

The Chanukkah Rorschach Test

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There's a hilarious short story about Chanukkah that I love by the novelist Nathan Englander.¹ It tells the tale of a Jewish man named Reb Itzik, the leader of a small Hasidic shul in Brooklyn, who has come upon hard times and cannot afford to keep the lights on in his synagogue. In order to make a little extra money, Reb Itzik takes on odd jobs on the side, moonlighting in order to pay the synagogue's electric bill.

On a recent December day, Reb Itzik notices a wanted ad in the newspaper. A casting agency is seeking an actor with a particular look for a short-term, seasonal acting job. And although Reb Itzik has no acting experience to speak of, he does indeed fit the look. The casting agency is looking for "a heavy man" -- and Reb Itzik is a bit round in the belly. And preferably, the actor they are looking for will have "a white beard" -- and Reb Itzik, an observant Jew, has never in his life trimmed his beard, which now, in his old age, has indeed faded to white. So Reb Itzik decides to go in for the audition. And before he even has the chance to recite his one and only line, Reb Itzik has been cast... as a department store Santa Claus.

There are many things to love about this story. But the thing that I love most is the way it captures the overwhelming force of the Christmas season. Even this ultra-Orthodox rabbi cannot avoid participating in it. The holiday of Chanukkah is never even mentioned in the story - - but to the perceptive reader, it hovers quietly in the background. A Jew trying to keep the lights on in his synagogue? Sounds familiar -- like the ancient Maccabees who, for entirely different reasons, also struggled to keep the lights burning in their sanctuary. The message of the story is clear: in the United States, Christmas is king, and Chanukkah rides quietly on its coattails.²

It might come as little surprise that Chanukkah gets a boost from American Christmas. After all, from the very beginning, Chanukkah has always been something of a chameleon holiday -- able to change its appearance in order to fit the society in which it is being celebrated.

Consider, for example, the story of the miraculous oil, which was only supposed to last for one night, but instead lasted for eight. It is so familiar that even the youngest learners can likely recount it. The only problem is that, if you read the Book of Maccabees -- the earliest version of the Chanukkah narrative -- you'll find no such story. No oil. No menorah. No miracle.

¹ "Reb Kringle," from Englander's short story collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. My synopsis here is intentionally modified from the original story in order to capture the story's comedic tone.

² Unlike Christmas, Chanukkah is a relatively minor festival. Chanukkah is theologically poor: unlike Passover, when God redeems the Jewish people from slavery, or Yom Kippur, when God forgives the Jewish people of their wrongdoings -- Chanukkah contains little theological material. Christmas, by contrast, is theologically rich: it tells the story of the birth of God's son. Chanukkah is also unlike Christmas in that Chanukkah has not, historically, been a holiday of gift-giving. That ritual is traditionally reserved for Purim.

The story of the oil does not make an appearance until the writing of the Talmud -- at least 400 years after the Maccabean Revolt. In order to understand why the story appears in that time and place, we must understand something about Jewish history. Like their Maccabean ancestors, the rabbis who wrote the Talmud had themselves just lived through a Jewish revolt against an oppressive superpower -- in their case, against the Romans. But whereas the earlier Maccabean revolt had proven successful, this more recent revolt against Rome was brutally crushed. The rabbis were living under Roman occupation -- and they could not afford to provoke the ire of their oppressors. To that end, the rabbis sought to downplay the story of the earlier, successful Maccabean revolt, and instead, to highlight a different story, now famous to us all: the story of the miraculous oil.³

Whether the rabbis invented that story from scratch, or whether its absence from the Book of Maccabees can be explained by other reasons, is beyond our purposes tonight. What *is* relevant is that in one era, Chanukkah was a story about a military victory, and in another era, it became a story about a divine miracle.

So it might come as little surprise that in *our* era, Chanukkah is largely a story about American Christmas -- and literally so, in the case of Reb Itzik. Chanukkah is a chameleon holiday, able to change its appearance according to the needs of the times. Or, in the words of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Chanukkah is "a holiday Rorschach test. Every community and every generation has interpreted Chanukkah in its own image, speaking to its own needs."⁴

This evening, I'd like to explore three contemporary understandings of Chanukkah. If Chanukkah is a Rorschach test, then exploring how contemporary Jews see the holiday should tell us something about the Jewish world in which we live. We will examine Chanukkah through the lens of three major groups -- non-orthodox Jews, ultra-orthodox Jews, and Israeli Jews.

One caveat before we proceed: this analysis is purposefully overly simplistic. Each of us will likely resonate with parts of all three groups. The intent is not to pigeonhole any one group, but rather, to try and identify relevant themes that arise along the boundaries of contemporary Jewish life.

With that caveat in mind, let's look at the results of our Chanukkah Rorschach test.

Let's start with non-Orthodox Jewry -- a group that includes Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, secular, and cultural Jews. Non-orthodox Jews tend to think of Chanukkah in spiritual terms. It is a holiday about bringing light into the darkest time of the year. Or, it is a holiday about justice -- about the oppressed overcoming their oppressors. Think, for

³ Similarly, the rabbis of the Talmud chose as the *haftarah* reading for the Shabbat during the week of Chanukkah these pacifistic words from the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might and not by power, but by spirit alone" (Zech. 4:6) shall the Jewish people be redeemed from their sufferings. (Zechariah lived during the time of the Babylonian and Persian oppressions.)

⁴ *The Jewish Way*, p. 277. With gratitude to my teacher Dr. Wendy Zierler for introducing me to that book, and in whose classroom many of the ideas found in this sermon first germinated.

example, of the lyrics to the Peter, Paul, and Mary song “Light One Candle”: “We have come this far always believing that *justice* would somehow prevail.” For non-orthodox Jews, Chanukkah’s spiritual message is universal -- applicable to all people, regardless of religious identity.

One particularly compelling example of the universal, spiritual message of Chanukkah comes from the [Institute for Jewish Spirituality](#). Perhaps you remember in 2013, when the second night of Chanukkah coincided with Thanksgiving -- a concurrence that was cleverly dubbed “Thanksgivukkah.” The Institute for Jewish Spirituality sent out an email to its supporters, highlighting the shared spirit of gratitude between the two holidays. The email read: “Maybe the deeper ‘miracle’ of Hanukkah is [the way that the Maccabees reacted] when faced with an apparently insufficient amount of oil. Rather than despairing over what they lacked, they saw the good in what they had”⁵ -- a posture of gratitude.

Incidentally, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality is not the first group to recognize within the Chanukkah story a theme of gratitude. The ancient rabbis associated Chanukkah with Psalm 30⁶ -- which is a psalm of giving thanks. The psalm tells the story of a person who has experienced a reversal of fortunes. His life had been a mess -- but by the grace of God, he is able to turn things around, and once again believes that life can be beautiful. In the words of the psalm: “[God] turned my mourning into dancing. I shall give thanks forever.”

While the particulars are different, the core messages of Psalm 30 and of the Chanukkah story are the same. In both cases, a bad situation took a turn for the better -- and as a result, we ought to express our gratitude.

These three themes -- light, justice, and gratitude -- exemplify the non-orthodox understanding of Chanukkah. These are universal, spiritual ideals. And indeed, non-orthodox Jewry does understand itself in universal, spiritual terms. Non-orthodox Jews tend to see Judaism as a religion with a universal message -- striving for the good of all people, with little concern for ethnic boundaries.

But this universal, spiritual message brings us face-to-face with our second group: ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Unlike their non-orthodox cousins, ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to understand Chanukkah in *highly* ethnic terms. To understand why, we need to understand what the Maccabees were fighting for, and what they were fighting against.

⁵ Rabbi Marc Margolius

⁶ There are a variety of reasons why the rabbis might have chosen Psalm 30 for Chanukkah -- not least of all, because the psalm includes the word *chanukkah* in its opening verse, which caused the rabbis to believe (incorrectly) that the psalm was composed at the time of the Maccabean revolt. (Most scholars believe that the psalms were completed by the year 400 BCE; the Maccabean revolt began in 167 BCE.)

Clearly, the Maccabees were fighting for the freedom to practice their religion. Less obvious is that they were equally fighting against the spread of Hellenism. Hellenism was Greek culture, exported around the Mediterranean. Greek culture was highly sophisticated -- producing great works of art, literature, philosophy, and science. It believed in equality between people, and tearing down the barriers that divide neighbor from neighbor. It was the most advanced society that that part of the world had ever seen. In fact, the Greeks believed their culture was so advanced, they thought it was only fair that everyone deserved to get a taste.

The only problem was: not everyone wanted a taste. Regardless of how sophisticated Greek culture may have been, it was not the local culture of kingdoms around the Mediterranean. The Maccabees were fighting not only for religious freedom, they were equally fighting against the idea that everyone ought to participate in the supposedly superior majority culture. They were fighting against cultural homogeneity.

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism was born of a similar story. In the early 1800s, as the changes of modernity began to accelerate, as Jews across Europe were finally being emancipated from behind the walls of the ghetto, as Jewish thinkers began to broaden their intellectual horizons -- as these monumental changes were taking root, a rabbi in Hungary named the Hatam Sofer declared: "Change is prohibited by the Torah." And with that, ultra-Orthodoxy was established.⁷

The Hatam Sofer based his prohibition against change on a well-known midrash -- which says that the reason the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt was because they never assimilated to the majority culture. Specifically: they never took on Egyptian names, wore Egyptian clothing, or spoke the Egyptian language.⁸ The Hatam Sofer argued: just as the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt by virtue of their cultural distinctiveness, so too shall we be redeemed from the seismic changes of modernity by virtue of our cultural distinctiveness. And so still today, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities dress, speak, and name their children in the way of their European forebears -- despite what the supposedly superior majority culture might think.

We need only substitute Hellenism with modernity, and the Maccabees with the ultra-Orthodox, and the two stories are a near perfect parallel.

But the parallel doesn't end there. Many scholars believe that the Maccabean revolt ought to be viewed as an internal Jewish civil war -- between those Jews who embraced Hellenism and

⁷ This history is brilliantly traced in Leora Batnitzky's book *How Judaism Became a Religion*. For the story of Ultra-Orthodoxy, see, in particular, the book's conclusion.

⁸ Nevermind that, despite what the midrash says, the Torah clearly demonstrates that the Israelites did indeed take on Egyptians names. Moses and Aaron are both names of Egyptian origin, to name but two highly significant examples. The irony deepens when one considers that on Chanukah, our annual cycle of Torah reading brings us to the story of Joseph -- who, upon assuming the role of royal vizier, changed his name to an Egyptian name, married an Egyptian wife, and named his children with names that mean "I have forgotten my father's house" and "God has made me fertile in a foreign land." He is so deeply assimilated that when his brothers eventually come to Egypt to beg for bread, they do not recognize him. For more on this topic, see Arnold Eisen's article here: <http://www.jtsa.edu/joseph-hanukkah-and-the-dilemmas-of-assimilation>

those who resisted it. And while thankfully, Jewish in-fighting in our own time has never reached the proportions of civil war, it is easy to see the fault lines over which such a conflict would arise. The first group we've examined this evening, the non-orthodox, looks at the Chanukkah Rorschach test and sees a holiday that is about universal ideals -- like light, justice, and gratitude. Our second group, the ultra-Orthodox, looks at the exact same Chanukkah Rorschach test and sees the exact opposite message: a holiday that is about the triumph of the local over the universal. The fault lines have been drawn.

What does our third group -- Israeli Jews -- see when they look at the Chanukkah Rorschach test?

The early Zionists looked to traditional Jewish sources for symbols and stories that they could inherit as their own. And despite the obvious centrality of the Land of Israel to all of Jewish life, when the early Zionists looked at the Jewish calendar, they found surprisingly little material to work with. The Passover story takes place in Egypt; Shavuot and Sukkot take place in the Sinai desert; Purim takes place Persia; Rosh Hashanah is about the creation of world, which takes place everywhere; Yom Kippur and Shabbat are about the restoration of the self, which takes place internally.⁹ Among all the Jewish holidays, only Chanukkah takes place in the Land of Israel. The Zionists had found their symbol.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that travelers to Israel during the holiday of Chanukkah may return home with any variety of souvenirs -- but all are certain to return carrying an Israeli dreidel, which, unlike a diaspora dreidel, is not inscribed "a great miracle happened there," but rather "a great miracle happened *here*." Israel is the land of the Maccabees.¹⁰

But the connection is deeper than just geography. In his recent best-selling book, [Catch '67](#), Israeli writer Micah Goodman describes Zionism in the following terms. For two-thousand years before the Zionist movement, Jewish communities had to rely on outside forces for their protection. There were two options from which to choose: rely on God, or rely on governments. Of course, history proved that neither the promises of the Torah nor the promises of kings, caliphs, tzars, and constitutions could ensure Jewish safety. So the Zionists decided to dispense with God and foreign governments. They would have to rely on themselves.

There are names for each of these moves. Giving up on God is called "secularism." And giving up on governments is called "statecraft." And indeed, the Zionist movement originated as a secular statecraft.

Let us deal first with the secular. There is a popular Chanukkah song that was written by an early Zionist poet. It's call *Mi Y'maleil* -- or, as it is popularly translated into English, "Who Can

⁹ While the holiday of Tisha B'Av does take place in the Land of Israel, it is a commemoration of defeat and destruction -- useless themes to the early Zionists.

¹⁰ Additionally: perhaps it's no surprise that the so called Jewish olympics held every four years in Israel is called the Maccabi Games, and that professional sports teams in Israel bear names like Maccabi Tel Aviv and Maccabi Haifa.

Retell?" In Hebrew, the song features classical religious language. It speaks of the Hero of Israel, the Messiah, the Redeemer -- terms that, in biblical lore, are typically reserved for God. But in the song's final stanza, the twist is revealed. In the story of Chanukkah, the Redeemer of Israel is not God, but rather, the Jewish people themselves -- as we sing in the English lyrics: "But now all Israel must as one arise, redeem *itself* through deeds and sacrifice," just as the Maccabees did.

Similarly, the "statecraft" component of secular statecraft took inspiration from the Chanukkah story. Theodor Herzl, founder of political Zionism, recognized that -- like the Maccabees, who were themselves guerilla warriors -- the Jewish people needed to take responsibility for our own self-defense. Herzl concluded his most influential book, *The Jewish State*, with the following sentence: "The Maccabees shall rise again." Indeed, an early version of the Israeli flag featured the word "Maccabee" emblazoned in the center of the Jewish star.

The Zionist movement took the Maccabees as their inspiration as they founded their secular statecraft. They looked at the Chanukkah Rorschach test and saw a story of people who had taken responsibility for their own safety -- dispensing with God and dispensing with foreign governments.

The only problem is that, in so doing, they inadvertently drew two fault lines between themselves and the other two groups we've examined tonight. Ultra-Orthodox Jews do indeed rely on God. Non-orthodox Jews -- at least, those of us who live in the diaspora -- do indeed rely on foreign governments.

When contemporary world Jewry looks at the Chanukkah Rorschach test, what we see there are our divisions: three fault lines, that keep each group separated from the others

The Talmud records a famous debate between the great sages Hillel and Shammai, over how the Chanukkah menorah ought to be lit. Hillel argues that we should start with one candle, and add one each night, move progressively upwards to eight -- the way we light our menorahs today. But Shammai disagrees. He argues that we should start with eight candles, and remove one each night, until, on the last night, only one remains. Two sages, two opposing ideas, one uncrossable fault line between them.

But I've heard it said: that, if only for a brief moment, on the fourth day of Chanukkah -- as Hillel is cleaning up his menorah from the night before, and Shammai is setting up his menorah for the night ahead -- for that brief moment, both sages hold four candles.

If only we can make that brief moment last, and last, and last -- like a jar of oil that burns for longer than expected.