair of the book of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes proclaims that the world is hevel/vanity. Nothing really changes; all is endless repetition. A generation comes, a generation goes. A child dies, a wife, a father . . . all is in vain, without significance.

The Exodus provided the memory that made hope a very real possibility. Being is not inalterable. Becoming marks a human being’s ontology. Radical surprise becomes an important feature. New possibilities are always present; history can change.

Life is not just the present. A future is real. Without spontaneity and without creativity the future would be just a repetition of what already was. The Exodus introduces the dimension of a radically new tomorrow. That is the idea of Messianism. The belief in a Messiah proclaims a radical futurism; a new separate concept in human consciousness of time. Life is not exhausted by endless cycles. Once our story is told as our beginning through revolution, then history is a wide-open book.
Hanukkah is the Festival of Lights. It commemorates an ancient Jewish rebellion against oppression, during which the Temple in Jerusalem was miraculously recaptured from pagan hellenizers and rededicated to the worship of God. The candles of Hanukkah celebrate that rededication. They also help brighten the long winter nights.

But I remember a Hanukkah when darkness almost overpowered the light. It was the first week of November 1938. The final years of the Depression lay like a polluting mist across the streets of New York. On afternoons when it did not rain I would play on the sidewalk in front of the plate-glass window of the candy story near our apartment house. The bubble of darkness on the other side of the world bumped only vaguely against my consciousness. I was very young then, interested more in Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers than Adolf Hitler.

One afternoon I was near the candy store, in the cardboard box that was my rocket ship, when an elderly couple walked slowly by; I caught some of their frightened words. Before supper that evening I saw my mother standing over the kitchen sink, her head bowed, and heard her whispering agitatedly to herself. Later, my father came home from work, drenched in weariness; he turned on the radio and became wearier still.

That night I lay awake in my bed and saw the pieces of the day come together and form a portrait of terror: “A Jewish boy had shot a German [official in Paris],” the old people had said. “We will pay dearly for it, very dearly.” “The boy had been sent by his parents to live with his uncle in Paris,” my father had murmured. “Then the boy’s parents were deported to Poland [by the Nazis in Germany].”

“The boy went out of his mind,” my mother had said in a voice full of fear. “He did not know what he was doing.”

I lay very still in my bed, thinking of the boy who had shot the German and wondering what the Germans would do to the Jews. Two days later the [German official] died, [then came Krystal Nacht, the pogroms called the Night of the Broken Glass, November 9, 1938].

In the weeks that followed I dreamed about the synagogues that were burning all over Germany, about the Jews who were being sent to concentration camps, about the looted stores and smashed shop-windows. One day I stood in front of our apartment house and imagined our street littered with glass, shattered glass everywhere, the plate-glass window of the candy store splattered across the sidewalk, the store itself burned and gutted. I imagined the entire block, the neighborhood, the city heaped with broken glass and thick with the stench of fire. The days of that November and December began to go dark, until it seemed all the world would soon be shades of darkness: dark sun and dark moon, dark sky and dark earth, dark

offered us or called us to take an initiative in a significant “window of opportunity” that may just transform history “miraculously.” We can become active partners with Divine destiny by regarding key junctures in our life, so-called “accidents,” as pregnant with meaning. That is how we rewrite and reinterpret our lives as a purposeful narrative.

Option #3
The laws of nature are themselves a miracle created by God and worthy of wonder.

As the Jewish philosophers Maimonides (12th century) and Heschel (20th century) argue, the fact of order can itself be seen as Divine. As the prayerbook phrases it, “we thank you God for miracles of the everyday” such as our success in processing our wastes without diarrhea or constipation. In experiencing the beauty of order in the snowflake and in the glacier, in the human mind’s innovative wisdom and in the lawfulness of the everyday, we discover the miracle of what exists, rather than the miracle of the anomaly and of the bizarre. Though the miracle of Hanukkah celebrates the extraordinary, in which we may be reticent to believe, we can still have faith in the miracle of the ordinary, the amazing patterns of order in a world created by God out of chaos.
night and dark day. I was a child then, but I still remember that darkness as a malevolence I could touch and smell, an evil growth draining my world of its light.

My world seemed thick with that darkness when Hanukkah came that year on the twenty-fifth of December. I remember my father chanting the blessings over the first candle on the first night of the festival. He was short and balding, and he chanted in a thin, intense voice. I stood between him and my mother, gazing at the flame of the first night’s candle. The flame seemed pitiful against the malignant darkness outside our window. I went to bed and was cold with dread over the horror of the world.

The next night two candles were lighted. Again my father chanted the blessings before the lighting and the prayer that follows when the candles are burning: “We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, the deliverances, and the wonders which You did for our ancestors . . . During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are sacred . . . We are only to look at them, in order that we may give thanks unto Your Name, for Your miracles, Your deliverances and Your wonders.”

I wanted a miracle. But there were no miracles during that Hanukkah. Where was God? I kept dreaming of burning synagogues.

On the eighth and final night of the festival I stood with my parents in front of the burning candles. The darkness mocked their light. I could see my parents glancing at me. My mother sighed. Then my father murmured my name.

“You want another miracle?” he asked wearily.

I did not respond.

“Yes,” he said. “You want another miracle.” He was silent a moment. Then he said, in a gentle, urging voice, “I also want another miracle. But if it does not come, we will make a human miracle. We will give the world the special gifts of our Jewishness. We will not let the world burn out our souls.”

The candles glowed feebly against the dark window.

“Sometimes I think man is a greater miracle-maker than God,” my father said tiredly, looking at the candles. “God does not have to live day after day on this broken planet. Perhaps you will learn to make your own miracles. I will try to teach you how to make human miracles.”

I lay awake a long time that night and did not believe my father could ever teach me that. But now, decades later, I think he taught me well. And I am trying hard to teach it to my own children.

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Option #4

The Biblical miracles are always associated with historical redemption because they point not to the violation of natural order which is seen as Divinely beautiful, but to the violation of human order which is so often corrupt and oppressive.

This is an insight I owe to my teacher Rabbi David Hartman. Miracles in the Bible are often not merely proofs of religious dogmas (as in the case of Elijah on Mount Carmel), but also contributions to undermining totalitarian oppressors. For example, at the Red Sea the Jews needed not only a military miracle to be saved from Pharaoh’s chariots, but a psychological-political miracle to be liberated from their paralyzing fear of Pharaoh, their self-deified master. When Pharaoh is so amazingly defeated before their very eyes, then they can begin to believe in their own potential as free human beings and to give their allegiance to a God of liberation.

The violation of nature is the form the miracle took in the eyes of the people because for them the absoluteness of the rule of Pharaoh, his invincibility, seemed as solid as the laws of nature. Many of the ten plagues are described as events that had never before occurred since the foundation of Egypt.
Thus described, they served to undermine the mental hold on the slaves who believed the ancient kingdom of Egypt could never be shaken. But the message of the miracle is about people’s mistaken belief that the power of an empire is absolute and eternal. I believe in this message which liberates me from the totalitarian propaganda of the oppressor, even if I regard the supernatural form of the miracle as a rhetorical device, a kind of educational gimmick, to shake me out of my habitual defeatism about “the way things are and always will be.”

CHOOSING OUR HANUKKAH MIRACLE

With these options in mind, we return to the Hanukkah narratives. The Rabbis speak of two different kinds of miracles that the menorah proclaims. We must decide whether to believe in and propagate either.

A. Miracle Oil

The miracle recalled in the Talmud speaks of a cruse of oil that burned for eight days instead of one. That is a supernatural miracle violating the laws of nature. Taken literally it promotes a belief in supernatural intervention. It may even denigrate human effort. Perhaps that kind of belief explains why Lubavitch Hasidim refused to wear gas masks during the Iraqi missile attacks on Israel in 1991 when chemical warheads were feared.

However David Hartman argues that the miracle of oil is only a symbol that arouses human faith. When human beings are willing to believe that more is possible than meets the eye, then they will invest in historical projects like the Maccabean Revolt and the Declaration of the Independence of Israel in 1948 even against all odds. Our presupposition that a cruse of oil cannot burn for eight days, that it is a natural impossibility, is only a symbol of the mistaken belief in the historical impossibility of change.102

B. The Miracles of the Few Against the Many

Even if we cannot embrace the miracle of the cruse of oil, the Rabbis offered a different kind of miracle to celebrate. The Rabbinic prayer for Hanukkah, Al HaNissim, ignores the miracle of the oil and speaks of a general phenomenon possible in every generation whereby God helps human beings to bring about miraculous rescues from historical oppressors. This belief in God’s miracles does not undermine human effort but causes it to redouble. The miracle is “natural” within the realm of historical possibility, yet inconceivable and unattainable by oppressed peoples who don’t believe in its possibility.

In the Exodus from Egypt, God initiates the miracles for a passive, despairing people of slaves. However on Hanukkah, first the martyrs like Hannah and then the zealots and the warriors initiate the redemptive process. In a world where God seems eclipsed, where there are no supernatural signs and no prophets, where the leading priests accepted Hellenism as a boon, the Maccabees bear witness to another dimension. They evaluate the world differently and they believe in a Divine power whose hidden will becomes manifest. The Rabbis celebrated the political and military manifestation of God’s miracle in the Maccabees’ victory.

Personally, I prefer the miracle of the few against the many. I need to reject the miraculous long-burning cruse of oil lest I be understood as an anti-rationalist or passive Jew. But perhaps beyond my polemic against the childish legend, I need to mature and to reinterpret both kinds of miracles as opening me up to other dimensions, to possibilities in myself and in my world that I have too quickly foreclosed. Believing in miracles is another way of learning to keep my options open and letting myself be surprised.