Religious Persecution, Civil War, and Bureaucratic Mischief: A Chanukah Story for the Ages

Jill Katz, PhD
Clinical Assistant Professor of Archaeology, Yeshiva University

The vagaries of the Jewish experience are all manifest in the story of Chanukah. Some, such as religious persecution and factional tensions, are so familiar that we are almost inured to them. Others may make us pause as we ask ourselves: "What is the appropriate degree to which we should embrace secular culture?" Then there are others, which at first glance seem irrelevant or simply tangential, yet upon further consideration can be interpreted as watershed moments. Into this category are the seemingly innocuous or non-targeted bureaucratic decisions that have great potential to wreak havoc on Jewish life and sustainability.

The Syrian Greeks, of course, did not invent anti-Semitism. Besides Pharaoh who enslaved us and Haman who tried to kill us, there was Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the third century BCE, who maintained that the Jews were enemies of mankind and should be annihilated. His retelling of the Exodus story has the Jews not escaping to physical and spiritual freedom but rather as a collection of diseased individuals (lepers, actually), expelled from Egypt in order to preserve the body politic.

Nevertheless, when Antiochus IV specifically outlawed Jewish ritual practices such as *brit milah* (circumcision), Shabbat observance, dietary laws, and the Temple liturgy, he earned the ignominious distinction of being the first ruler in history to implement a religious persecution. Once the Jewish religion itself was targeted (not just the Jewish people), the focal point for Jewish ritual practice—the Temple Mount—became the obvious target. Antiochus and his Jewish supporters enacted a program to eradicate the particular and non-inclusive character of the sacred space. The Syrian Greeks first removed the walls and gates that had separated the Temple Mount from the city, and, in deliberate violation of traditional precepts, planted trees, which transformed the Temple Mount into a Greek-style sacred grove. The final straw occurred on the 15th of Kislev 167 BCE when the Jews learned that an "abomination"—most likely a *matzeva* (standing stone)—had been erected near the *mizbeach* (altar).[1] The Temple Mount now resembled an

[1] "Now on the 15th day of Kislev . . . they erected an abomination of desolation upon the altar" (1 *Maccabees* 1:54).

ancient *bamah* (high place) with its trees and open altar. The unmistakable goal was to erase the traditional Jewish boundaries of increasing exclusivity on the Temple Mount and replace them with a modernized cult that would appeal to the cosmopolitan man everywhere.

As is so often the case in Jewish history, this menace of external attack on Judaism was matched by threats posed by internal schisms. In the days before the big three—Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes—Jews were already grappling with and arguing over new concepts that arrived with Hellenism such as secularism and universalism. Moreover, the transmission of Hellenistic culture was primarily through the *polis*, the secular city, and its institutions such as the *gymnasium,* where young men were instructed in Hellenistic ideals of body and mind. There they studied Greek literature, poetry, and philosophy while engaging in arduous physical and military training.

In the century after Alexander, Jerusalem's relative isolation—far from the coast and without direct access to major trade routes—meant that the city and its inhabitants were initially not much affected by Hellenism. The Ptolemies in Egypt who ruled over the Land of Israel mostly left the community alone save for the 20 talents of silver that was due each year. Moreover, since Jerusalem was just a provincial city and not a *polis*, it had no *gymnasium*. Inevitably and progressively, though, Jerusalem became more and more familiar with the Greek world so that by the end of the third century BCE, some Jews began to acquire a rudimentary Greek education and give their children Greek names. This was the time of Joseph Tobiad, who as chief tax collector for the Ptolemies has the distinction of being the first Jewish banker.

The main Jewish factions that developed were roughly based on the degree to which Hellenism was embraced. The first group—called Antiochene Jews because Antioch was the Seleucid capital in Syria—represented those who wholly embraced Hellenism and the economic, social, and cultural opportunities it presented. This was a small, yet influential minority, even including some High Priests. A middle group of landowners, merchants, and craftsmen coalesced around the kohanim (priests) who themselves were attracted to Greek ideals, and in some cases had Greek names, but were deeply committed to Torah law, especially regarding the proper observance of Temple ritual. The rest of the people, particularly the lower classes, were steadfastly opposed to Hellenism and became even more scrupulous regarding Torah observance.

As expected, each of these three groups had a separate reaction to the prospect of Jerusalem becoming a *polis*. The Antiochene Jews, who clearly favored the change in status, did what they could to encourage it, and constructed a *gymnasium* near the Beit haMikdash for their sons in anticipation. They even had a name for the new city: Antioch in Judea. The kohanim and their supporters were initially not opposed to this potential change in status, as they recognized that as a *polis*, Jerusalem would probably benefit economically. The traditionalists were totally opposed. However, a change in Jerusalem's status required a number of years, both for administrative approval from the Syrian Greek rulers and for the construction of the necessary civic structures (e.g., agora, acropolis, and theater). In the meantime, the Torah remained the law of the land.

These factional divisions and their viewpoints were not static, particularly as the Hellenizers strayed more and more from Jewish tradition. The appointment of Menelaus as kohen gadol scandalized the majority of Jews because he was not of the proper lineage (i.e., descendent of

Zadok). According to the book of *Maccabees*, he was not even a kohen,[2] although the first century CE Jewish historian Josephus says he was.[3] An attempted coup to overthrow Menelaus—whom Antiochus IV himself had appointed kohen gadol after the requisite bribe—led to harsh measures by Antiochus IV. He violated the Temple itself and plundered its treasures. In the face of continued unrest, he rejected the bid for *polis,* demolished part of the city wall, and erected a new fortress overlooking the Temple Mount called the Akra, which served as headquarters for Syrian Greek soldiers and their most loyal Jewish followers. The location of the Akra is debated, although there is a growing consensus that it stood in the area of the present al-Aqsa Mosque.

There is no question that religious persecution and internecine struggle critically contributed to the mounting tensions and combustible situation in Jerusalem right before the Maccabean revolt. Yet there remains one more factor that is generally overlooked: a paradigmatic shift in administrative policy.[4] This ultimately may have been the catalyst for revolt as it was certainly the factor that posed the most existential danger to the Jewish people both in Jerusalem and the Diaspora.

To understand the administrative change that Antiochus IV attempted to enact and its potential consequences, we have to remember that when the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and conquered Judah, the Jews lost not only political independence but religious independence as well. The Babylonians assumed that without the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews would do what all other conquered peoples did and adopt the religious beliefs and practices of their new home. For a certain segment of the population, that may indeed have been the case, but there was a sizeable portion of Jews who managed to stay true to their faith and nation during the 50 years of Babylonian sovereignty. The maintenance of this distinct Jewish identity is attested to not only by Biblical sources but also by Babylonian ones.[5] How this was achieved is beyond the scope of this essay, yet it must be acknowledged that survival of a religious group in exile was unprecedented at that time.

With the dawn of the Persian Empire, however, the situation for the Jews improved markedly. The most notable change, of course, was the reversal in policy toward the exiles, which allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Beit haMikdash. This official policy is recorded both in the Edict of Cyrus and in the book of Ezra (1:3). A second, equally profound development occurred in the granting of religious autonomy to the Jews despite their lack of political autonomy. Basically, the Persians made an agreement: in exchange for submission to imperial rule and the paying of taxes, the Jews would retain local rights and practices. This approach reflects a certain pragmatism and was not so unusual in the ancient world. However, the deal with the Persians went further in making explicit that those local rights and practices were to be adjudicated by Ezra and his official appointees (judges). The new paradigm provided both autonomy and authority for an increasingly vigorous cadre of halachic interpreters. Thus, Persian law stipulated that Jews were subject to Jewish law, and, consequently, any violation of

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[2] According to 2 *Maccabees* (3:4; 4:23), Menelaus was of the tribe of Benjamin.

[3] *Antiquities* VII:5

[4] For more on this approach, see "Re-examining Hanukkah" by John Ma in marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org.

[5] See for example the recently discovered cuneiform tablets from the ancient site of Al-Yahudu ("City of Judaeans"), about 60 miles southwest of Baghdad.

Jewish law by a Jew was a violation of Persian law. Whether or not this paradigm was good for the individual Jew can be debated, but it was certainly good for the Jewish community. This new administrative precedent was so beneficial that it actually lasted until emancipation.

Thus, for nearly two centuries before Antiochus IV, the Jews had lived under a foreign political power—both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora—that had left them completely free to run their own spiritual, religious, and communal affairs. Even after the fall of the Persian Empire, the Ptolemaic and Seleucid rulers affirmed this practice. In fact, Jewish scribes were usually called upon to help draw up the special charters, as was the case when the Seleucids first conquered the Levant. In the Charter of 200 BCE, Antiochus III (father of Antiochus IV) stipulated that the Torah would remain the law of the land, affirmed the exclusiveness of the Beit haMikdash, and appointed the kohen Simon as *ethnarch*, or head of the Jewish community. Despite Jewish in-fighting and Syrian disdain for Jewish particularism, religious autonomy prevailed.

In 170 BCE, the Jews staged an internal coup by replacing the Syrian-appointed kohen gadol Menelaus with the more popularly supported Jason. Antiochus perceived this as an act of rebellion and decided to punish the Jews by revoking the Charter of 200. This immediately caused more religious persecution and a final schismatic break with the Antiochene Jews; yet the real damage was to be found in the loss of community integrity and self-determination on a non-political level. The Jews had learned to survive without political autonomy and there were even some who believed that it was better to forgo it. However, it was impossible to conceive how the Jewish people could survive intact subject to imperial laws that were in direct conflict with their own laws. The revocation of the Charter of 200 left no choice but for mainstream Jews in Judaea to rebel, not only to overturn this particular decree but also to reestablish the precedent of religious autonomy for all Jews.

As we know, the story of the uprising ends well. The majority of the Jews united together to fight for religious freedom and succeeded even in becoming free of pagan control altogether. The symbol of the Greeks and their staunchest Jewish supporters, the Akra, was destroyed, while the Jews who were inside were given the opportunity to rejoin the Jewish community now under Hasmonean control. For a brief moment, the Jewish people achieved a unity and commonality of purpose that arose by confronting an insidious attack on our peoplehood, which couched itself as a simple bureaucratic measure.

Today, with blatant anti-Semitism frowned upon in the West, the assaults on our community both as a religion and a people increasingly come from bureaucratic maneuvers. Their subtlety varies from the overt UN Resolution that "Zionism is Racism" to the seemingly more benign manifestos on Human Rights—who can argue against Human Rights?—that are somehow systematically applied to only one country in the world: Israel. Individual rights are also behind the movement to ban *brit milah*, as was the attempt in San Francisco a few years ago. And, of course, animals also have rights, as activists argue in Europe as they try to prohibit *shechita*, or kosher slaughter, in the name of animal welfare. These are just a few examples to illustrate that our need to recognize and confront bureaucratic assaults on our national integrity and religious freedom is just as pertinent today as it was over 2,000 years ago.