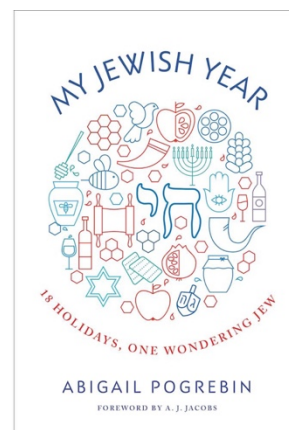


Chapter 9. Hanukkah Reconsidered: A Split in the Jewish Soul

12.11.14

Hanukkah wasn't complicated for me until this year.

I grew up with the basics: lighting the menorah (the Hanukkah candelabra, technically the “Hanukiah”) for eight nights with a candle added each night; spinning the dreidel, the four-sided top with Hebrew letters, twirled expectantly by us three kids —(if it landed on our letter, we got to open a gift); eating latkes (potato pancakes) made expertly by Mom with crispy edges, sour cream on the side; and belting a few songs, including the obvious standards, “Hanukkah, Oh Hanukkah,” and “Maoz Tzur” (Mighty Rock).



I knew the story of the brave Maccabees, the family that fought off the Jew-hating Greeks, because Mom retold the tale when we were little and we acted it out in costumes at the annual friends-and-family Hanukkah party. The Cruel Greek King, Antiochus (usually played by my twin, Robin, in a Tudor crown), decreed that all Jews must stop practicing Judaism; he set up idols for the Jews to worship instead of their God, and led his army to seize the Jews' holy Temple. But the Jewish warrior, Judah the Maccabee (usually played by me), and his Maccabee brothers (all played by my younger brother, David), fought back valiantly, and reclaimed the Temple.

For costumes, we turned bed sheets into togas, which seemed like good, all-purpose ancient garb. Our relatives and parents' friends cheered as we stomped around with cardboard swords and shouted in British accents (when in doubt, use a British accent). I'm sure the audience enjoyed Mom's spiked eggnog more than our thespian exploits.

The Hanukkah story ends with the miracle, of course: When the Maccabees reclaim the Temple, they try to rekindle the menorah, which was lit daily at that time. But when they look for oil to reignite it, they find only one jar—enough for a single day. They burn the one cruse of oil optimistically, defiantly, and lo and behold, it lasts eight days. Amen.

I grew up loving this holiday, and not just because of the big party or the presents Mom wrapped in blue and silver Hanukkah colors. I loved the way the house glowed differently during Hanukkah week, how I looked forward to my siblings and me being called from our bedrooms to light the menorah, deciding whose turn it was to strike the match when we were old enough to hold a flame, counting how many candles were to be added.

It was a halcyon holiday. That is, until this year, when I learned the dark side and felt like a kid discovering there's no Santa Claus. It turns out that Hanukkah is, in part, a tale of Jew vs. Jew.

Come again? Us against us? What ever happened to Jew against Greek; Maccabee vs. Antiochus? The more complete story, asserted by rabbi after rabbi, is that the Maccabees (a.k.a. the Hasmoneans) took on not just Antiochus IV, who in 167 BCE forbid Jewish practice. They challenged their *fellow Jews for selling out* — embracing Greek culture, Hellenization, because they were either seduced by it, or afraid to disobey authority.

“Hanukkah grows out of a split in the Jewish soul,” writes Rabbi Irving Greenberg in his book, *The Jewish Way*. “In most of the battles in that extended war, Jews fought among themselves as soldiers in the armies on both sides.”

“A split in the Jewish soul.” I see the potential for this in arguments over last summer's Israel-Gaza war. And I've seen it in the fault lines between the Orthodox and Modern-Orthodox, between Conservative and Reform. Ashkenazi vs. Sephardic. Zionist vs. Anti-Zionist. I've been attuned, during my current expedition, to the Opted-In vs. the Opted-Out Jew. The former has an ease with Hebrew, ritual, kosher rules, holiday customs. The latter doesn't power down on Shabbat, reads the prayers in transliteration and doesn't know it's a Jewish holiday on Shemini Atzeret. I get the difference, and it didn't used to bug me, but then it started to. Which is partly why I chose to do this project. But even a few months in, I'm straddling the two camps and alert to how each group judges the other, drawing conclusions about what brand of Judaism is “Jewish enough” or “too Jewish,” exclusive or welcoming, cursory or rigorous.

Obviously Jews will always disagree (two Jews, three opinions), but there's something deeper dividing us: a sense of who's authentic and who's not. I have my own anxiety about where I fall or how I'm perceived. Which is why this new Hanukkah angle triggers something personal.

I know it's too simplistic to say the Maccabees stand in for the observant while the rest of us are Hellenized. But implicit in so many of the Hanukkah teachings I'm now reading is that Jews are in danger of losing our direction — our *distinctiveness* — and abandoning the traditions, language, and texts that make us Jews.

Am I Hellenized? Would the Maccabees have viewed me as a threat to Jewish life? Hanukkah makes me question this for the first time.

I order an Earl Gray at Alice's Tea Cup with Arthur Kurzweil, a writer and speaker with a copious gray beard who counts as his mentor the legendary Talmud scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. I've asked him to talk to me about Hanukkah because I've found his lectures refreshing: he never says the politically-correct thing.

Sure enough, even before I've poured Splenda into my teacup, he says that the Hanukkah story "is about Jewish intolerance in the best sense of the word," when strict Jews were intolerant of lax ones. "I mean 'intolerance' in the sense of, 'I don't want to just blend in with the majority unconsciously,'" Kurzweil tells me.

He believes too many of us have "blended in," or assimilated, by default, opting for an "anything-goes" Judaism that isn't Judaism. "I don't know who said it originally, but I think it's a great analogy: Baseball has four bases. You can invent a game with five bases; maybe it's even a better game. But it's not baseball. So I think Hanukkah is trying to say, 'Judaism is not whatever you want it to be.'"

I can hear the counterarguments—that Judaism *is* individual and valid in every form. But the Maccabees didn't think so. Neither does Kurzweil. He disdains DIY Judaism, Torah groups that spend more time inviting personal takes than teaching the sages: "I'd rather go to a doctor for a medical opinion than the guy on the street."

Although Kurzweil doesn't point a finger at me, I'm clearly implicated as a member of his Hellenized camp. Before we part ways, he urges me to interview his mentor, Rabbi Steinsaltz, with whom he's studied and co-written two books: *On the Road with Rabbi Steinsaltz* and *Pebbles of Wisdom from Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz*. The master rebbe is visiting New York from Israel this very week. I say yes instantly because Steinsaltz is the Beyoncé of Talmud.

In the meantime, I prepare for my kids' Hanukkah, which means wrapping presents in Hanukkah paper — hard to come by at CVS, where rolls of Christmas paper dominate the aisles — and making sure I have Mom's recipes for latkes and egg nog. I know egg nog is a Christmas thing, but it's always been the taste of Hanukkah to me, thanks to Mom's creamy tradition, which involves folds of cream, swirls of dark rum, and sprinkled nutmeg (I was given the virgin edition before drinking age).

Steinsaltz, 77, a frail but fierce recipient of the prestigious Israel Prize, has an office on West 45th Street at the Aleph Society, which exists solely to fund his work: translating Talmud and making it accessible. He has spent 45 years translating the Talmud to Modern Hebrew, an enterprise he completed five years ago, to much acclaim. His colleague, Ruth, joins our meeting, in part, it becomes clear, to help me decipher the rabbi, whose wispy voice is hard to hear.

When I tell Steinsaltz about Kurzweil's view of Hanukkah, Steinsaltz agrees. "The Maccabean Revolt was a war that Jews fought to remain Jews." He underscores the idea that the enemy was internal -- Jews who embraced Greek culture, adopted Greek names, rules, and ideals. "The idea of the Maccabean fight was, *Can you keep your identity?*... And that fight, in a certain way, exists today. The Jews disappeared as a people. They became a part of a general multitude."

It's an indictment I've never considered -- that so many of us have faded away as a people. Not completely, but noticeably. Maybe this Jewish Year is my personal attempt not to.

When I ask Steinsaltz whether it's fair to assess the quality of someone's Jewishness, he doesn't mince words. "There is good art and bad art," he asserts. "You make judgments about good and evil, beautiful and not beautiful, right and wrong. When you read a piece of trash, you see that it's trash. Of course you are judgmental. Why shouldn't you be judgmental?"

I don't know many Jews without judgment. I don't know any *human beings* without judgment. We're all wired to weigh in -- often rashly -- on other people's choices or conduct. Judgments are made about Jews with Christmas trees, Jewish women in wigs, Jews who eat cheeseburgers and Jewish men who won't sit next to a woman on an airplane. So maybe Steinsaltz is just affirming what the rest of us gloss over: we decide daily whether a painting is masterful or mystifying, whether a novel is brilliant or boring, and whether one person's Judaism is thin or substantive.

I have four different menorahs, none of them special, except one: the flat wooden board with eight metal nuts glued to its face, sloppily decorated with red paint and glitter. It's the menorah Ben made when he was 4 years old. I put it on the kitchen table, along with my travel menorah, and the one I bought at the Museum of Modern Art store. I like to have them all on display with a full box of slender tapers at the ready and a few colorful dreidels circling the tableau. It signals to my kids that the holiday is just a few days away, and hopefully gives them a sense of the anticipation I felt at their age.

This year, we haven't even lit the first candle before my head is spinning from all my preparatory conversations. To sort through the Kurzweil and Steinsaltz indictments, I call my college friend, Rabbi Mychal Springer, who presided at Ben and Molly's naming ceremonies, and is now the director of the Center for Pastoral Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

“I think Judaism has survived *because* of Hellenistic impulses,” she says. “Over the generations, we’ve incorporated good things from the world around us. Judaism isn’t ossified. And sometimes we get frightened and say we’ve gone outside the bounds, but that’s part of the process of recognizing what’s sustainable. I can’t only be afraid of external impulses, of absorbing. I don’t think they’re only bad.”

She offers a concrete example of where modern Hellenization has been important. “The Conservative movement has had a major revolution around sexuality and gender over the last thirty years....The idea that nothing changes is *ahistorical*. Judaism has always evolved. Hanukkah isn’t commanded anywhere in the Bible. And suddenly we invent Hanukkah and we say we’re ‘commanded’ to say these prayers for this holiday we invented. So even Hanukkah itself is a radical act. You always have to be incorporating the story of your people in its own day. In fact, Hanukkah is the great symbol of our evolution. Where do you find Hanukkah in the Bible? You don’t! The closest you get is Sukkot.”

Sukkot? What does that have to do with Hanukkah? Glad you asked. The ancient Jews, oppressed by Antiochus, had to *skip* Sukkot because the king forbid all Jewish practice. So when the Jews retook the Temple, they made up for the missed Sukkot by celebrating it, belatedly. That Sukkot-redo became a new holiday, Hanukkah, which means, “rededication.” I get it now. Since Sukkot lasts 8 days, so does Hanukkah. “Historically Hanukkah is simply a late Sukkot,” Springer clarifies. It demonstrates how Jews will not be denied their schedule – the one I’m trying to follow now; they’d rather celebrate a festival two months late than miss it.

At home, I get sentimental when I see my children dive into Hanukkah, the candlelight in their eyes. I flash back to their toddlerhood, when the same flickering light was on their smaller faces, showing the same concentration as they held the shammes (lighting candle), often with my steadying hand or Dave’s. My recurring regret this year has been seeing all the traditions I never gave them. But *this* holiday is one that’s ingrained, safe.

Ben and Molly know Hanukkah — how to set up the menorah, adding the new candles right to left (the way Hebrew is read), lighting them left to right (newest candle to oldest). They’re familiar with the blessing, the songs, the dreidel game, my pyramid of gifts, how one night is reserved for giving, not receiving: as soon as they were old enough to have a conversation, we discussed what kind of organization or cause they’d select for our “Giving Night.” It strikes me, on this holiday this year, that tradition can be easy or shaky -- easy if you start early, shaky if you never began.

Still intent on adding facts to the rosy-colored Hanukkah story, I go the whole nine yards and call Seth Schwartz, the hard-hitting Professor of Classical Jewish Civilization at Columbia University. I want to make sure that Kurzweil's Jew vs. Jew paradigm — Hellenist versus Traditionalist — is rooted in scholarship.

Schwartz says it isn't. Or at least that it's an oversimplification. As we sit in his classic-academia office on Columbia's campus, Schwartz says the Maccabees (only one faction of the traditionalists) weren't rebelling chiefly against assimilated Jews, but against Antiochus' royal edict to stop Judaism. "The Maccabee revolt was not a civil war between progressive Jews and reactionary Jews," he says, calling this an exaggerated subplot which "many liberal rabbis learned in rabbinical school." Schwartz contends that, in some American Orthodox circles, the Hanukkah story has become a convenient admonition — "We have to fight against the Jewish Hellenizers of our own time."

I ask his reaction to those who say the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) of today are the Maccabees of yesterday. "Historians exist in order to make people not say things like that," he says, clearly irritated.

As to whether Jews like me can be called Hellenists, Schwartz instead suggests we are materialists, pointing out that Hanukkah was never a major holiday until Christmas exploded. "Three generations ago who gave a shit about Hanukkah?" asks Schwartz. "Our ancestors in the Old Country, they lit candles on Hanukkah. That was it. There wasn't a fuss about it. We needed a big story to compete with the Christmas story. So I think it's specifically American."

I leave Schwartz's office feeling sheepish about my kids' present pile.

On top of all this Hanukkah-homework, I've been asked to orchestrate a Hanukkah event at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the main training academy for Conservative rabbis and scholars. Rabbi Burt Visotzky, who oversees some of JTS' special programming has asked me to create, with Amichai Lau-Lavie of Lab/Shul, a captivating Hanukkah experience for 400 people in early December.

That's a tall order, especially for a well-versed Jewish audience, and since Amichai and I are so busy, we do most of the planning by phone. We efficiently "cast" the panel—trying to achieve some balance in terms of denomination or Jewish perspective, looking for participants who will eschew stock answers about Hanukkah's meaning.

We get fast yesses from Rabbi David Ingber of Romemu; Bruce Feiler, author of *Walking the Bible*; Rabba Sara Hurwitz, the first woman to be ordained in Orthodoxy

(though much of the Orthodox establishment still won't recognize her as clergy); Rabbi Jill Hammer, Director of Spiritual Education at the Academy for Jewish Religion; and Burt. We ask each person to prepare one aspect of the holiday: Ingber will focus on light, Feiler on Christmas envy, Hurwitz on *pirsum hanes* –publicizing the miracle (the command to put the menorah in the window), Visotzky on Hanukkah history, Hammer on the winter solstice.

But we're still missing an ultra-Orthodox rabbi and no one will come aboard. It's hard for me not to see the echoes of Maccabee-Hellenist tensions when I invite the participation of representatives from Chabad and Agudath Israel (an Ultra-Orthodox communal organization). Chabad puts me off till it's too late anyway. Agudath says they can't — or won't — sit on the JTS stage with non-Orthodox rabbis. "Agudath Israel's policy with regard to involvement with non-Orthodox institutions prevents me from accepting," writes Rabbi Avi Shafran, Agudath's Director of Public Affairs, who invited me, as part of my exploration this year, to spend a Sabbath with his family.

His email goes on: "That policy is a sort of 'civil-disobedience statement,' intended as an alternative to shouting from the rooftops that we don't accept any model of 'multiple Judaisms.' So, instead, we opt to not do anything that might send a subtle or subliminal message to the contrary. Sorry. Really. But I do deeply appreciate your reaching out on this."

When I tell Shafran that I'd like to quote his email in my holiday dispatch, he asks me to "please make sure the readers know that I consider all Jews to be my brothers and sisters, regardless of affiliations or levels of observance."

I can't help but feel disillusioned. I'd been aware of these philosophical divisions, but I hadn't anticipated the impossibility of sharing a stage. Is it really so anathema to have a public conversation with non-Orthodox clergy about Maccabees?

I call sociologist Steven M. Cohen, a non-Orthodox-but-well-versed Jew, to explain it to me. "To sit with you and me individually in a café is fine," he said. "Possibly to sit with you and me and speak at a JCC may be okay. But the second that you bring in a rabbi, then you bring in a religious functionary who represents a system of thought and culture that actively denies some of their deeply-held principles. So from their point of view, they can't do that — they can't extend any honor to a rabbi of a non-Orthodox tradition."

I'm nervous about the JTS evening as it approaches, but it's packed and joyful, with a palpable holiday energy in the auditorium. We open the proceedings wearing props that set the tone — I'm in a Menorah headband; Amichai in his "Ugly Hanukkah Sweater." The panel discussion is lively, and after a musical pause for a Hanukkah rap, we invite

25 cantors on stage to sing “Light One Candle” by Peter, Paul and Mary. The surprise of the evening is that Peter himself is here—Peter Yarrow, who has agreed to lead the assorted cantors in the song he wrote in the 80s, which has since become a Hanukkah anthem.

*Light one candle for the Maccabee children
Give thanks that their light didn't die...*

Watching 25 cantors singing in unison proves more persuasive than any argument. I look out at my family in the audience, singing along, and think to myself: as complex as Hanukkah is, it can be very simple. And though the historical context offers food for thought, I'll always be that nine-year-old who rushed downstairs when Mom said it was time to light the menorah.

Rabbi Burton Visotzky on Hanukkah

“The rabbis really couldn’t stand the Maccabees. In all 2700 folios of Talmud, the Maccabees got just one page. If the rabbis could have, they would have suppressed the holiday entirely -- because it’s militaristic, and frankly, as far as the rabbis were concerned, the Maccabees were on the wrong side of the divide. The Battle of Hanukkah, which took place in the 2nd century before the Common Era, was a battle within the Jewish community, not unlike the one we’re fighting now, between zealotry – those who wanted very little to do with the outside world, and those Jews who were willing to live in accommodation with the outside world, who were willing to Hellenize to a greater extent. And that battle disturbed the rabbis, who were a people who liked to get along to go along. So 700 years – 700 years! after the Maccabees fought their fight, the rabbis discovered a cruse of oil. What?, you say, the rabbis invented the oil? Yes, Virginia... It’s kind of astonishing how the rabbis shifted from the battle to the light. For the rabbis it was always about adding light. That’s what they did. They wanted no part of either the military aspect of it, or the Hanukkah that was anti-assimilationist-we’re-going-to-live-in-our-own-fortress.”