

Dear Friends,

In his essay, "Against Despair" published in 1978, Elie Wiesel wrote: "A Jew is forever surrounded, if not shielded, by his community, both physically and spiritually. Now, as always, Jews are intimately linked one to the other. Shout here and you will be heard in Kiev. Shout in Kiev and you will be heard in Paris. When Jews are sad in Jerusalem, Jews everywhere reflect their sadness. Thus, a Jew lives in more than one place, in more than one era, on more than one level. To be Jewish is to be possessed of a historical consciousness that transcends individual consciousness. Since the Jew represents more than himself, his death transcends his own."

The massacre of the Pittsburgh Eleven at the Tree of Life synagogue complex certainly proved the truth of Wiesel's teaching. The pogrom raised a lament from every corner of the Jewish world. Jews may not be universal in their ritual behavior or in their belief, but we rally whenever Jewish blood is spilled. Even so, fractures between Jews living in America and Jews living in Israel were exposed. Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi could not bring himself to acknowledge that his fellow Reform and Reconstructionist Jews were slaughtered in a synagogue, thereby underscoring the religious denominational division between Judaism's two largest population centers. On the political front, Naftali Bennett, the Knesset's Minister of Diaspora Affairs, was accused of hypocrisy for travelling to Pittsburgh where Jews had been slaughtered, in part, for their support of immigrants given his party's xenophobic rhetoric regarding the supposed threat of undocumented African refugees to Israelis. In response, one might be tempted to write an essay in counterpoint to Wiesel's simply titled, "Despair."

Of course, disagreements among Jews, even at critical junctures in our People's history, is not a new phenomenon. From the time of the exodus with Korah's rebellion against Moses, to the rivalry between Jabotinsky and Ben Gurion before the founding of the State, we Jews have earned our reputation as being a contentious people summarized in the saying, "Where you find two Jews, there will be three opinions."

Our contentiousness reached its apogee with the Maccabees. Although time has come to paint Judah to be a paradigm of Jewish resistance against tyranny, modern Jewish historians like Elias Bickermann have revealed from their study of the Books of the Maccabees that Judah and his brothers spilled considerably more Jewish blood than Greek in the course of their exploits. In chapter one of I Maccabees, we read: "At that time there came forth from *Israel* certain lawless men who persuaded many others (i.e., Israelites), saying: 'Let us go and make a treaty with the heathen around us.'" Chapter 4 of II Maccabees details the social reforms and religious apostasies of the Temple's High Priest, Jason. Principally, it was against Jason and the cosmopolitan Jews of Jerusalem who supported him that Judah and his fellow zealots fought, not against Antiochus' soldiers.

But if this is the true story, why have we been fed the fable? Truth to tell, our Sages were no fans of Judah or for what he stood for, but they were hard pressed to suppress the popular tale of Judah's heroism especially given the history of Jewish victimization that took the Jews from the destruction of the Temple by Rome in 70 c.e. to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Besides, no nation or people celebrate a civil war.

In the long run, I think the rabbinic response to the national trauma of the Roman Dispersion and the elevation of Judah in the eyes of the common folk was an disservice. The story of Judah is a warning to what divisions between Jews might lead to if we allow them to fester and grow. With it all, nevertheless, we can still enjoy the glow of the Hanukka lights. I wish you all a joyous holiday.

Warmly,
Lee

P.S. About those lights... Where does the miracle of the oil figure into the narrative? It doesn't. There is no attestation of such a miracle in any of the four books of the Maccabees. The Rabbis added that story to the Maccabee legend about six hundred years after Judah's death. They used the story borrowed from the Talmud to justify the lighting of lights by Jews at the time of winter solstice. But that's a study for still another time.