



For Heaven's Sake #37: Hanukkah, Interfaith, and the Israeli Psyche

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What happens when an ancient holiday is rebranded for modern audiences? For Israelis, Hanukkah was reinvented as a celebration of Jewish heroism, of our ability to persevere against overwhelming threats, with the Maccabean warrior as the precursor to the IDF. In contrast, in North America Hanukkah has been rebranded as a universal battle against religious suppression, with the Hanukkah lights as beacons for interfaith ecumenism and religious tolerance. In this episode **Donniel Hartman, Yossi Klein Halevi, and Elana Stein Hain** discuss what this dichotomy says about the two largest Jewish communities in the world.

*This source sheet is part of Episode #37 of **For Heaven's Sake**, a bi-weekly podcast from the Shalom Hartman Institute's [iEngage Project](#) that revives the lost art of Jewish debate for the sake of illuminating a topic, not sowing division. The podcast draws its name from the concept of *Machloket l'shem shemayim*, "disagreeing for the sake of heaven."*



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1. Ron Wolfson, *The Art of Jewish Living: Hanukkah*, 1990, p. 41

It is mid-winter at Valley Forge. Everyone is cold. Frostbite is widespread. Everyone has given up hope. George Washington is depressed. One night, looking for inspiration, George goes for a walk through the camp. He finds one Jewish member of the Continental Army lighting the haunkkiya [*sic*]. . . the soldier explains Hanukkah, Judah Maccabee, and everything to George, who refinds his courage in the process—enough to stand up when the boat crosses the Delaware. Later the first President sends our Jewish soldier a silver Menorah. . . as a gift of appreciation, along with a letter which says, “Judaism has a lot to offer the world. You should be proud to be a Jew.”

2. Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), “The Feast of Lights”

Kindle the taper like the steadfast star
Ablaze on evening's forehead o'er the earth,
And add each night a lustre till afar
An eightfold splendor shine above thy hearth.
Clash, Israel, the cymbals, touch the lyre,
Blow the brass trumpet and the harsh-tongued horn;
Chant psalms of victory till the heart takes fire,
The Maccabean spirit leap new-born.

Remember how from wintry dawn till night,
Such songs were sung in Zion, when again
On the high altar flamed the sacred light,
And, purified from every Syrian stain,
The foam-white walls with golden shields were hung,
With crowns and silken spoils, and at the shrine,
Stood, midst their conqueror-tribe, five chieftains sprung
From one heroic stock, one seed divine.

Five branches grown from Mattathias' stem,
The Blessed John, the Keen-Eyed Jonathan,
Simon the fair, the Burst-of Spring, the Gem,
Eleazar, Help of-God; o'er all his clan
Judas the Lion-Prince, the Avenging Rod,
Towered in warrior-beauty, uncrowned king,
Armed with the breastplate and the sword of God,
Whose praise is: "He received the perishing."

They who had camped within the mountain-pass,
Couched on the rock, and tented neath the sky,
Who saw from Mizpah's heights the tangled grass
Choke the wide Temple-courts, the altar lie
Disfigured and polluted--who had flung
Their faces on the stones, and mourned aloud
And rent their garments, wailing with one tongue,
Crushed as a wind-swept bed of reeds is bowed,

Even they by one voice fired, one heart of flame,
Though broken reeds, had risen, and were men,
They rushed upon the spoiler and o'ercame,
Each arm for freedom had the strength of ten.
Now is their mourning into dancing turned,
Their sackcloth doffed for garments of delight,
Week-long the festive torches shall be burned,
Music and revelry wed day with night.

Still ours the dance, the feast, the glorious Psalm,
The mystic lights of emblem, and the Word.
Where is our Judas? Where our five-branched palm?
Where are the lion-warriors of the Lord?
Clash, Israel, the cymbals, touch the lyre,
Sound the brass trumpet and the harsh-tongued horn,
Chant hymns of victory till the heart take fire,
The Maccabean spirit leap new-born!

3. Jerusalem Talmud, Sukkah 5:1 (55b)

בימי טרוגיינוס הרשע נולד לו בן בתשעה באב והיו מתעניין. מתה בתו בחנוכה והדליקו נרות ושלחה אשתו ואמרה לו עד שאת מכבש את הברבריים בוא וכבוש את היהודים שמרדו בך. חשב מיתי לעשרה יומין ואתא לחמשה. אתא ואשכחון עסיקין באורייתא בפסוקא (דברים כח) ישא ה' עליך גו מרחק מקצה הארץ וגו'. אמר לון מה הויתון עסיקין אמרין ליה הכין וכן. אמר לון דוא גברא הוא דחשב מיתי לעשרה יומין ואתא לחמשה והקיפן ליגיונות והרגן. אמר לנשיהן נשמעות אתם לליגיונותי ואין אני הורג אתכם אמרין ליה מה דעבדת בארעיא עביד בעילייתא ועירב דמן בדמן והלך הדם בים עד קיפריס. באותה השעה נגדעה קרן ישראל ועוד אינה עתידה לחזור למקומה עד שיבוא בן דוד.

In the time of the wicked Trajan, a son was born to him on the 9th of Av and they were fasting. His daughter died on Hanukkah and they lit candles. His wife sent to him and said, "Before you conquer the barbarians, come conquer the Jews who rebelled against you." He intended to come in 10 days and made it in 5. He came and found them engaged in Torah study, on the verse "He will cast upon you a nation from afar, from the edge of the earth, etc." He said to them, "What are you studying?" They said, "this." He said to them, "It is this man, who intended to come in 10 days and came in 5." He surrounded them with legionnaires and massacred them. He said to their wives, "Obey my legionnaires and I won't kill you." They said to him, "What you did to the fallen, do also to the standing." He commingled their blood and the blood flowed in the sea until Cyprus. At that moment a horn of Israel was cut and is destined never to return to its place until the son of David comes.