Mai Chanukah? What is Chanukah?
By Rabbi Steve Greenberg

This is how the Talmud begins its short foray into the origins of Chanukah. Remarkably, there is very little material in the Talmud on Chanukah. While Purim has a tractate all its own, Chanukah merits a few scattered lines and a number of minor mentions. Chanukah was apparently not very much appreciated by the rabbis. When the Talmud describes the holiday, it glosses over the great battles and offers the story of a very different miracle: A single cruse of pure oil miraculously lasting for eight days—a story not found in any early sources and whose first appearance is at least four hundred years after it purportedly occurred.

What actually happened? What did the Maccabees and their supporters celebrate and why for eight days? What did it come to mean to the rabbis who clearly re-created the holiday? And finally, what should it mean to us today?

There are of course many ways to tell the Chanukah story and the ways we do are not unrelated to who we are. Every community and generation interprets Chanukah in its own image. For us there are a number of obvious contenders. For American Jews it is most often about religious freedom from tyrants. For Israelis it is about routing the armies of a dominating empire and winning back Jewish sovereignty. For traditional Jews it is about a fight against assimilation. Hasidic Jews take another path and read the story allegorically as a story about seeking one’s inner life and rededicating oneself to that small burning candle. Indeed, every generation asks what the Rabbis ask when they open their short conversation on the holiday... “Mai Chanukah?” -- What is Chanukah?

Revisiting the Maccabees
Historically speaking, the place to start is the apocryphal record, the books of Maccabees. You’ll need a bit of patience with the details of the history, but it will be well worth the effort. These books are historical accounts of the Hasmonean dynasty’s exploits written in Greek. Much of what we know of the Hasmonean period is found in these two volumes. Interestingly, they were included in the Catholic Bible but not in the Jewish or Protestant Bibles. Maccabees I was written by a pro-Hasmonean patriot somewhere between 104 and 93 BCE. Maccabees II, written as response to Maccabees I, is an abridgement of a much longer historical work written by Jason of Cyrene and is much more critical of the Hasmonean dynasty. Perhaps it should not surprise us to find a government sponsored version of the story and a government critical version of the same events.

The author of Maccabees I tells us that “a wicked shoot sprouted” from the stock of Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the son of King Antiochus III. We are introduced to Antiochus IV as a military looter. “In his arrogance he went into the sanctuary and took the gold altar and the lampstand for the light... he took the secret treasures, which he found...back to his own country.” Not only was he a thief, he was a brutal general. He “massacred the people and spoke with great arrogance.”

However, if it is a villain we are looking we should keep reading. We are told by the author of Maccabees I that Antiochus was not alone in his evil. “At that time, lawless men arose in Israel and seduced many with their plea, “Come, let us make a covenant with the gentiles around us because ever since we have kept ourselves separated from them we have suffered many evils.” The plea got so favorable a reception that some of the people took it upon themselves to apply to the king, who granted them liberty to follow the practices of the gentiles. “Thereupon, they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the customs of the gentiles and underwent operations to disguise their circumcisions, rebelling against the sacred covenant...The aping of Greek manners reached a peak such that the young priests were no very interested in their Temple duties and were no longer eager to perform their duties at the altar and instead put the highest value on Greek honors.”
It appears that Jews in Jerusalem were tired of being a backwater in the kingdom. They wanted the economic and political status that only a list of Greek institutions would buy them. In fact, the priestly families were among the most assimilated in the country. In the second book of Maccabees we are introduced to the high priest, Jason, who paid Antiochus an enormous tribute for the privilege of introducing Greek custom into Jerusalem. "On taking office, Jason immediately brought his fellow Jews over to the Greek style of life...He founded a gymnasium beneath the very citadel...

Here you have the first interpretive splits. Who is the villain? If Antiochus is the villain as it appears in the first chapter of Maccabees I then the revolt is for religious freedom. Antiochus might then be cast as the persecuting Charles II or George III and the Maccabees as the Puritans or as the poorly armed revolutionary forces under George Washington. As well, if Antiochus is the villain then Israelis have no trouble reading the story either. They easily cast Judah as Moshe Dayan and the Hasmonean fighters as Israeli soldiers defending their country from the powerful armies aimed at their destruction. However, if the real villains are the Hellenizing Jews who actually brought the Syrian Greeks in to defend them, then Mattathias’ campaign will look more like a civil war between religious and secular Jews.

From Religious Resistance to Rebellion

In response to the increasing cultural and religious influence of the Hellenists in the holy city, we learn that Mattathias and his family left Jerusalem and moved to Modein. Eventually, the king’s officials in charge of enforcing the apostasy come to the town and attempt to impose their cult on the people. They ask Mattathias to be the first to come forward and sacrifice on the pagan altar. Mattathias famously replied: "If all the gentiles under the king’s rule listen to his order to depart from the religion of their fathers and choose to obey his commands, nevertheless, I and my sons and my kinsmen shall follow the covenant of our fathers."

Following Mattathias’ speech a Jewish man came forward in the sight of all to offer sacrifice upon on the altar in Modein. When Mattathias saw this, he was filled with zeal and rage…and slew him and the king’s officials enforcing the sacrifices. The editorializing of the author is overt. “He acted zealously for the sake of the Torah, as Phineas acted against Zimri, the son of Salom.” Following this dramatic act of religious zealotry Mattathias and his sons flee to the mountains, and draw around them a growing force of resistance to Syrian oppression.

They began their campaign by destroying the illicit altars and forcibly circumcising all the uncircumcised babies found within the boundaries of Israel. But soon, what started as religious resistance became a full throttle rebellion. Judah, Mattathias’ eldest son, leads the rebels to a number of remarkable victories against the Syrian generals. Philip, the royal commander in Jerusalem, sends for help, but Antiochus IV is busy taxing (and looting) the eastern regions of the Seleucid empire. He appoints his young son, Antiochus V as coregent over the western regions of the empire with Lysias, his son’s guardian and chief minister.

But Lysias is not able to rout Judah and his guerilla army. The Hellenizing Jews of Jerusalem, seeing Judah’s military success, begin to get worried about being caught in between and ask Lysias to appeal to the coregent for a negotiated settlement. Lysias, impressed by the strength of the resistance brings the question to the young coregent. The coregent sends a letter to the Jews offering amnesty to the Jews, an end the imposed cult, and permission to resume observing the Torah if the fighting ceases and the Jews return to their homes.

From Megilat Taanit, an early rabbinic calendar, we learn that the majority of the Jews accept the offer of the coregent and even celebrate the date annually on Adar 28th as the end of the persecution. It is very interesting that the author of Maccabees I never mentions the amnesty offer, nor the existence of such a celebration.
Most of us grew up with a portrayal of the conflict as one between the wicked Antiochus and the Maccabees. What becomes clear from the historical record is that the Syrian Greeks were in league with a large community of assimilationist Jews who wanted what they had to offer. Moreover, when read in our contemporary context, the Maccabees come off as a rather fundamentalist group. For the crowd of Jews who visit gymnasiums a lot more often than synagogues, this story poses some serious challenges.

However, it is the second part of the story, that part which describes the process of the rededication of the Temple that is even more challenging of our common assumptions.

Awaiting the Rededication
With the amnesty accepted, Lysias retreats in the early spring of 164 BCE. Ostensibly, the war is over. Judah is now free to recover and purify the Temple. Remarkably, he does not. What was he waiting for? Why does he delay the rededication of the Temple till the late autumn? Why does Chanukah, literally, “the rededication”, happen on the 25th of Kislev when the war was over nearly eight months earlier?

According to the historian, Jonathan Goldstein, there were religious sensibilities involved. Pious Jews claimed that while many of the prophesies of the Book of Daniel and the other apocryphal books had occurred, there were more miracles to come. The book of Enoch had even promised that God’s own Temple would descend from heaven to Jerusalem and replace the desecrated Temple built of human hands. Even if most doubted this possibility, still, the Solomonic Temple was inaugurated by a miraculous fire from heaven. Judah could not just burst in upon the desecrated Temple without extraordinary care. According to Goldstein, Judah waited till Tishri of that year because some of these prophecies were to take place at the beginning of the Sabbatical year. The Sabbatical year typically began at the end of the high holiday cycle. They waited till the end of Sukkoth, and nothing happened. Frustrated, Judah and his men decided to act. They destroyed the idolatrous obelisk, the “abomination of desolation” which had been erected by Antiochus on the Temple Mount. Still, the purification of the altar and the rededication of the Temple were trickier matters.

As well, there were doubts. Perhaps they had been mistaken in regard to the date. The calendar had not been under their power during the persecution period. It was conjectured that they had missed a month or perhaps even two months of intercalation. (Five times in nineteen years an extra month is added or intercalated in order to insure that the lunar and solar calendars match up.) Consequently, they waited another month, till late in Heshvan, and again no miracles occurred. Judah needed to respond to the frustration that the delay was creating among the people. He decided to remove the profaned altar where pigs had been sacrificed and he built and set up a new altar. Everything now was done but one thing, a rededication ceremony. But Judah was still not confident enough to dedicate the altar. The dedication of the Temple altar was enshrined in Jewish memory as a supernatural event. Judah feared that an overtly human overture would be a violation of the sanctity of the place. They needed some kind of a sign or symbolic moment in order to proceed.

Since there was a possibility that the calendar was off not one month but two, Judah waits yet another month. It is now the month of Kislev, but this time however, Judah was ready. Kislev offered Judah a ripe opportunity. The 25th of Kislev was a well known anniversary. It was the date that Antiochus first demanded a monthly sacrifice to his despised foreign god. Judah gave the pious hopefuls till after Shemini Azteret, the 23rd of the month to allow for the prophesied miracles to occur, and but they did not. He then quickly prepared in the following two days and announced that an extra eight day rededication holiday; a “second Sukkoth” would begin on the very day that Antiochus had chosen for his idolatrous sacrifice. But Kislev 25th was not the only a useful sign for Judah. Sukkoth itself was a sign. Solomon dedicates his Temple in an eight day celebration which extended that year’s Sukkoth celebration. In fact, in Maccabees II the first name of Chanukah is “Sukkoth in Kislev.”
On the eve of Kislev 25th they brought the menorah, the incense altar and the bread table into the inner sanctuary. They offered incense, arranged the bread on the table and lit the menorah for the first time in years. Judah probably made much of the lighting of the menorah not only because it was an act that marked the beginning of the eight day celebration, but because unlike the offering of incense, this ritual could be imitated everywhere outside the sanctuary. The association of the holiday with kindling lights is very early. When Josephus describes the holiday of dedication, he calls it “Urim” meaning lights.

The New December Dilemma
So, now that we have an historical frame for understanding Chanukah, we may find ourselves with more than a mild December dilemma. Chanukah seems to be less about religious freedom, let about despots and more about jihad against Westernizing heretics.

The simpler American and Israeli versions are indeed diversions from the painful internal questions of authenticity and assimilation.

Moreover, it is clear now that the eight day celebration, at least as far as the record suggests, is not about an eight day miracle of oil at all, but about a leader’s clever use of historical precedent in order to persuade the people to renew the Temple cult without miracles.

So here we are...deprived of our two Chanukah fantasies. The boogey man is not really Antiochus and there was not oil lasting eight days. Instead what do we have? Well, I think that we have two very real and different options. The first is a cultural recreation of Chanukah and the second is a spiritual recreation of the Chanukah.

Chanukah Rebooted
If we have been avoiding the conflict of the Hellenizers and the Pietists why not face the beast? Instead of distancing ourselves from the conflicts of authenticity and assimilation, perhaps ought to employ the question as a challenge and celebrate a holiday that is much more interesting than the one we now observe so widely and so lightly. Instead of eight days of presents, (a coarse imitation of both Christmas and the materialist society we live in) why not remake Chanukah as an eight day celebration of Jewish culture? We could celebrate a different aspect of Jewish culture each day—food, literature, art, music, dance, philosophy, wisdom and faith. Perhaps Chanukah is the time of year that we ought to look at the tensions between our desire to be part of the larger world and our mandate to be a unique and special people. Such a remaking of Chanukah would not make us comfortable allies with zealots, but it might well allow us to ask ourselves some good questions about Jewish authenticity.

However for those seeking a more spiritual frame for their rebooted Chanukah, the Hasidic approach has a lot to offer. The Hasidim tended to personalize the holidays. In the Sefat Emet by the Gerer Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger) the Temple is something found in every Jew. As the Torah says, “Build me a Tabernacle and I will dwell within them” (Ex. 25:6). The Gerer Rebbe says that we rededicate the Temple on Chanukah by reconnecting our soul. The Temple inside us becomes manifest when a person recognizes that all life-energy comes from the soul. Thus we say each day: “The soul which You have placed within me is pure...... This means that there is a certain pure place within each Jew, but it is indeed deeply hidden. When the Temple was standing, it was clear that all life-energy came from God.” But now, after that dwelling-place has been hidden, the Temple has not disappeared, it has just gone hiding. It can be found by searching oneself with the candles. By the power of inwardness we can find the hidden light within all our own inner chambers. This is the meaning of the statement (Taanit 11a-b): “A person must always measure himself as though a holy being dwelt within his guts.” Of a person who conducts himself in this way it is written: “Let them make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell within them.” Truly within them!