The Jewish revolt against the Greeks became history's first religious war.

By Rabbi Ken Spiro

We know the details of the Jewish fight against the Greeks and Hellenism from the two Books of the Maccabees as well as the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus.

(These chronicles are not included in the Bible because, as we learned in class #26, the Men of the Great Assembly had decided many years earlier what the Bible should contain and these events occurred much later in time. The Books of the Maccabees, were both written in the 1st century BCE. The First Book of Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew as an official court history for the Hasmonean Dynasty, rulers of the autonomous Hasmonean Kingdom in ancient Israel. The Second Book of Maccabees was originally written in Greek and was based on an earlier work written by the ancient historian Jason of Cyrene.)
This revolt of the Jews sets a precedent in human history. It is the world’s first ideological/religious war. As noted in the previous class, no one in the ancient world died for their gods; only the Jews thought that their religion – the only monotheistic religion at the time – was worth dying for.

But (also as previously noted) it was not just a war against the Greeks, it was also a civil war – Jews, who were loyal to Judaism, fighting other Jews, who had become Hellenized and who were siding with the Greeks.

The year was 138 BCE\(^1\) and the horrible persecution of Judaism by the Greeks was in full swing. The Greek troops showed up in the town of Modi’in (a site west of Jerusalem which you can visit today off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway) and demanded that the Jews there sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. The elder of the town, Mattathias, who was a kohen, that is of the priestly class, refused:

> "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers... We will not obey the king’s word by turning aside from our religion to the right or to the left."\(^2\)

But there was a Hellenized Jew in the town who was willing to do what was unspeakable in Jewish eyes. As he was about to sacrifice the pig, Mattathias stabbed him, also killing the Greek official present. He then turned to the crowd and announced:

> "Follow me, all of you who are for God’s law and stand by the covenant."\(^3\)

Those who joined Mattathias and his five sons – named Judah, Johanan, Simon, Elazar, Jonathan – headed for the hills, expecting that the Greeks were going to come back and wipe out the whole village as a reprisal. In the hills, they organized a guerilla army, led primarily by the oldest of the sons named Judah, nicknamed Maccabee, which means “the Hammer.” Maccabee

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1. Jewish dates and Christian dates (adopted by the Western World) show a discrepancy of approximately 30 years for this time period.
2. 1 Maccabees 2:19-22.
3. 1 Maccabees 2:27.
is also an acronym for *mi komocho ba’alim Hashem*, “Who is like You among the powers, O God” – the battle cry of the Jewish people.

We don’t know exactly how large this Maccabee army was, but even the most optimistic estimates put the number at no more than 12,000 men. This tiny force took on the fighting Greek army of up to 40,000 men.

But the Greeks were not just numerically superior. The Greeks were professional soldiers – they had equipment, they had training, and they had a herd of war elephants, which were the tanks of the ancient world. The Jews were vastly outnumbered, poorly trained and poorly equipped (not to mention, they had no elephants), but what they lacked in training and equipment they made up in spirit.

Most of the battles took place in the foothills leading from the coastal plain area (Tel Aviv) to Jerusalem. The Greeks were trying to march their armies up the natural canyons that led into the mountain areas, the stronghold of the Jewish army. There were only a few places where the Greeks could actually ascend, and these were the places where the Maccabees took them on.

Now when we read about the revolt of the Maccabees today, it seems like it was over in a few weeks – the battles were fought, the Jews won and the Greeks went home. But, in fact, it took 25 years (!) of fighting and a great many casualties on both sides until the Greeks finally reached a peace agreement with the Jews.

**Chanukah**

After the first three years, the Jews were able re-conquer Jerusalem. They found the Temple defiled and turned into a pagan sanctuary, where pigs had been sacrificed on the altar. When they re-entered the Temple, the first thing they did was to try to light a make-shift menorah (as the real gold one had been melted down by the Greeks) but only one vial of pure lamp oil with the special seal was discovered. They used this vial to light the menorah and miraculously it stayed lit for eight days, by which time fresh pure oil has been pressed and delivered to the Temple.
The miracle of the oil lasting for eight days (which is not mentioned in the Book of the Maccabees) is described in the Talmud:

And when the royal Hasmonean House gained the upper hand and vanquished [the Greeks], they searched and found only one flask of oil... with the High Priest’s seal, and it contained only [enough] oil to burn for one day. A miracle occurred and it burned for eight days.4

The Maccabees then purified the Temple and rededicated it on the 25th of Kislev, which is the date on the Hebrew calendar when we celebrate the first of the eight days of Chanukah. (The Hebrew word Chanukah means “dedication” or “inauguration.”) The Book of Maccabees relates:

Early in the morning of the 25th day of the ninth month which is the month of Kislev... they [the priests] rose and offered sacrifices, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offerings which they had built ... it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals... So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days...5

Chanukah – one of two holidays added to the Jewish calendar by the rabbis – celebrates two kinds of miracles: 1) the military victory of the vastly outnumbered Jews against the Greeks; and 2) the spiritual victory of Jewish values over those of the Greek. It is this spiritual victory which is symbolized by the lights of Chanukah.

If we look at these two miracles, clearly the military victory was greater, yet the miracle of the oil is commemorated during the festival of Chanukah. The military victory may have been more impressive, but as we already mentioned, the real battle was spiritual and not physical. Precisely this spiritual victory is what is symbolized by the light of the menorah. (Fire, the soul and spirituality are all connected in Jewish thought).

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4 Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 21b.
5 1 Maccabees 4:52-56.
The light of Chanukah is symbolic of the inner spiritual strength of the Jewish people that, despite all odds, is never extinguished. It is precisely this inner spiritual strength that has enabled the Jews to outlast the greatest empires in history and to have monumental impact on humanity.

The re-dedication of the Temple did not, however, end the fight. A Greek garrison remained stationed in Jerusalem and the Greek armies besieged the city in an attempt to re-conquer it. Many more battles were fought over many years before the conflict finally ended.

In fact, it was not until 113 BCE, during the reign of Seleucid monarch Demitrius II, that the Greeks finally had enough of the fighting and signed a peace treaty with Simon, the last survivor of the five sons of Mattathias.\(^6\)

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\text{In [that] year, Israel was released from the gentile yoke; the people began to write on their contracts and agreements: "In the first year of Simon, the great High Priest, general and leader of the Jews."}\]

Thus Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel was officially restored.

**Reign of the Hasmoneans**

As noted above, Mattathias was a *kohen*, and so it is not surprising that his son, Simon, should become High Priest. But Simon also took on himself the title of *Nasi* meaning “prince/president”. He did not call himself king, because he knew full well that a Jewish king could only come from the line of David, but for all practical purposes he assumed the role of kingship.

(The line of David – the line of kings – comes from the tribe of Judah, whereas the line of the *kohanim*, the priests, comes from the tribe of Levi, as per the blessing of Jacob to his 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel.)

This was a bad choice on the part of Simon because his descendants did not respect his distinction. They started a new ruling dynasty in Israel – the Hasmonean dynasty – which lasted for 103 years and which was marked by

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\(^6\) In 133 BCE, Elazar fell in battle while thrusting a spear into the belly of war elephant on which he thought the king was riding; the elephant fell on him, crushing him death. Judah was killed at the battle of Elasa in 132 BCE, and Jonathan fell in another battle in 113 BCE.

\(^7\) 1 Maccabees 13:41-42.
great territorial expansion, but also by a terrible moral and religious decline. They should not have been kings in the first place, and then they became corrupted by their own power.

The next ruler was Simon’s son, Johanan Hyrcanus, a powerful and ambitious ruler. Among his many errors, Johanan Hyrcanus did a terrible anti-Jewish thing. As part of his effort to expand the borders of Israel and strengthen the country, he forcibly converted the newly conquered peoples. This was something never done in Judaism before or since – Jews discourage converts rather than the other way around.

One of the peoples that were forcibly converted at this time was the Idumeans. And this error cost the Jews dearly.

In Israel, not far from Beit Shemesh, there is a fascinating archeological site open to tourists called Beit Guvrin Maresha. It consists of thousands of man-made caves that are mostly cut into the soft limestone. This was one of the major cities of the Idumeans. And you can even play archeologist and go there and dig for a day. This is one of the places that the Hasmoneans conquered, giving the people a terrible choice (that would later be given to the Jews) – convert or leave. Many of the inhabitants chose to destroy their houses and leave the country.

One of the Idumean families that was forcibly converted would become very significant for its role in the drama some years later during the Roman invasion. A descendant of this family – Herod – will be appointed Jewish king and he will be a schizophrenic ruler. He will murder the High Priest, 45 members of the Jewish Supreme Court as well as several members of his own family, but he will also embark on a series of fantastic building projects that will include the city of Caesarea, the fortress at Masada, and a total re-building of the Temple. As we will see, Herod (who was only nominally Jewish) will have a bizarre relationship with the Jews.

**Decline of Jewish Rule**

After the death of Johanan Hyrcanus, his son Judah Aristobulus declared himself king, not being satisfied with the title of “prince.” Naturally, the
Sanhedrin – which had been willing to have Johanan as prince – objected to this and earned his ire. Writes Rabbi Berel Wein in *Echoes of Glory*:

*He persecuted the rabbis and their Pharisee followers. He ruthlessly exiled many of them, and hundreds of Pharisees were painfully and violently executed.*

The next ruler, Alexander Yanai (the brother of Johanan Hyrcanus) was another chip off the old block. Like his brother, he could not tolerate Pharisee opposition, and he had 800 of them executed after first forcing them to watch the slaughter of their families. During the executions, Alexander Yannai hosted a Greek-style feast.

After Yannai’s death, his widow, Queen Salome, ruled for nine years. She was the only ray of light in this dismal period. Her brother was Simon ben Shatach, the leading rabbi of his generation and during her reign there was peace between the leadership and the rabbis. This would be the last period of true peace and stability for a very long time.

The history of the Hasmonean Dynasty is a classic case of one of the great tragic families starting off so illustriously and ending so disastrously, bringing the Jewish people to ruin.9

The last two Hasmonean rulers were the sons of Salome – Hyrcanus and Aristobolus – both of whom were totally Hellenized. Hyrcanus was the weaker of the two, but he had a strong advisor by the name of Antipater, a descendant of Idumean converts to Judaism (who just happened to have a baby boy named Herod).

The brothers were fighting with each other as to who should be king. The obvious answer was neither. But tell that to morally corrupt, power hungry men. They hit on the idea of asking Rome to mediate in their dispute.10

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9 Perhaps the greatest irony of the legacy of the Maccabees is what is named after them today: The Maccabiah Games (the Jewish Olympic Games, started in 1932 and held every four years in Israel). There is virtually no cultural institution that more typifies ancient Greek culture than their athletic competitions. That the Maccabees, who gave their lives to save Judaism from Greek influence, should have Greek-style sporting events named after them is the saddest of endings to this tragic story.

10 The relationship between the Jews and the Romans actually began during the Maccabean Revolt when Judah Maccabee made an alliance with Rome.
Inviting the Romans in was not like inviting a multi-national peace-keeping force or international mediation team. We’re talking about people with an incredible energy to conquer and gain all the territory they could.

The year was 63 BCE and the great Roman general Pompeii was cleaning up the last of the Greek Empire. He was more than happy to oblige and move his armies into Israel.

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<th>138 BCE</th>
<th>Revolt of the Maccabees begins, led by the Hasmoneans – Mattathias and his five sons: Johanan, Simon, Judah, Elazar, and Jonathan</th>
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<td>135 BCE</td>
<td>Hasmoneans reclaim the Temple in Jerusalem; Miracle of Chanukah</td>
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<td>War continues between the Greeks and the Maccabees</td>
<td>Jerusalem besieged by the Seleucids</td>
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<td>Alcimus appointed High Priest</td>
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<td>Judah is killed in battle; Jonathan becomes leader of Jewish forces</td>
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<td>Alcimus the High Priest dies; Jonathan becomes High Priest</td>
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<td>Jonathan is killed; Simon becomes High Priest, proclaims himself “Prince of the Jews”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hasmoneans assume kingship of Israel</td>
<td>Rule of Simon begins; treaty made with Greek forces</td>
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<td>Simon is murdered; Johanan Hyrcanus becomes ruler; Idumeans forcibly converted to Judaism</td>
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<td>Judah Aristobulus (son of Johanan Hyrcanus) declares himself king</td>
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<td>Alexander Yanni (Judah Aristobulus’ brother) rules</td>
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<td>Queen Salome (Alexander Yanni’s widow) rules</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hycranus and Aristobulus (Salome’s sons) rule; they invite Roman general Pompeii to Israel</td>
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<td>63 BCE</td>
<td>Pompeii enters Jerusalem, slaughters Jews, makes Hyrcanus nominal ruler</td>
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<td>37 BCE</td>
<td>Antigonus (son of Aristobulos) is killed by the Romans thus ending the Hasmonean dynasty</td>
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