

# Chanukah and the Non-Observant

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In a NY Times Op-Ed for this Chanukah, “The Hypocrisy of Chanukah” (Dec. 1, 2018) we read of a Jewish novelist – Michael David Lukas’ – soul searching regarding the holiday of Chanukah. He begins with a discussion about how Chanukah became popular in non-observant Jewish homes as the need for an alternative to Christmas developed. Sociologically, Chanukah is a necessary holiday for Jewish parents to appease their children with around this time of year. But of course this has nothing to do with the significance, meaning or theology of Chanukah. When Mr. Lukas finds out the true story of Chanukah – that the Maccabees defeated the Greek worldview – he is less than thrilled. In his words:

The more I thought about all this, the more it disturbed me. For what am I if not a Hellenized Jew? (O.K., an Americanized Jew, but what’s the difference, really?) I eat pork every so often. Before having children, my wife and I agonized over the question of circumcision. And while I’ve never offered burned sacrifices to Zeus, I do go to yoga occasionally. When it comes down to it, it’s pretty clear that the Maccabees would have hated me. They would have hated me because I’m assimilated and because I’m the product of intermarriage. And while I can’t say for certain what the Maccabees would have thought about my fondness for Bernie Sanders or my practice of Reconstructionist Judaism, I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have liked those things either.

In other words, his conclusion is that non-observant Jews should not celebrate Chanukah. Chanukah celebrates the defeat of assimilation and Jewish secularism, and so if you are an assimilated or secular Jew you should not be celebrating it. One does not celebrate their defeat, or the victories of those who oppose them.

Since I assume most sermons in the USA this morning are about this Op-Ed, I am hesitant to follow the trend and discuss it. But this is of course an issue ripe for reflection. In a country where most Jews are tenuously connected to Jewish practice and theology we must understand what does it mean that Chanukah is so popular amongst non-observant Jews? Is it simply that these Jews don’t understand what it is they are celebrating?

But these questions apply not only to the non-observant, they apply to us, a Modern Orthodox congregation, too. We live our lives based on Torah values and practice, but we are comfortable in the world of the Greeks, in Western culture. Is this hybrid something the Maccabees would have felt comfortable with? Are we not in some ways, perhaps small, but still representative of something the Maccabees opposed?

One of the things the approach of this Op-Ed misses is the complexity of religious practice and the times each generation finds themselves in. Context matters in everything and in Judaism too. Two Jews may do the same action and for one it is the greatest mitzvah and for the other it is the most egregious sin. It depends on why they are doing it, who they are, their life circumstances, and a host of other details. Two Jews may rush through their morning prayers and one has offended the act of prayer, while the other has elevated it. It depends on context. Two Jews may drive to the synagogue on Shabbat, for one it is a major violation of the law, while the other has done something significant to celebrate Shabbat.

We are all different, with different spiritual challenges and growth opportunities. Generations are different, communities and locations are different, families differ, and so on. When we promote the laws of Judaism, of course we encourage every Jew to obey as much as they can, but we cannot expect every Jew's religious life to be uniform, nor would we want such a thing. Generations and communities must tailor Judaism to speak to their context and times, all within the framework of the traditional halachic system.

To speak of the Maccabees opposing Greek culture is to miss the point. The Maccabees represent not a battle against, but a battle in favor of - to preserve the spirit of Torah observance and commitment. In their times, for the Maccabees circles, it may have been right to oppose Greek culture in its totality. But in our times that may be the wrong approach. Neither is an illegitimate approach to Judaism. So long as both groups intend to promote Torah study and halachic living, they can reflect the needs of different times.

There's a story I always think illustrates this point strongly. At a meeting of the rabbis in Eastern Europe the burning debate was whether rabbis should learn Russian - the local language. R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, one of the major Torah leaders of the time and the author of classic rabbinic commentaries, was in favor of it, but others, including R. Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chaim - the major leader of European Jewry of the time was opposed. The Chafetz Chaim, who was aging and wasn't slated to come to the convention, made a dramatic last minute effort to attend in order to oppose rabbis studying Russian.

Some authors use this story to illustrate the Chafetz Chaim's unilateral opposition to secular studies, but I suspect it teaches us something more profound. What was a burning issue a hundred years ago, is largely a non-issue today. It does not mean we have abandoned the Chafetz Chaim's principles, it means the world has changed. It would be impossible for the Orthodox rabbinate to function today in America - no matter how right-wing - without speaking English. The Chafetz Chaim's dedication and devotion to Judaism would manifest itself in different ways in America, and that is to be expected and embraced.

Back to our Op-Ed. The idea that the Maccabees opposed the non-observant is superficial. The Maccabees opposed a lack of commitment to Judaism, a lack of concern for God and His teachings, an apathy about the world of the spirit. What they would have thought about Americanized Jews would have depended. If they eat pork and agonize over circumcision, and don't care for Judaism, then yes, one assumes the Maccabees would have been unhappy. But that same pork eating Jew who agonizes over circumcision, but is on a journey, to learn more, to understand Judaism and relate it to their lives a bit more. That Americanized Jew who takes their Judaism seriously, despite where they are right now, one assumes the Maccabees would have thought of him or her, not as an enemy, but as a fellow traveler.