

Hanukkah Made Western Civilization Possible

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By Dennis Prager

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—Were it not for its proximity to Christmas, Hanukkah would be unknown to most non-Jews and it would not be celebrated by most nonreligious Jews. The proof is that the other post-Hebrew Bible holiday, Purim, while very popular in Israel, where it is sort of a Jewish Mardi Gras, is essentially unknown to non-Jews and largely ignored by most American Jews.

In other words, if Purim fell in December and Hanukkah in March, everyone would know about Purim, and few would have ever heard of Hanukkah.

Too bad. Hanukkah is actually of seminal importance both to Judaism and to the world.

Hanukkah commemorates the incredible Jewish victory over far more numerous and powerful Greek forces in 164 B.C.

The Jews’ revolt, known the Maccabean Revolt, named after its leader, Judah the Maccabee, was directed against the Greek Seleucid Empire in 167–160 B.C. The Seleucid Empire was a Greek state in west Asia and the Middle East that lasted from 312 to 63 B.C. At its height, it covered approximately one and half million square miles.

In 168 B.C., the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, launched a horrific campaign against Judaism.

Two things about this anti-Jewish persecution stand out.

- First, Antiochus did not seek to annihilate Jews, as Adolf Hitler and the Nazis did 2,000 years later and the Islamic regime in Iran does today. He sought to annihilate Judaism. Jews who abandoned the Torah and Jewish practices and adopted Hellenism were left alone.
- Second, among all the religions under his rule, Antiochus persecuted only Judaism. His Greek regime had no problem with pagan religions. It was

Judaism that disturbed Antiochus and the Seleucids.

To understand why Judaism so bothered Antiochus, one needs to understand that no pagan religion completely rejected Hellenism. Judaism did.

If Antiochus wanted a statue to him or to a Greek god erected in a pagan temple, none of the pagan religions would have objected. The pagan attitude toward religion was nonexclusive. No pagan god was regarded as the one God of all humanity. But the Jews claimed that their God was indeed the only God in the world.

Despite this belief—that the God of Judaism is the God of all humanity—Judaism never insisted that non-Jews needed to convert to Judaism. Thus, Jews never forcibly imposed Judaism on non-Jews. But, unlike all their pagan neighbors, the Jews rejected the gods of everyone else. And this infuriated Antiochus. He hated the Jews' monotheism.

So he decreed that Judaism be abolished. He erected statues of Greek gods in the Jews' holy temple, put to death Jewish parents who ritually circumcised their 8-day-old sons—hanging the murdered Jewish child around the mother's neck—forced Jews to eat pork, offered illicit sacrifices, burned Torah scrolls, executed Jews who observed the Sabbath, and dedicated the holy temple to Zeus.

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It was the Greeks who originated the blood libel—the myth of Jewish ritual murder of non-Jews. They made up a story about Antiochus, who, upon entering the sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem, found a Greek captive waiting to be burned as a sacrifice to the Jewish God. Antiochus reportedly claimed that the prospective victim had been informed by temple servants that it was an established practice of the Jews to kidnap a Greek, fatten him up for a year, then place him on wood, sacrifice him, eat his flesh, and swear an oath of hostility to the Greeks.

According to rabbinic tradition, the victorious Maccabees found just one bottle of oil that had not been contaminated. It contained only enough oil to keep the temple menorah (candelabra) lighted for one day, but it miraculously lasted for eight days. Hence the eight days of Hanukkah.

But Hanukkah represents far more than the miracle of the oil.

The Jews' successful rebellion assured the continued existence of the Jewish religion and contributed to the decisive influence of monotheism in Western

culture and history.

The most far-reaching consequence of the revolt was the perpetuation of the monotheistic idea, which was threatened by the Seleucids' Hellenism, the Greek religion and culture that Antiochus tried to impose by force, and that many Hellenized Jews accepted voluntarily.

Hebrew monotheism gave the world one God—meaning that all humans are brothers and sisters, since we are all His children, created in His image. It also gave the world one moral code—meaning that morality is not relative to every nation, every religion, or every individual. It was also the only religion in the world to disassociate God and nature. Nature is not God; God created nature—for man's use.

Ironically, the Western world, in its radical post-Judeo-Christian secularism, has reverted to pagan nature worship.

Hanukkah saved monotheism and thereby made the creation of the Western world possible. Maybe people of every faith—especially faith in Western civilization—should light a menorah for eight days.