



Artist's rendering of a Jewish warrior in war camelry at the time of the Chashmonean Dynasty

Gaza and the Chashmonaim

The history that goes beyond the days of Chanukah

E

veryone knows the story of Chanukah, but for some reason the years of the Chashmonean Empire that followed from 152 BCE to the Roman conquest of Eretz Yisrael in 63 BCE are barely understood. In this period, the Jewish people came into conflict for the second time with the occupants of what is now the Gaza Strip and the southern coastal plain of Israel. In antiquity, this area ran farther north than today's Gaza, continuing northward up through Ashkelon and Ashdod.

The first contact had been shortly after *bnei Yisrael* entered Canaan. Groups from the Aegean region, known to historians as Sea Peoples, took control of the area known as Pleshes (Philistia). The area had previously been under Egyptian control, as shown by both written sources and archaeological excavations. The Sea Peoples, referred to in *Tanach* as the Plishtim (Philistines), waged constant guerilla attacks against the Israelites after they settled in the hill country of Yehudah and Shomron, despoiling their livestock and crops. The constant threat of the Plishtim led *bnei Yisrael* to ask for a king in order to unify the tribes and defend their territory from the constant raids.

With the establishment of the Chashmonean Empire, a similar process occurred. But to understand this we need to go back to 164 BCE, when Yehudah the Maccabee and his army defeated the Seleucid Syrians (the Yevanim). This victory did not last long. In no time, the Seleucids were back with an army of 20,000 and drove Yehudah and his forces out of Yerushalayim. The Jewish forces continued to battle the Seleucids, and Yehudah fell in battle in 160 BCE. He was succeeded by his brother Yonasan, who continued the struggle. In 152 BCE, two pretenders were fighting over the rule of the Seleucid Syrian Empire, and Yonasan offered his services to the weaker, whom he was able to put on the throne. In return, Yonasan was granted the right as *kohen gadol* to rule over the Jewish areas of Eretz Yisrael. This was the beginning of the Chashmonean Empire.

From the breakup of Alexander the Great's empire in 311 BCE, Gaza and the other areas of the southern coastal plain had been dominated in turn by the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria, two of the empires that emerged in the years after his death. Some soldiers from the area still called Philistia had joined the Seleucids in their war against the Jews. By then, the city of Gaza and the other cities in this area had been Hellenized, and the population was now a mix of the earlier Plishtim and Hellenized Egyptians and Syrians. Yet, apparently, the old antagonism between Philistia and the Jews still smoldered. So, it is easy to understand why, as part of his efforts to obliterate idolatry, Yonasan made forays into this territory, destroying the pagan altars in Ashdod, burning their idolatrous images and plundering the city.

When Yonasan was appointed by the Seleucids to rule, his brother Shimon was made governor of the territory from Tzur (Tyre in modern-day Lebanon) to Egypt. In other words, the en-

"The Chashmonean Kingdom" Vintage Map printed in Jerusalem by Karta, 1950



tire coastal plain was ceded to the Chashmonean dynasty. Yonasan and Shimon immediately sought to take control of the southern coastal plain. This indeed was the first step in the ongoing expansion of the Chashmonean Empire. Ashkelon was quickly conquered, but Gaza resisted, still opposing their age-old enemies, the Jews. Yonasan besieged them, destroying the outskirts of the city. They quickly surrendered and he offered them peaceful terms, taking the sons of their rulers as hostages for security.

After the assassination of Yonasan by the Seleucid General Trypho in 143 BCE, he was succeeded by Shimon. Shimon was himself assassinated in 135 by a traitorous son-in-law. He was succeeded by Yochanan Hyrcanus, who is referred to as Yochanan Kohen Gadol by *Chazal*. However, during this period, the Chashmonean Empire lost its authority over the Gaza Strip and southern coastal plain. This situation changed radically with the ascension of Alexander Yannai (Janneus)—Yannai Hamelech—in 104 BCE.

Yannai immediately began to retake the entire coastal plain, including Gaza. Now

the story gets complicated. The coastal cities called in help from Cyprus in the person of Ptolemy Lathyrus, who had been deposed as king of Egypt. He overran much of the country and then turned towards Egypt, which he sought to retake as king. The Egyptian forces drove him back to Gaza, where he spent the winter. He then returned to Cyprus. In 96 BCE, Yannai returned to Gaza and attacked with full force, blaming its citizens for bringing Lathyrus into Eretz Yisrael and for all the destruction he wrought. After a siege that lasted a full year, Yannai's forces were victorious and Gaza surrendered. By 78 BCE, two years before his death, Yannai possessed all the coastal cities of Eretz Yisrael—including Gaza—except Ashkelon.

Yannai died in 76 BCE. He was certainly the Chashmonean most hated by his people. The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 66a) describes his conflict with the *Perushim*. We know from Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls of the abortive revolution that he survived. He was succeeded by his wife, Shlomtzion Hamalkah, Queen Salome Alexandra.

When her sons Aristobulos and Hyrcanus fought over the succession to the Chashmonean kingship, the Romans stepped in and occupied the country in 63 BCE. Now, Judea, the Jewish Galilee and the coastal plain, including Gaza, were all part of the new Roman Province of Syria. For a few short years, Hordos (King Herod) would rule Gaza and the surrounding area, but this came to an end with his death in 4 BCE.

The period of the Empire of the Chashmonaim may be seen as a continuation of the hostility between the area of Gaza and the southern coastal plain and the Jews of Eretz Yisrael. This conflict, as we saw, had its start in the biblical period, immediately after *bnei Yisrael* entered Canaan. The Arab conquest of the entire Middle East in 640 CE brought about a profound change in the population of Gaza. Nevertheless, as the Jewish people reestablished themselves in Eretz Yisrael in modern times, the very same tensions would reappear, tensions that are still being fought over today. ●

Lawrence H. Schiffman is Global Distinguished Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University.

Left: A bowl fragment from the time of the Chashmonaim inscribed with the name Hycanus. Right: Arrowheads from the Chashmonai war against the Seleucids found in Yerushalayim.



FULL
PAGE

