

What Hanukkah Teaches About Violence. Prof. Yakov Rabkin

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Biblical accounts teem with violent episodes. Just a few days ago, we read in the synagogue the story of Jacob's two sons, Levi and Simeon, massacring the entire male population of a city in a devious scheme using a religious pretext. ([Genesis 34](#)) Their father was so aggrieved that even on his death bed, when he was blessing the other children, these two heard a resolute condemnation: "Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay a man, and when pleased they maim an ox. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. ([Genesis 49:5-7](#))

Jewish oral tradition, developed after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, often interprets allegorically the Biblical verses that mention the instruments of war. Thus, the sword and the bow used by Jacob the Patriarch against his enemies ([Genesis 48:22](#)) become prayer and supplication ([Bereshit Rabbah 97:6](#)); the victory of Benaiah over Moab ([2 Samuel 23:20](#)) now stands for Torah study ([BT Berakhot, 18b](#)). Tradition locates Jewish heroism in the house of study, not on the battlefield. This partly explains the refusal of thousands of observant Jews to enroll in Israel's military.

Yet, Hanukkah, which, incidentally, is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, but can be found in the Christian one, seems to be a story of war. A comparison of Hanukkah with another popular Jewish holiday – Purim – reveals something important about traditional Jewish attitudes to collective threats, spiritual and physical.

The holiday of Purim, related in the Book of Esther, provides a peaceful model for conflict resolution. The story is as simple as it is prophetic. Haman, the Persian vizier, has planned a total massacre: "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day" ([Esther 3:13](#)). The response of the Jews was to proclaim a fast of repentance, but at the same time to find a way to influence the king and thereby circumventing the vizier and his decree. Queen Esther intervened, revealed to the king her Jewish origins, and convinced him to stop the planned genocide. But it did not occur to any of the Jews to organize self-defence units against Haman. And the violence of the Jews against their enemies mentioned in the finale has been explicitly authorized by the king who only recently acquiesced to his vizier's idea of exterminating the Jews.

But the resolute recourse to force is central in the story of Hanukkah, which, like Purim, also celebrates deliverance from a collective threat. The difference between the two threats to the Jews explains the differing relationship to force expressed in the stories. Haman's threats of physical destruction induced the Jews to fast and repent. However, when King Antiochus outlawed Judaic practice and forced the Jews into idolatry, he sought their

spiritual destruction. Under such a threat the use of force becomes legitimate: a Jew is duty-bound to sacrifice his or her life rather than worship idols.

This history of the Maccabees is often used to draw political conclusions. According to a contemporary commentary, clearly at odds with the traditional vision of the event : “For any thinking Jew, Hanukkah is nothing more than the day of commemoration of the heroes of Jewish self-defence. No miracle fell from the sky.... But the sword had created one: a dead people had been resurrected. The Torah could not save from the fist; it was the fist that saved the Torah. The sword, and not the skullcap, will protect the Jew in the blood-soaked lands of his enemies.” Today, this lesson resonates with many Jews who believe in the primacy of might.

Ironically, such glorification of force reverses the significance of the holiday, which celebrates allegiance to the Torah against Hellenistic influence. What is the Judaic reference to Hanukkah? A passage from the daily prayer reveals its meaning:

“In the days of Mattisiah, the son of Yochanan, the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons — when the wicked Hellenistic kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and compel them to stray from the statutes of Your Will — You in your great mercy stood up for them in the time of their distress. You took up their grievance, judged their claim, and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of Your Torah.”
(Complete ArtScroll Siddur)

The war that the advocates of the use of force tend to invoke turns out to have been, in Jewish ritual, a victory of God and not of humans. Tradition emphasizes that the decisive factors were loyalty to the Torah and moral purity, rather than the number of soldiers and the fighting strength of the army. With regard to Hanukkah, the Talmud relegates the hostilities to a secondary position and emphasizes that the strong were the Hellenizers and the weak Jews loyal to their religion. Tradition focuses instead on the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days in the Temple that the Maccabees had liberated and purified. It links the purity of the oil untouched by the Hellenizers and the purity of heart all Jews must keep in order to fight idolatry.

Thus, even when violence is legitimate, as in the case of Hannukah, it is definitely downplayed in rabbinic Judaism. **“Who is the mightiest of the mighty? One who turns an enemy into a friend.”** (Avot de rabbi Nathan, 23) Conversely, new values, promoted by some followers of National Judaism (dati-leumi) as the Torah of the Land of Israel, encourage reliance on the use of force. The eight days of Hannukah should allow us to ponder the issue of recourse to violence, which has undergirded the Zionist settlement in the Holy Land for over a century. While it has led to death, dispossession and dislocation of hundreds of thousands of people, it has failed to ensure peace and tranquility.

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