

Defending the Maccabees from a New York Times Opinion Piece

Mikeitz/Chanukah 5779

Rabbi Steven Saks

Novelist Michael David Lukas claims that “the Maccabees would have hated me” in his December 1 New York Times opinion piece, *The Hypocrisy of Chanukah*. Lukas explains that the Maccabees would have hated him because he is “assimilated” and “Hellenized,” meaning he is Americanized. Why would this cause the Maccabees to hate him? According to Lukas, Chanukah celebrates the Maccabees’ success in “subjecting assimilated Jews.” His claim is that the Maccabees, who hailed from the rural town of Modi’in, forced their more cosmopolitan Jewish brethren to adhere to their parochial version of Judaism and, in doing so, deprived them of the choice of living a highly Hellenized life.

It is certainly true that one could view the Maccabees as small-town *Bible Belters* who opposed the assimilationist practices of urban Jews. Similar tensions still exist today as cities have increasingly become “blue” and rural regions increasingly become “red.” Similarly, Barack Obama received much pushback when he stated in 2008 that people in small towns are “bitter” due to economic stagnation and therefore “cling to their guns and religion.”

However, viewing the Maccabees as religious oppressors is anachronistic and shows a misunderstanding of the power dynamics of the day. Menelaus, the High Priest (who was a

Benjaminite and therefore had no right to serve as a priest under Jewish law), bribed his way into office and is believed to have encouraged the Seleucid Empire to proscribe Jewish practices that served as barriers to participation in Hellenistic culture. Think of *Kashrut*, *Shabbat* and *Brit Milah* (Circumcision):

- *Kashrut* - Can't eat at your local Greek diner in Jerusalem if you are strictly *Kosher*.
- *Shabbat* - Can't go to see the Greek tragedy performed on Saturday.
- *Brit Milah* - You would stand out as different in a Greek gym in which people worked out in the nude. It has been said that some Jews tried to reverse their circumcision.

Though Menelaus likely believed that these reforms were necessary to ensure Judaism's relevance in a changing world, his top down proscriptions of some of Judaism's most basic laws was an act of tyrannical coercion. Nowadays, Menelaus would be quickly labeled "intolerant." The Maccabees fought to save Judaism as it had been practiced and in doing so preserved the Judaism we know today.

I do not know what the Maccabees would think of Michael David Lukas. While they certainly would encourage him to observe the Jewish practices they fought to preserve, his assimilationist lifestyle would not pose the same threat that Menelaus posed. The reason is that, unlike Menelaus, he doesn't hold a position that

allows him to prevent other Jews from practicing Judaism as they wish.

It should also be noted that Judaism does not require us to choose between Judaism and the greater world. *Yosef* (Joseph), who we read about on Shabbat Chanukah, modeled how one can integrate into the greater culture while safeguarding one's identity as an Israelite. He served as Pharaoh's viceroy, even taking on the Egyptian name *Zaphenat-paneah*, while simultaneously raising two sons who would become patriarchs of tribes of Israel.

Rabbi *Menachem Mendel* Sacks comments that, when *Noach* (Noah) left the ark, he realized that the world needed a combination of his son *Shem's* gift of Torah and ethics and his son *Yefet's* gift of wisdom and culture. According to Jewish thought, *Avraham* (Abraham) descends from *Shem* and the Greeks descend from *Yefet*. Rabbi *Menachem Mendel* Sacks in *Menachem Tziyon to Parshat Noach* writes:

Therefore, he presented the world with a program of the beauty of Yefet in the tents of Shem. He stressed the word "veyishkon" – let him dwell – to emphasize that Yefet should know and recognize his place - that he is only dwelling with Shem, but under no circumstances is to be the host. The guest should never have the audacity to expel the host.

The point being made is that we Jews should integrate the dominant culture, symbolized by *Yefet's* Greece, into Jewish life

without allowing Judaism to become secondary to that dominant culture. The Torah is the cake; the best the dominant culture has to offer serves as our toppings. Thanks to the Maccabees we have been able to do just that. Jews said no thanks to the nude gyms, but we like your universities. The ideas of having houses or schools of thought such as *Bet Hillel* and *Bet Shammai* (the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai) are Greek ideas that successfully enhanced Judaism. The concept of a *yeshiva* (Jewish school of Torah study) is based on the Greek university.

Our challenge is to continue to take advantage of the good that the dominant culture has to offer and use it to enhance Judaism without compromising it.