



*shema bekolah hear her voice*  
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

*Confronting the Darker  
Side of Hanukkah*

by Ginna Green

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

# Confronting the Darker Side of Hanukkah

by Ginna Green<sup>1</sup>

Amidst the glowing lights, the sweet and savory treats, and the overall feeling of levity, the story of Hanukkah also has a darker side. Today, we are in the midst of a period of deep polarization in American life, including the entrenchment of dangerously fundamentalist religious and social attitudes. As an activist, I believe that the annual celebration of eight nights of Hanukkah presents some challenges that are all-too-often left unspoken.

Like so many of the Jewish historical lessons we learn in schools, synagogues, camps, and youth groups, the Hanukkah story we are taught is more than meets the eye. The lore of the holiday, built upon the *myth* of the Maccabees' success in triumphing over Greek forces, has come to symbolize Jewish agency, self-preservation, and even strength and military might. But the holiday also rests on the *reality* of the Maccabees' success—that is, a brutal civil war that engulfed the Jews of the region as the Maccabees fought not just against the Greeks, but against their fellow Jews as well, for the subsequent, if relatively brief, control of the Jewish community of Judea and a broader fight for Jewishness itself.

In 2018, while planning our organization's public campaign centered around Hanukkah, just six weeks after a violent white nationalist took the lives of eleven Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue simply because they were Jews, a friend and co-worker reminded everyone present that “We [activists] would not have been the Maccabees in the Hanukkah story.” They were partially

correct. Most of us, who were also social justice activists and organizers and advocates (warriors in our own right!) would likely not have taken up arms alongside Matityahu and his sons. Many of us would have likely been among the Jews who enjoyed Greek influences and culture—some even to the exclusion of Judaism and Jewish tradition.

If we were given the ability to travel to Judea at the time of the original Hanukkah story, I imagine that many of us would have tried to enjoy the best of both worlds, modeling what might have served as the precursor to *Torah U'madda*, an approach in Orthodox Judaism concerning the relationship between our ancient texts and religious knowledge, and secular studies including sciences and philosophy. It is this concept of *Torah U'madda* that has enabled us as Jews in the modern era to preserve our studies, customs, and practices, and to comfortably live within—and with the benefits of—secular and non-Jewish societies. Indeed, one could posit that Jews have historically been safest to practice any and all manner of Judaism in places where everyone was free to practice any and all manner of the faiths of their choosing. Thus, when I recount the Hanukkah story, the notion that the Maccabees were the Jewish fundamentalists of the era—those who sought preservation of our faith's codes and tenets to be strictly applied and strictly followed, to the detriment of fellow Jews who embraced Hellenic influences and practices—figures prominently in my mind. As an observant Jew and an activist, I experience an inner struggle with celebrating this holiday—rabbinically commanded to commemorate a victory that, on the one hand, gave us back a rededicated Temple, but on the other hand, pitted Jews against Jews in the process.

Whether or not we agree with the historical accounting, or the historical detail, of the Hanukkah story, we must also appreciate that we owe a debt of gratitude to the Maccabees. Or we may not. Rabbi James Ponet, writing in *Slate* in 2005, questions whether the Jewish people needed the Maccabean effort to maintain our faith and

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collective sense of self:

But the question remains. Was the bloody Maccabean civil war and revolt necessary to the survival of Jewish identity? The Hasmonean state, originally a bulwark against Greek dominance, eventually declined into a petty Hellenist tyranny barely distinguishable from other military-political entities in the Middle East at the time.

We can never know the answer to that question on the necessity of the Maccabean revolt. But we need to look no further than the contemporary United States to see that we exist in a time where the presence and future of minority and marginalized communities like ours are caught in the crosshairs of forces that would rather we not exist. Our fight for Jewish continuity today, is not, as told in the Hanukkah story, led principally by our most fundamentalist faction. It is also being fought by those my co-worker designated as folks who would not have been lining up to revolt with the Hasmoneans: It's with the Jewish activists seeking to build a truly multiracial, feminist democracy where all of us, regardless of our religion or race or where we come from, can thrive. Dove Kent, Senior Strategy Officer at Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, quoted Dania Rajendra, the former board chair for Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, in her post-Tree of Life piece for *The Forward*:

We who believe in the promise of American democracy—that this can be a country where we all thrive—are in the fight of our lives. We do not choose the terrain. We do not choose, even, our partners in the fight.

Put in another context, it is not unlike the old story of the hassid and the secular *hayyelet* (soldier) passing each other in the street on a Shabbat morning. The hassid laments that but for their dedication to constant Torah study and

a certain religious lifestyle that ensures God's protection, the State of Israel would cease to exist, whereas the *hayyelet* reflects back that but for the might of a strong military, many of whose soldiers don't dwell on Torah studies and reject that religious lifestyle, enable those to dedicate their life to Torah that way, all the while protecting the State of Israel. Some see a tension, others, an unusual partnership.

Why is this year different from all other years? I look at Hanukkah and the Maccabees a bit differently than in years past. Whether or not I agree with the premise or veracity of the Maccabees' war, I do vigorously agree with what we can acknowledge is its clearest overarching result: a successful uprising that preserved Jewish tradition from the threat of eradication against the effects of non-Jewish influence. To that end, I appreciate the rich offering of the Sefat Emet, which has broadened my appreciation of the holiday beyond the rabbinic instruction to commemorate the miracle of light by oil (and the historical reality of its connection to a problematic war), to one that invites us to commemorate the miracle of eight nights of light, delivered to us by God:

איתא ברוקח כי הל"ו נרות דחנוכה מול הל"ו שעות שהאיר אור הגנוז בששת ימי בראשית ע"ש. א"כ נראה שגר חנוכה הוא מאור הגנוז והוא מאיר בתוך החושך הגדול זהו שרמזו שמאיר מסוף העולם ועד סופו שאין העלם וסתר עומד נגד זה האור כי העולם נק' הטבע שהוא מעלים ומסתיר האור. אבל אור הראשון הי' מאיר בכל אלה ההסתרות וגנוז לצדיקים. וע"ז כתיב זרח בחושך אור לישירים. וכ' העם ההולכים בחושך ראו אור גדול. ואותו הדור בימי יון הרשעה הלכו בחושך כמ"ש חז"ל וחושך זה יון שהחשיכו עיניהם של ישראל ומ"מ אותו הדור מסרו נפשם והלכו בעבודת השי"ת גם תוך החושך. לכן זכו שהאיר להם מאור הגנוז ונשאר הארה מזה האור לימים השפלים בכל שנה ושנה. וכל עובד ה' צריך לשמוח בימים הללו שיש בהם הארה מאור הגנוז בעבודת השי"ת שכן עיקר כוונת הרשעים הי' להשכיחנו תורת ה' וחוקיו ונרות חנוכה מביאים. זכירה:

R' Elazar of Worms says in his work *The Rokeach*

that the thirty-six candles we light on Hannukah parallel the thirty-six hours for which the original light of the six days of creation shone, before it was hidden away. If this is so, then it appears that each Hannukah candle draws from the or *haganuz*, the hidden light of creation, and gives light in great darkness, as our Sages hinted with their description of the or *haganuz* as a light that shone from one end of the world to the other (*Haggigah* 12a). There is no hiddenness or obscurity (*he'elem*) before this light. We call the world (*olam*) that obscures (*ma'alim*) and hides this light “the natural,” but the original light of creation shone through all these layers of concealment and it was hidden away for the righteous; on this it is written “A light shines for the upright in the darkness...” (Psalms 112:4). It is also written “The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light...” (Isaiah 9:1). The generation that lived in the days of the wicked Greeks walked in darkness, as the Sages taught, “Darkness refers to Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel...” (*Bereshit Rabba* 2:4). Nevertheless they served God with a spirit of self-sacrifice even in the midst of this darkness. That is why they merited that the hidden light shine for them, and some of its illumination remains, radiating from year to year even in these lowly times. Every servant of God must rejoice during these days when a touch of the hidden light illuminates Divine service. The primary intent of the wicked ones was to make us forget God’s laws and Torah, and the Hanukkah lights bring us to remembrance.

That or *haganuz* that illuminated the path of the Maccabees, and continues to be present each year, can also illuminate the path forward for Jewish continuity yet again. The forces of wickedness today take a different shape and pose a different threat than in days of old, but their threats to Jewish continuity are as clear and present of a danger as any other in our history. Those of us who value both Torah and its values, must seek that or *haganuz* to continue to illuminate what’s possible and what’s important. As has been discussed, we will never know if we truly needed the Maccabees to solidify Jewish continuity and identity. And, while I have at times found it personally enticing to reject the holiday due to its problematic origins, it is abundantly clear that it is also mine to embrace wholeheartedly. We, too, can merit the light of creation to illuminate our paths to both a Judaism that evolves, that is inclusive, that is observant, while still remaining committed to “God’s laws and Torah,” and a society and democracy where every single one of us—each of us created in the image of God—can thrive.

Essentially, celebrating Hanukkah means acknowledging the problematic realities of the “great miracle that happened there,” and also that the triumph of the fundamentalists in that moment may have meant the survival of a faith tradition. Their survival then means we can fight for our survival now—that we will continue to grow and change and be that light unto the nations we are told to be.



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JOFA advocates for expanding women’s rights and opportunities within the framework of *halakha*, to build a vibrant and equitable Orthodox community.