

Feature

Putting Together the Story of



Chanukah

The ancient sources that tell the story of the Chashmona'im

BY LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

Ask any Jewish child who the hero of Chanukah is, and he or she will automatically respond, “Yehudah the Maccabee.” But how do we know this? Our traditional sources (an excerpt from *Megillas Taanis* quoted in the Gemara, *Al Hanisim* and Rambam) do not mention the names of Yehudah and his brothers. But our ancestors must have known the names, because a tremendous



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A painting depicting
Antiochus' attack on
Yerushalayim

number of boys in the *Bayis Sheini* and Mishnaic times were given the names of Yehudah and his brothers: Shimon, Elazar, Yochanan and Yonasan. Of course, the name of their father Matisyahu is known to us from *Al Hanisim*, but nothing is mentioned there of his heroism or his role in the Maccabean Revolt. The Gemara, followed by the Rambam, does tell us that the revolt was led by the sons of *Chashmona'i*, referring to Matisyahu. So how do we know the rest of the story? And where can you go if you want to get all of the details?

Sometime around the year 100 BCE, a Jew in Eretz Yisrael, writing in Hebrew, set down a detailed account of the history of the Maccabean Revolt (168-164 BCE) and of the Chashmonian dynasty that ruled over the land in the aftermath of the Jewish victory. This book is called *I Maccabees* to distinguish it from a partly overlapping work by another author known as *II Maccabees*. After a brief background starting with the time of Alexander the Great, it introduces the persecutions of Antiochus IV, the Seleucid Syrian ruler (the *Yevanim*) and describes the beginnings of the revolt under Matisyahu in 168 BCE. It then provides detailed descriptions of the battles that took place under Yehudah and his eventual victory, but then it describes his subsequent expulsion by the Seleucids and the eventual establishment of the Chashmonian dynasty by Yonasan in 152 BCE. After describing his reign, and his murder at the hands of a treacherous Seleucid commander, it describes the successful beginning of Shim'on's reign (142-135), emphasizing his successful expulsion of the Seleucid garrison from their last stronghold in Jerusalem. This was the formal end of the Seleucid Empire's hold over Judea.

We are very fortunate that the Greek bible (the *Septuagint*) includes a number of post-biblical Jewish works including *I Maccabees* in Greek translation. But this is not the only work of this nature. A second text, *II Maccabees*, also preserved in the Greek bibles, describes the years leading up to the revolt beginning in 175 BCE and continues up to the purification of the *Beis Hamikdash* in 164. This work can be dated to sometime in the late second century or early first century BCE. The most important aspect of this book is that it presents the background for the persecutions of Antiochus. The author traces the rise of Greek influence among the Jews of Eretz Yisrael and the eventual rise of a high priest who favored extreme Hellenization, leading to internal strife that, in turn, led

Antiochus IV to come in on the side of the Hellenized Jews with his military force. This book also details the complex series of events and battles that took place under Yehudah, ending with the Maccabean victory against the Seleucid General Nicanor, before Yehudah's death on the battlefield in 160.

II Maccabees is the source of the important lesson that we learn from the Chanukah story about assimilation and the adoption of foreign ways. This work is the earliest source for the story of the martyrdom of the woman we know as Chanah and her seven sons. The mother's name is first found in medieval *midrashim* from which the Jewish people received this powerful account. While there is no evidence that the *Chachamim* of the Mishnah or Gemara read either of these books, these works were destined to enter into the normative Jewish tradition in indirect ways.



A painting depicting Yehudah leading the Jews into battle

II Maccabees and the Background to the Revolt

It is from *II Maccabees* that we learn the background of the revolt. After the death of Alexander the Great, his empire split into several parts. Eretz Yisrael came under the rule of the Seleucid Syrian dynasty by 198 BCE. When the infamous Antiochus IV Epiphanes (ruled 175–164 BCE) succeeded to the throne, the Hellenist *kohen* Jason succeeded in buying the high priesthood from Antiochus.

In addition to purchasing the office of *kohen gadol*, Jason also bought the right to establish a gymnasium and Greek school in Jerusalem, and to turn the city into a Hellenistic city, termed in Greek a *polis*, to be named Antioch in honor of Antiochus IV. The Jews were to live under the laws of a Greek city. Among other things, this meant



that the majority of those who previously had enjoyed full rights under the laws of the Torah now found themselves second-class citizens in an oligarchy. In addition, Greek-style athletic activities began, grossly violating Jewish laws of *tznius*.

It is not surprising that the already Hellenized aristocracy of Judea so willingly undertook these changes. Citizenship in Greek cities held many pluses: The commercial benefits of trade with other such cities, the minting of coins, and other advantages that would have been particularly attractive to the aristocracy. Furthermore, the *polis* afforded its citizens the opportunity to see themselves as part of a wider and more open world.

Jason and his followers maintained the *Beis Hamikdash* and its rituals according to the tradition, even if they compromised with the Hellenistic way of life in other spheres.

Jason's brand of Hellenization was apparently not enough for some. Pro-Hellenist elements plotted to have Menelaus replace Jason as *kohen gadol*. Menelaus succeeded in buying the office from Antiochus in 171 BCE, as Jason himself had done only a few years earlier. After an armed battle, Jason was forced to flee Jerusalem. Now in control, Menelaus appropriated funds from the treasury of the *Beis Hamikdash* to present gifts to Antiochus.

Menelaus' misappropriation of the *Beis Hamikdash's* funds turned the people bitterly against him. Violence broke out in Yerushalayim. Despite an appeal from representatives of the people that Menelaus be replaced, Antiochus allowed him to continue in office, and the representatives were executed.

In the aftermath of Antiochus' failed attempt to capture Egypt in 168 BCE, false rumors of his death led Jason, the deposed *kohen gadol*, to leave his hiding place and mount an assault on Jerusalem. He managed to drive Menelaus and his supporters into the citadel, but he was not able to reassert his rule. Eventually he was forced to again flee the holy city. Despite a slaughter led by Antiochus himself, the insurrection in Jerusalem continued. An attempt by the Seleucid General Apollonius to bring the situation under control by establishing a fortress, known as the Acra, at the center of the *polis*, and by stationing a Hellenistic garrison there, led only to further popular opposition and to a massive flight of Jews from the city.

Discontent was mounting; determined to stem it, Antiochus conceived of the infamous persecutions, which, far from being the beginning of our story, come after years of struggle fueled by the attempt of Hellenistic Jews to foist their way of life on the entire nation of Israel. There is no evidence whatsoever that Antiochus pursued a similar policy anywhere else in his kingdom. As he

saw the situation, the way to bring the Jewish people under control was through an onslaught against the forces that propelled them, the Torah, the *mitzvos*, and the culture of the Jewish people. As we know, he was destined to fail.

The Course of the Revolt

So far, everything is based on *II Maccabees*. Now the account of *I Maccabees* starts, but our summary includes details from *II Maccabees*:

The persecutions were enacted in the winter of 167/66 BCE. In December of 167 foreign idolatrous worship was introduced into the *Beis Hamikdash*. In addition, throughout Eretz Yisrael, Shabbos and Yom Tov were to be violated, *bamos* (outdoor shrines) were built where unclean animals were to be offered, *bris milah* was outlawed, and *kashrus* could not be observed, under penalty of death. In every part of the land Jews found themselves facing royal officials who sought to enforce the regulations with a vengeance, burning *sifrei Torah* and executing those who hid them. Antiochus had instituted this brutal program in order to deprive the Jewish uprising of a purpose by forcing the Jews to become what he thought were normal citizens of the Seleucid Empire. The stage was now set for the confrontation of two opposing forces: the Jewish people and the Seleucids. The heroism of the *Chashmona'im* (the Maccabean family) would ignite the flames of full-scale revolt.

Matisyahu, the *kohen* from Modiin, and men and women like him, bravely refused to submit to the decrees. It is in *I Maccabees* that we learn of Matisyahu and his sons' refusal of the command of a Seleucid officer to worship an idol and his killing of a Jew who was about to submit to that demand. *I Maccabees* tells us that it was this confrontation that touched off the full revolt. Several thousand loyal Jews soon coalesced

around the *Chashmona'im*, led by Yehudah the Maccabee (“hammer”), and his brothers Yochanan, Shimon, Elazar and Yonasan. By the time of Matisyahu’s passing in 166/65 BCE, they had taken control of Judea after assembling a large army. Both *II Maccabees* and *I Maccabees* present intricate details of the battles that have fascinated military historians. Throughout both books, the *tefillos* of Matisyahu and his sons are truly inspiring.

Under Yehudah, the Jewish army defeated a series of Seleucid generals who attempted to put down the uprising. In December of 164 BCE he and his men captured Yerushalayim, although a Seleucid garrison continued to hold the Acra, the Hellenistic fortress. On 25 Kislev, Yehudah purified the *Beis Hamikdash* and restored the sacrificial worship to conform to Jewish tradition. The main objective of the revolt, ending the persecutions and restoring Judaism, had been achieved. This is when our Sages tell us that the Menorah that Yehudah and his followers lit in the *Beis Hamikdash* lasted for eight days on a one-day supply of oil.

From Yehudah to the Chashmonian State

Throughout the period of persecution and revolt, the Hellenistic pagans had sided with the Seleucids and participated in the persecutions. Yehudah now turned on these enemies as well as on the Hellenizing Jews who had brought on the horrible persecutions. The Hellenizers, many of them of aristocratic origins, had fought on the side of the Seleucids against Yehudah. Their center was the Acra, and it was there that they finally took refuge when Yehudah conquered Yerushalayim.

Yehudah undertook wars throughout the Land of Israel to defend the Jews from their pagan neighbors and at the same time to extirpate paganism from the country. After Antiochus IV died in 164 BCE, his son Antiochus V Eupator advanced on

Judea, executed Menelaus, the Hellenizing high priest, blaming him for embroiling the Seleucid Empire in the persecutions and the war with the Jews, and appointed Alcimus (Yakim in Hebrew) as *kohen gadol*. By 162 BCE, Yehudah and his party had barred Alcimus from taking office. Alcimus sought the help of the Seleucids, and they confirmed him in office, although the *Chashmona'im* continued to resist his rule.

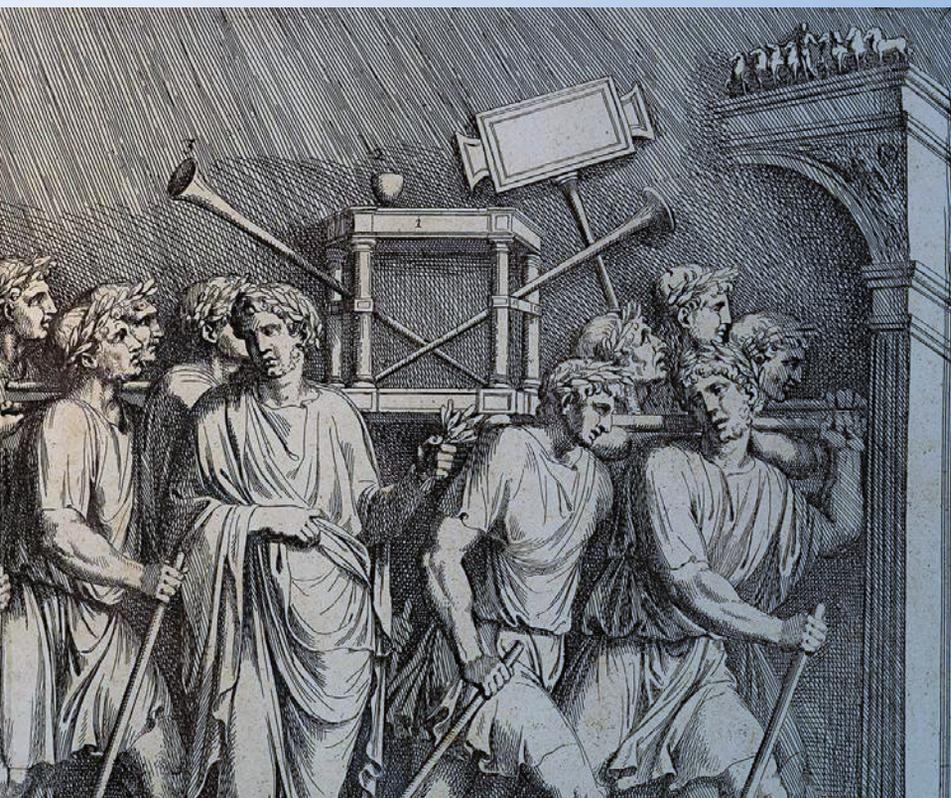
Alcimus sought Seleucid help to maintain his regime against Yehudah. The force dispatched to aid him was defeated, and Alcimus fled to Syria. He returned with the Seleucid general Bacchides, and Yehudah fell in battle against him in 160 BCE. The *Chashmona'im* now rallied around Yonasan. Finally, Bacchides entered into negotiations with Yonasan. The two signed a treaty that gave Yonasan, based in his stronghold at Michmash, control over most of Judea.

In 152 BCE, when internal affairs in Syria led to a civil war over the succession to the throne, both sides began wooing Yonasan. He gave his backing to Alexander Balas, and



The Menorah as depicted on the Arch of Titus

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on Sukkos of 152 BCE he appeared in the *Beis Hamikdash* in the robes of the *kohen gadol*, having been appointed to the office by Balas. Judea was now united under the rule of a *Chashmona'i kohen gadol*. A dynasty had dawned that would rule the Jewish people until the coming of the Romans in 63 BCE, when they ceased to rule autonomously.

What Happened to the Books of Maccabees?

When Josephus produced his historical works in around 90-100 CE, he virtually repeated *I Maccabees* in its entirety, but he did not have access at all to *II Maccabees*. We should note that his father's name was Matisyahu and that he was a descendent of the *Chashmona'im*. We will be returning to his influence, but our next stop is a text that was known already in the Geonic period, in versions in Hebrew and Aramaic, known as *Megillas Antiochus*. This account of the Chanukah story was proba-

bly composed in Hebrew, since it is an imitation of *Megillas Esther*. It may have been composed sometime in the late Talmudic period. The work was known already to the author of *Halachos Gedolos* and to Rabbeinu Saadyah Gaon (882-942) in Babylonia, and it was read aloud in some Jewish communities (see companion article). While the author of this work had access to some information contained in *I* and *II Maccabees*, he certainly did not use these works directly. However, this author is the first in the chain of normative Jewish tradition to mention the five brothers by name.

The books of *I* and *II Maccabees* next come to the fore in our traditional literature in a work known as *Sefer Yosippon*, an early medieval translation and adaptation of the works of Josephus. The earliest manuscripts of this work were copied from a manuscript that was itself copied by Rabbeinu Gershom (c. 960-1028). *Yosippon* was composed in southern Italy c. 953. The work was cited by Rashi and the Ramban. Although this work has often been con-

sidered to be simply a translation of Josephus, that is not the case. The author had a recently translated Latin version of Josephus available to him, but only for parts of Josephus' histories. For our purpose, what is really amazing is that in addition to the version of *I Maccabees* virtually copied by Josephus into his work, the author of *Yosippon* had *II Maccabees* as well, and in writing his history he synthesized the two accounts into one continuous narrative, thus presenting a detailed account of the Maccabean Revolt. It is from his account that from the tenth century on the Jewish community has had indirect access to the books of *I* and *II Maccabees*, which were effectively lost to it for over 1,000 years.

But here is the amazing irony: Since the *Septuagint* served as the bible of the early Christians, it was translated *in toto* into Latin. So for that entire period in which these works were not available to Jews, they were—and still are—in the Apocrypha section of the bible of every Catholic. These works were removed from the bibles of the Protestants during the Reformation in the 16th century. The *Tanach* never contained any works written after the last of the *Nevi'im*: Chagai, Zecharyah and Malachi. Only in modern times, beginning in the 19th century, were Hebrew translations of *I* and *II Maccabees* available to the Jewish community.

So if you want to know what really happened “in those days at this time,” take a look at the books of the *Maccabees* or their adaptation in *Sefer Yosippon*. The details are all there, and there is much to be learned of relevance to the challenges facing *klal Yisrael* in the Diaspora and in Eretz Yisrael. In the words of *Sefer Devarim* (32:7): “Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past.” □

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