

REINVENTING HANUKKAH  
ADDITIONAL READINGS  
COMPILED BY NOAM ZION



The article below was created as a composite of two fine historical retrospectives on the changing significance of Hanukkah in Israel – one by **Ehud Luz**, whose father was the Labor Party's Speaker of the Knesset, and the other by **Eliezer Don-Yehiya**.

Ehud Luz, "On the Myth of Revival of the Maccabees", HaUmah, Kislev 1978 vol. 1:56 p. 44 ff by permission of the author [E.L.]

Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "Hanukkah and the Myth of the Maccabees in Zionist Ideology in Israeli Society," reprinted by permission of Jewish Journal of Sociology XXXIV: 1 (June, 1992) 5ff [E.D-Y.]

### **The Israeli Politics of Observance: Remembering the Maccabees in a Partisan Way by Ehud Luz and Eliezer Don-Yehiya**

*"The Maccabees will be resurrected!" - Theodore Herzl (concluding sentence of his prophetic book, The Jewish State , 1897)*

#### **Writing History is a Self-Projection on the Past [E.L.]**

History is a mirror by which we can view ourselves... The motive for our interest in history is to interpret our life ideal and to prove that the ideal is achievable in reality in the future just as it once was a fact of history. This approach is especially relevant for Revivalist Movements that seek to shape the future in the image of the past. Revival is never a simple return to the past but always a reflective dialogue in which the present seeks to shape the future in the image of a particular past which it has reconstructed in its own image. We turn to the past to derive a concrete model of our soul's dream and the faith that the dream is realizable. The past is an interpretation and a justification for our aspirations. In this sense, modern study of history functions like ancient myths. Myth gave meaning to one's private life by anchoring it in the eternal comprehensive lawfulness of life. What is ephemeral is really an example of the eternal; private life is a repetition and a revival of a holy event that belongs to eternity...

Therefore the myth of "revival" plays such a central role in the national awakening of historical peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. Historical romanticism is the cradle of modern nationalism because the past is mythic and eternal and it grants the power of renewal to the present.

#### **The Secularization of Hanukkah [E.L.]**

Of all the historic symbols used by modern Zionism, none is as important as "the Maccabees". The rabbinic religious tradition – in so far as it recalled the Hasmoneans at all – emphasized the religious miracle in their battle against persecution of Judaism and the desecration of the Temple (see the traditional prayer "*Al HaNissim*"). However the Secular Zionists rejected the miracle and emphasized the earthly realism of Hasmonean heroism. Zionism made Hanukkah a nationalist holiday... the secularization and nationalization of religious celebrations focused on minor religious holidays and reprioritized their significance.

Lag BaOmer became a celebration of Bar Kochba's revolt against the Roman Empire (132-135 CE); Tu B'Shvat became a celebration of the redemption of Eretz Yisrael (through reforestation). However, Hanukkah was the main site of national re-creation. The early religious Zionist Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever proposed that Hanukkah be the official holiday of the proto Zionist organization in Russia – Hovevei Zion (1881)... this minor holiday provided neutral ground for religious and secular Zionists to share their nationalist program...

## **Hanukkah Displaces Pesach as the Holiday of Freedom [E.L.]**

While traditionally Pesach has been the holiday of national liberation, its family observance and its exclusive emphasis on God's supernatural redemption, could not serve the Zionist slogans of "auto emancipation" and "if I do not do for myself, who will do for me?" Yitzhak Ben Zvi, early pioneer and later second president of the State of Israel, wrote in 1911:

The glory and the educational value of the Hasmoneans is that their example revived the nation to be its own redeemer and the determiner of its own future...

## **The Secular "Hanukkah" becomes the "Festival of the Hasmoneans" [E. D-Y.]**

The various new ways of interpreting and celebrating Hanukkah prompted some observers to claim that the traditional holy day had been in fact replaced by a new festival which differed from the older one in content and even in name. Thus, while the Hebrew word "*Hanukkah*" (which means "dedication") refers to the religious dedication of the Temple in the wake of its liberation from the control of the Hellenizers, the preferred name now was the "Festival of the Hasmoneans". The historian, Joseph Klausner, who was one of the mentors of the Revisionist movement, stated:

Hanukkah is an ancient festival, but a modest one. The Festival of the Hasmoneans is a new holy day, but full of high spirits and popular gaiety. **What was Hanukkah?**... ' a memorial for the Miracles'... the lighting of the little candles... at home, potato pancakes and playing cards for the adults, spinning tops for the toddlers.

**And what is Hanukkah now?** – The Festival of the Hasmoneans, a holiday filled with cheering, a big national holiday which is celebrated by the Jewish people in all its dispersions with parties and speeches, songs and ballads, hikes and parades... This is our Festival of the Hasmoneans as it is today. Does any nation have a national holiday as great and as consecrated as this?

## **Haredim (Ultra Orthodox) Condemn the Zionists [E. D-Y.]**

The traditional concept of Hanukkah stressed the miraculous salvation from above, in contrast to the Zionist emphasis on the theme of the self-liberation. This clash between the two approaches to the festival was apparent from the very beginning of modern Zionism. In 1903, a rabbi deplored the actions of the Zionists who, he claimed:

Magnified the festival of the Maccabees and augmented their strength and power, and this is truly a great mistake... For under natural conditions they were incapable of winning the war, and [they were victorious] only because they were completely righteous men and sought with selfless devotion to save our sacred religion.

The fiercest opponents of the Zionist version of Hanukkah were the Haredim, who also dismissed Zionism as a movement, which ran counter to the spirit of religious tradition. They claimed that the manner of the Zionist celebrations of Hanukkah was closer to the outlook of the Hellenizers than it was to that of the Hasmoneans, although the Zionists were pretending to be praising the latter. They added that the Zionists expressed admiration for the values fostered by the Hellenizers under the influence of a foreign culture, such as the worship of physical strength. Yitzhak Breuer, a major Haredi leader, commented:

The Hellenizers loved their people and their land in their own fashion... They loved the land, but loathed the Land of Torah, loved the people but despised the People of the

Torah, loved the Greek licentiousness but hated the burden of Torah... It is not for the Jewish State that the Hasmoneans fought but for the People of the Torah. They did battle against the kingdom of evil when it threatened the People of the Torah with destruction... They also fought against the wicked among their own people... This was a *kulturkampf* [a clash between two cultures] ...Greek culture triumphed over the whole world, and only the Torah culture was able to withstand it.

### **Not Martyrs, But Heroes [E.L.]**

[In reading the Book of Maccabees there is praise for courageous religious martyrs like Hannah and her seven sons as well as for Judah the military hero. However the Zionists in their battle against the Ultra Orthodox saw these as mutually exclusive ideals.]

The Zionist pioneer Zerubavel argued in 1911 that Jewish history is characterized by two different ideal types: (1) the passive religious martyrs who died for the sanctification of God's name were nurtured in the exile, and (2) the activist hero nurtured in Eretz Yisrael. The Zionist pioneers are inheritors of the later zealous Hasmoneans:

Martyrs are evoked at a time of weakness, heroes are emulated at a time of courage and action. That was why the pioneers of the national renaissance tended to identify with the Hasmoneans and with the other heroes of the Second Temple: The Hasmoneans did not make do with prayers... The Biryonim [the rebels against Rome in 66 CE] did not expect miracles... They shed their blood for the people's freedom.

In the Hasmoneans, the Zionist secularists saw the beginning of a revolt that was not only nationalist, but secularist in its reliance on human effort to redeem the nation.

### **New Songs: "No Miracle Occurred" [E.d-Y.]**

The miracle of the cruse of oil was openly belittled since it was believed that it was a salient example of the passive approach, which characterized traditional Diaspora Jewry. Indeed, a popular song, widely heard during Hanukkah, states: "**No miracle befell us, no cruse of oil did we find**". The divine intervention of the Lord was replaced by reference to the heroic people who delivered the Jewish community by their own courage and strength. A children's song chanted on Hanukkah altered the Biblical verse: '*Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord?*' (Psalms, 106:2) to '*Who can recount the exploits of Israel?*' The very name "Maccabees," traditionally considered to be an acronym for the verse, '*Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods?*' (Exodus, 15:11) was given a new rendition by a Zionist functionary: 'Who is like unto thee among the nations, Israel?'

Traditional practices in the celebration of the festival, such as the lighting of the candles in the **Menorah** (candelabrum), were observed but they were reinterpreted: the candles were said not to be in memory of the miracle of the cruse of oil, but to betoken the light of national deliverance. Furthermore, the ceremony of lighting the candles which traditionally took place in the home was now observed in the town square or other places of public assembly; and instead of the traditional blessings, there were speeches, declarations, and songs of a national-political character, and torches were lit and were carried through the streets in festive parades.

One elaborate event was a pilgrimage to Modiin where members of the youth movement, Maccabee, lit a torch and relayed it in a marathon to light Hanukkah candles along the way. On the first occasion of such a ceremony in Modiin, the audience was told that the torch which was being kindled there would be carried by runners who were the descendants of the Maccabees 'not only to light the Hanukkah candles but to light up the hearts of Hebrew youth and to herald

unity and national action'. [Ironically] the Modiin marathon [a Greek term and institution] became part of a series of sports events which were held during the Hanukkah period.

### **Labor and Likud (Revisionists): Left and Right Parties celebrate a Different Hanukkah [E.D-Y]**

The vast majority of the Jewish community of pre-state Israel regarded Hanukkah as chiefly expressing the values associated with the struggle for national liberation. This perception was shared by the two rival movements which competed for hegemony in the Zionist movement and in the Jewish community of Palestine (the *Yishuv*): the Labor movement which was established in 1905 [and led by David Ben Gurion] and the Revisionist movement which was founded in 1925 [and led by Zeev Jabotinsky and later Menachem Begin and his Likud-Herut Party]. However, the two movements differed in their approach and in their interpretations of Jewish historical myths.

**Revisionists** emphasized the theme of combatting rule without hesitation and without compromise, however dangerous the fight, and even if the [majority of their] own nation was not willing to rebel. The Revisionists glorified the Zealots who revolted against the Romans in 66-70 CE as well as Bar-Kokhba's fighters who also rebelled against the Romans in 132-135 CE. Bar-Kokhba's last stronghold was Beitar and this was also the name of the youth movement of the Revisionists, while their most radical group was called Brit Habiryonim, after the most militant of the Zealots.

Although other Zionist groups also admired the fighters against the Romans, they gave pride of the place to the Hasmoneans who had waged war only after grave acts of provocation and of suppression by the Greek rulers. Such a reaction was more in tune with the 'defensive ethos' of the **Labor movement** and of other moderate groups in the *Yishuv*, while the revolts against Roman rule were more in line with the militant ethos of the **Revisionists**.

Many Zionist leaders, writers, and poets, who inspired the Revisionist movement, were admirers of the Hellenistic culture, which was anathema to the Hasmoneans. The Revisionists saw themselves as disciples of the renowned Zionist leader, Max Nordau. In an article published in 1900, Nordau urged the cultivation of a '**muscular Jewry**', which he associated especially with Bar-Kokhba, whom he described as 'a hero who never knew defeat' and who embodied 'the Jewry that is steeled in war and is enamoured of weapons'. Nordau also lauded, as representatives of 'muscular Jewry', the young Hellenizing Jews who took part in wrestling competitions and who were among the bitter enemies of the Hasmoneans.

One of the Zionist leaders who admired Hellenistic culture was the founder of the Revisionist movement, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who in 1905 declared:

Mankind will be eternally grateful to Hellenism, which was first to point to sports, as the best educational means for creating, by prolonged training and will power, a type imbued with spiritual beauty and courage. The Hellenes were the first to establish special gymnasia for this purpose.

The ideological differences between the Revisionists and Labour also became apparent in their differing concepts of the Hanukkah festival and of the Hasmonean revolt. The Revisionists saw the revolt as [a militant demand for national] independence, while their political rivals interpreted that revolt as a popular uprising of peace-loving peasants who had to defend themselves against their cruel oppressors.

Thus, in 1910, the Labour Zionist Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (who later became the second president of Israel) depicted the Hasmoneans as 'simple peasants' who liberated their people from foreign rule, as well as from exploitation by Jewish priests and 'capitalists', who enriched themselves 'at the expense of people'.

The Zionist scholar Joseph G. Klausner wrote:

The great victory of Judah Maccabeus, whose memory is honored in every Jewish house and every Jewish heart during the eight days of Hanukkah, was **the triumph of the Jewish tiller of the soil**. It was not the city of Jerusalem nor the ranks of the wealthy and large landowners, but the obscure village of Modiin in Judah, with its peasants whose plot of land was their all, that produced Mattathias the Hasmonean and his sons, who saved Jewish culture and perhaps the whole Jewish race from destruction. We have here an historic fact which speaks more than all the theoretical arguments in the world for the importance of national land and agricultural workers who literally draw their bread from their soil by the labor of their hands, for the sake of the culture, the freedom, the life of the nation.

Zionism knew how to raise the Feast of Hanukkah, that feast of small candles, which shed their eternal light from the past into the future, to the height of a new national symbol. Can one ever forget that fine sketch. "The Menorah", by the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl?

The picture of Herzl standing wrapped in troubled thought, in front of a menorah, is one of the most beautifully symbolic in the life of the leader. But it seems to me that **this festival has come to tell the people**, through its two thousand year old symbol, of **the principle of land redemption, and the creation of a class of workers on the soil that shall serve as a basis for the future existence of the race**.

#### **The Jewish Communist Hanukkah [E. D-Y]**

A peculiar attempt to use Hanukkah for **class-struggle propaganda** was made by the Palestinian Jewish Communists, who supported the anti-Zionism of the Arabs and who went so far as to portray the anti-Jewish riots of 1929 as a popular uprising of Arab peasants against Zionist efforts to dispossess them. In 1929, the Communist Youth League of Palestine published a pamphlet in which the leader of the Palestinian Arabs and self-confessed foe of Zionism – **the Jerusalem Mufti, Hadj Amin al-Husseini** [later a Nazi collaborator in Berlin during World War II] – was portrayed as the equivalent of Mattathias the Hasmonean, since both were spiritual leaders who encouraged the emergence of a national class-liberation movement:

It may well be that the symbol in whose name the Hasmonean muftis fought was a fanatic-religious character, but the real cause for which the peasant masses rose up was that of a movement of liberation from foreign domination and cruel exploitation.

#### **The Moderate Religious Zionist Compromise [E. D-Y]**

As for the religious Zionists, they sought to reconcile the national myth of the Maccabees with the traditional elements of Hanukkah. They held that the struggle of the Hasmoneans was fuelled by both religio-spiritual and national-political goals. Rabbi Yeshayahu Shapira, the Hapoel-Hamizrachi leader, considered the exploits of the Hasmoneans to be a shining example of the special obligation on the Orthodox community to rally to the cause of national redemption:

In the days of the Hasmoneans the banner of the revolt was raised expressly by Torah followers, and they risked their lives for the liberation of the land and of the Jewish spirit. Today, we face a similar war, a war for the redemption of our land and a war for the liberation of the Jewish spirit from the alien cultures that we have absorbed.

## **The Decline of the Zionist Hanukkah [E. D-Y]**

The establishment of the State of Israel apparently led to a decline in the importance of Hanukkah in Israeli political culture. It is no longer a major national event, with public assemblies, declarations and speeches, or with mass parades. One reason for this decline was that there was now a new annual national celebration – Independence Day.

The changes in the public perceptions of the festival are also reflected in the patterns of its celebration. Today, Hanukkah is celebrated mainly in the circle of family and friends, in the home or in parties. This whole process is linked in turn to the great decline in the status of secular ideologies, such as Socialist Zionism, or Ben-Gurion's version of *Mamlachtiut* (Statism). These ideologies were intended to replace traditional Jewish religion as a symbol-system, which would underpin the cohesiveness of Jewish society and be a source of inspiration for the achievement of national goals. With the decline of these ideologies, institutionalized and politicized structures of festivals and ceremonies were abandoned in favour of more traditional or more individual and spontaneous styles, which do not reflect clear and well-defined ideological commitments. A related development is the attenuation of political authority in Israeli society, as evidenced in the refusal of large sections of the Israeli public to accept the dictates of the establishment concerning the management of social and cultural affairs, including symbolic and ceremonial behavior.

## **Gush Emunim: The Messianist Religious Settlers Movement [E. D-Y]**

The only exception to the current trends of divesting Hanukkah of its political and heroic overtones is to be found in the symbol-system of Gush Emunim. In that movement, which advocates a mixture of devoutly religious and national values, Hanukkah symbolizes the uncompromising struggle for both religious and national goals. In 1980 one of the spiritual leaders Gush Emunim, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, on the subject of 'The Miracle of Hanukkah', declared that the chief feature of the festival was a commemoration of the victory of the heroic Hasmoneans over their people's oppressors. But that victory, the rabbi added, was achieved because the Jewish fighters were divinely inspired with spiritual power, which proved miraculous just like the miracle of the cruse of oil. Here we have a conception which stresses the centrality of the heroism of the Hasmoneans in the struggle to liberate their people, but which asserts that the source of that heroism was divine inspiration.

The members of Gush Emunim consider themselves to be the successors of the Maccabees. Gush Emunim played a dominant role in "The Movement to Stop the Withdrawal from Sinai", which was engaged in 1982 in a struggle against the implementation of the Camp David agreements with Egypt. Members of that group described themselves as "the Hasmoneans of their generation, the few against the many, fired with the spirit of truth and faith". The case of the Hasmoneans was used by the political radicals of Gush Emunim in their polemic against their rivals on the Israeli left. In an article published on Hanukkah, 1987, Dan Be'eri, [on trial for his part in a plot to bomb the Dome of the Rock], commented *caustically* that Hanukkah celebrations hailing the heroism of the Maccabees were increasingly becoming "something both creaking and grating." [With tongue in cheek he presented the Maccabees through the eyes of Israeli liberals who view both Gush Emunim and hence necessarily the Maccabees as "dangerous religious fanatics"]:

Just between ourselves, the Maccabees were at bottom pretty "fascistic". They were also terrorists and religious fanatics who thrust the nation into mortal danger. They operated out of irrational, Messianic motives, and fomented a civil war. They also spurned the nation's legitimate legal institutions, which enjoyed the solid support of a broad consensus, whereas they were a radical, violent minority. They... despised progress and universal cultural values. So, is it the deeds of these people that we are instilling in Jewish youth, not to mention the miracle of the

cruse of oil? This must be stopped at once! It's all very well and fitting for Orthodox Jews. But it cannot be a Zionist holiday, glorious and positive, a source of inspiration for a progressive and humanistic society.

Dan Be'eri was a member of the "Jewish Underground" which was active in the West Bank occupied territories in the years 1980-84, and he received a prison sentence in 1985 for his part in the plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock – the Muslim shrine on the Temple Mount. At the trial of Be'eri and his comrades, one of the defence's arguments was that "this court would also have convicted Judah the Maccabee for removing the idols from the Temple." The same reaction was implicit in a comment by the father of one of the accused: "This court is situated on Salah al-Din Street [in East Jerusalem] and not on Judah the Maccabee Street: that's the whole problem in a nutshell'.

Gush Emunim made efforts to link Hanukkah to its settlement activities. On Hanukkah, 1976, it established its first settlement in the occupied territories at Sebastia, and on Hanukkah, 1981, it launched a countrywide campaign to stop the Sinai withdrawal, using the slogan, [taken from a famous popular song by Naomi Shemer], "Do not uproot what is planted." However, despite the importance, which Gush Emunim has attached to Hanukkah, it has not been able to restore its standing as a central national event. One reason for this is that Hanukkah could not compete with new national festivals, such as Independence Day – and since the Six-Day War of 1967, also Jerusalem Day, which has acquired special importance and is indeed particularly celebrated by Gush Emunim. But the important factor is that while Gush Emunim can boast of its achievements in establishing Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, it can hardly boast of having made a deep impression on Israeli culture.

There has clearly been a great weakening in the link between Hanukkah celebrations in Israeli Jewish society and the national myth of the Maccabees. The prevailing tendency now is to observe the festival in a manner which reflects a mild fusion of national and traditional elements and which to a large extent is characteristic of Israeli political culture in general.

## Theodor Herzl's "The Menorah": From Assimilation to Zionism, From a Christmas Tree to a Menorah

By ALEX BEIN

The growth and evolution of Herzl's conception of the Jewish problem, since the day when he [as a journalist in Paris] looked on at the degradation of Dreyfus [falsely accused of being a traitor to the French army, court-martialled and sent to Devil's Island, 1895], can be measured almost with laboratory accuracy by a study of the articles which he wrote immediately after the first [Zionist] Congress. He himself was quite aware of the transformation. Two years before, in December 1895, he had been outraged by [Vienna's Chief Rabbi Moritz] Gudenmann's declaration that the use of a Christmas tree in Jewish homes – an accepted custom with Herzl's parents – was essentially un-Jewish. Herzl believed then that it was permissible to interpret the Christmas tree as a "**Hanukkah tree**"; or it might be looked upon as the celebration of the upward turn of the Menorah," in which he told how he had returned to Judaism, how he regarded the celebration of Hanukkah, and how this festival affected him. The story begins like a fairy tale: "*Once upon a time there was a man who had discovered deep in his soul the need to be a Jew.*" The man was an artist; he had made his peace with the surrounding world; he had long since ceased to concern himself with his Jewish origins and the faith of his fathers. But the ever-rising tide of anti-Jewish sentiment, the incessant attacks on the Jews, tore open something within him "*so that his soul became nothing more than an open and bleeding wound.*" He came by degrees to "a deep inner love" of Judaism, and to the conclusion "*that there was only one way out of the Jewish tragedy, and that was a return of the Jews to their homeland.*" Everyone believed that the man had gone mad. Everyone believed that "the way out" which he had chosen would result in a deepening and intensification of the evil. "*But he was sure now that the moral catastrophe in Jewish life was all the sharper because the Jews had lost that inner compensation which had existed so strongly in their ancestors.*"

Undistracted by the mockery and contempt which were directed at him, the man followed to its logical conclusion the consequences of his conviction. He realized that the first problem was that of the education of the young generation of Jews. He therefore decided to revive the festival of the Maccabees for his children, and to plant in their young souls a feeling of relationship to the past of their people. As he held aloft the nine-branched candlestick he suddenly recalled, in a strange rush of feeling, his own childhood, and the celebration of the festival in his father's house. He looked at the antique symbol, the prototype of which had so obviously been a tree, and asked himself "*whether it was possible to bring new life into his petrified menorah form, and to water its roots again as if it were really a tree.*" And thus the first evening of the Hanukkah festival passed.

"The first candle was lit, and the story of the origin of the festival recited: the miraculous origin of the undying lamp, the saga of the return from Babylon, of the Second Temple and of the Maccabees. Our friend related to his children all that he knew. It was not much, but it was enough for them. When he lit the second candle, it was the children who recited the story to him, and as he heard it from their lips it seemed not only beautiful, but quite new. And from then on he looked forward joyfully to the coming of each evening, always brighter than the evening before. Candle stood by candle in the menorah, and by their light, father and children dreamed their dreams. In the end it all grew into something more than he had sought to tell them, for it had risen beyond their understanding...

"Amid these meditations the week passed. The eighth day came, and now the **shammash**, the servant among the candles, which until then had been used only for the kindling of the others, burned together with them. A great light streamed out from the menorah. The eyes of the children flashed, but what our good friend saw was the kindling of the light of the nation. First one candle, and dimness all around it, so that the candle was sad and lonely. Then a companion was added to it. Then a third, and a fourth. The

darkness is compelled to retreat. The first candles are lit among the youth and the poor, and gradually they are joined by all those who love truth and beauty and justice and freedom. When all the candles burn there is admiration and rejoicing for the work that has been done. **And there is no office more beneficent and creative than that of a Servant of Light.**"

*Alex Bein, Biography of Theodore Herzl – A biography including quotes from Herzl's "The Menorah" translated by Maurice Samuel, used by permission of the Jewish Publication Society.*

## **A Biblical Psalm becomes a Secular Song**

### **Psalms 106**

Hallelujah.

Praise the Lord for God is good;

God's steadfast love is eternal.

**Who can tell the mighty acts of the Eternal, proclaim all God's praises?**

God saved [our ancestors], as befits God's name...

God delivered them from the foe,

Redeemed them for the enemy.

### **MI Y'MALEL – An Early Zionist Folksong**

**Who can tell the mighty acts of Israel,**

Who can count them?

In every age a hero rises to save the nation.

Hark! In those days at this time, a Maccabee overcame and redeemed.

And in our day the whole nation of Israel will be united and rise to be redeemed.

## The Maccabees and Muscular Judaism\*

By Max Nordau

*In Europe and Palestine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century newly created Jewish youth movements and student groups were named after heroes like “Maccabees” or “Bar Kochba” and devoted to physical education and sports. Max Nordau\*\*, Herzl’s second in command in the Zionist Congress and a famous writer who lamented the degeneration of Europe at the turn of the century wrote in the newspaper of the Bar Kochba Sports Club of Berlin:*

Two years ago, during a committee meeting at the Congress in Basle at the Zionist Congress (1898), I said: We must think of creating once again a Jewry of muscles. Once again! For history is our witness that such a Jewry had once existed. For too long, all too long have we been engaged in the mortification of our own flesh.

Or rather, to put it more precisely – others did the killing of our flesh for us. Their extraordinary success is measured by hundreds of thousands of Jewish corpses in the ghettos, in the churchyards, along the highways of medieval Europe. We ourselves would have gladly done without this “virtue” [i.e. the Christian virtue of corporal mortification]. We would have preferred to develop our bodies rather than to kill them or to have them – figuratively and actually – killed by others. We know how to make rational use of our life and appreciate its value.

If, unlike most other peoples, we do not conceive of [physical] life as our highest possession, it is nevertheless very valuable to us and thus worthy of careful treatment. During long centuries we have not been able to give it such treatment. All the elements of Aristotelian physics – light, air, water and earth – were measured out to us very sparingly. In the narrow Jewish street, our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movements; in the dimness of sunless houses, our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into frightened whispers, which rose in a crescendo only when our martyrs on the stakes cried out their dying prayers in the face of their executioners. But now, all coercion has become a memory of the past, and at least we are allowed space enough for our bodies to live again. Let us take up our oldest traditions, **let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men.**

This desire of going back to a glorious past finds a strong expression in the name which the Jewish gymnastic club in Berlin has chosen for itself. “Bar Kochba” was a hero who refused to know defeat. When in the end victory eluded him, he knew how to die. Bar Kochba was the last embodiment in world history of a bellicose, militant Jewry. To evoke the name of Bar Kochba is an unmistakable sign of ambition. But ambition is well suited for gymnasts striving for perfection.

**For no other people will gymnastics fulfill a more educational purpose than for us Jews.** It shall straighten us in body and in character. It shall give us self-confidence, although our enemies maintain that we already have too much self-confidence as it is. But who knows better than we do that their imputations are wrong. We completely lack a sober confidence in our physical prowess.

Our new muscle-Jews (Muskeljuden) have not yet regained the heroism of our ancestors who in large numbers eagerly entered the sport arenas in order to take part in competition and to pit

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\* “Muskeljudentum”, Juedische Turnzeitung (June 1903). Republished in Max Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften* (Cologne and Leipzig: Juedischer Verlag, 1909), pp. 379-81. Translation by J. Hessing reappears in Arthur Hertzberg’s *The Zionist Idea*.

\*\* Max Nordau (1849-1923), physician, avant-garde literary critic, novelist, and one of Herzl’s earliest supporters. At the Second Zionist Congress, Nordau proposed a program to promote the physical fitness of Jewish youth. In response, the Bar Kochba gymnastic club was founded in Berlin in 1898. Similar clubs were soon established throughout Europe under the name Maccabee. Today Israel’s best sports teams are part of the Maccabee Sports Federation.

themselves against the highly trained Hellenistic athletes and the powerful Nordic barbarians. But morally, even now the new muscle-Jews surpass their ancestors, for the ancient Jewish circus fighters were ashamed of their Judaism and tried to conceal the sign of the Covenant by means of surgical operation ...while the members of the "Bar Kochba" club loudly and proudly affirm their national loyalty.

May the Jewish gymnastic club flourish and thrive and become an example to be imitated in all the centers of Jewish life!

## **A Lubavitch Children's Story: the Young Hasmonean**

When little Yisrael returned from Heder (Hebrew school) on Hanukkah evening, the whole family were already ready to light the candles... "How much I desire to be one of the Hasmoneans, to join Judah the Maccabee in fighting the evil Greek Empire that tried to separate Israel from its Holy Torah", thought Yisrael. An inner desire to be one with the Hasmoneans took control of the young mind...

His sparkling eyes fastened on the candle that began to flicker and almost to go out. The flame rose and then fell again and again as if the candle were saying: I want to live, to light up the world... Yisrael's blue eyes closed for a moment and it seemed as if the candle was speaking to him before it departed and went out:

My dear son! I understand your desire to be a heroic Hasmonean, willing to sacrifice their lives for the Holy Torah... therefore I have come to assure you that you have the inner strength to be a Hasmonean. What the Maccabees did "in those days", you can do "in these days."

How? Let me tell you: Not far from your house are hundreds and thousands of Jews. Though inside them they have a holy Jewish soul like yours, it is hidden. They have no idea what a great and holy day Hanukkah is and what the candles symbolize – all those miracles. They know nothing.

Listen, my dear son! You have a wonderful opportunity to be a Maccabee, to fight the Greek spirit that distances them from the Hasmonean spirit. Go and talk to them. Tell them all the wonderful stories you have heard. Perhaps you can influence them so that they too will go with you to Heder (Hebrew school).

Before I leave you, (said the candle), I promise that if you really want it, you can be a Maccabee just like Judah the Maccabee...

***Al Hanissim:*** “The impure were handed over to the pure, the evil to the righteous...”

**By Menachem Mendel Schneerson**

The impure refer not to the Greeks as such, who as non-Jews have no basis for purity or impurity, but to the Hellenist Jews who have the potential to be pure... The miracle is even greater since the enemies of the Jews who were pure, righteous and students of Torah were the majority of Jews who willingly and by force became Hellenized. Yet the minority of Jews – pure, righteous students of Torah – defeated the many.

This is a source of encouragement for our generation in which the true and complete observers of Torah and mitzvot are a tiny minority among the Jews. Contemplating this fact can lead one, God forbid, to despair, since redemption requires all the Jews to repent. But the model of Hanukkah shows that a minority of Torah-true Jews can with God’s help win over the majority who are like “children who were captured” by others and never learned about Judaism. The minority is small in quantity not in quality; because of their holiness they not only defeat the others but the others are “handed over” to the pure and become “pure, righteous, students of Torah”.

This battle of majority impure and minority pure Jews is repeated inside each Jew. The minority i.e. one’s inner holiness and spirituality can transform the majority i.e. one’s physicality. Thus we can be encouraged to repent and to build our own inner sanctum by purifying ourselves and then lighting within us our candle, for “*God’s candle is the human soul.*”