

Jewish Ideas Weekly

www.jewishideasdaily.com

December 7-14, 2012

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7

Clothes Make the Man

By Chaim Saiman

Though the Talmud offers a near-endless supply of halakhic rules, its legal discussions are also a medium through which the Rabbis take up issues that we might understand as philosophical, political, or theological. The recent *daf yomi* (or “daily page”) Shabbat 63 presents a compact example. On the surface, the legal issue is nothing more profound than the technicalities of what can and cannot be transported on Shabbat. Yet a careful reading shows that this is simultaneously an exploration of war, peace, and the nature of manhood.

The general rule is that one may not transport objects in public areas on Shabbat. However, clothing and certain “adornments”—what we might call accessories—are permitted. But what constitutes an adornment? The Mishnah rules: “A man should not go out on Shabbat—not with a sword, nor a bow, nor a shield, nor a mace nor a spear.” On the surface, it would seem that items of military gear are off-limits on Shabbat because they are carried rather than worn.

But this ruling is disputed: “Rabbi Eliezer says, ‘They are an adornment for him.’” His statement makes clear that the sword under discussion is not a sword carried for defense, which would be subject to different rules, but an accessory designed to project an image. A trip to the art museum reminds us that kings and princes have long adorned themselves in military regalia to telegraph physical strength, military prowess and, ultimately, authority to rule. The Mishnah may have had a Roman general in mind; in today’s world the analogue might be the Marine Guard’s ceremonial

sword. Rabbi Eliezer is saying that in a culture where weapons are deployed symbolically, they become part of a man’s dress uniform, an adornment that may be carried on Shabbat.

The Sages respond by changing the terms of the debate: “But the Sages say, [swords] are but a disgrace, for the verse [Isaiah 2:4] says, ‘They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.’”



The Sages argue, in other words, that Rabbi Eliezer has employed the wrong standards. Conventional society may consider the decorated warrior a respectable image of manhood; but in the long view of human history, the valorization of military power represented in the sartorial symbols of war will not adorn a man but disgrace him.

Thus, the Sages offer a critique of military valor from the perspective of Isaiah’s messianic future. But why import this utopian standard into the decidedly compromised present? The classical commentaries are largely silent on this issue, leaving the matter to interpretation.

One possibility is that the Sages are reacting to Rabbi Eliezer’s focus on the ornamental. A functional sword is mere necessity, but a ceremonial sword makes a normative claim: the warrior is an ideal

image of man. The Sages reject this image. In their view, symbols should project true ideals; and the Jewish ideal is messianic, a state in which bearing a sword would look as foolish as “carrying a lamp in the broad daylight.” Thus, even in the present, military ornaments are more farcical than symbolic, more degrading than adorning. That is why they are prohibited on Shabbat.

An alternate reading is that the Sages are echoing an idea, found elsewhere in the Talmud (and later emphasized by the Hasidic masters), of Shabbat as an aspirational time that peers into the messianic era. The sword belongs to the six days of creation, reflecting the sub-optimal present; but Shabbat anticipates the Messiah. Hence, the symbols of war have no place in the domain of Shabbat.

Such is the debate in the Mishnah itself. But the Talmud offers two understandings of what divides Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages. The first proceeds along the lines just described: the Sages contend that Shabbat should reflect the messianic ideal of turning swords into plowshares, while Rabbi Eliezer holds that this all lies in the future. In the present “era of war,” as Rashi renders it, the sword presents a legitimate image and may be carried on Shabbat as a warrior’s “adornment.”

The Talmud’s second version of the debate raises the stakes still further. The question of what items can be carried on Shabbat is itself a question about the ends of human history: just what will the Messiah bring about?

In this reading, the Sages maintain that the Messiah will usher in an era of human perfection; but Rabbi Eliezer’s view is more minimalist. Deuteronomy 15:11 teaches that “the poor will *never* cease to be in the land,” and “never” is interpreted to include the messianic era. Poverty is inconsistent

Upcoming Features on Jewish Ideas Daily: Pierced ears, tattoos and much more!

All on www.jewishideasdaily.com.

with perfection, because where there is poverty there will be war. While the Messiah will bring about political restoration and religious redemption, there will be no perfection while human souls remain encased in bodies. Thus, according to Rabbi Eliezer, so long as we remain human, strife is inevitable, and the sword a legitimate symbol.

The Talmud then returns to the image of manhood. Is Rabbi Eliezer's acceptance of the sword as an adornment a mere concession to the facts of power, or is it a reflection of an essential value?

Thus, the Talmud asks, "What is the reason of Rabbi Eliezer, who said, 'It is an adornment for him?'" For it is written [in Psalm 45:3], 'Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one, clothe yourself with splendor and majesty.'" The psalm links the sword to splendor and majesty. Thus, Rabbi Eliezer's acceptance of the sword as an

adornment is no mere concession; for him, the warrior embodies a legitimate ideal.

But, the Talmud continues, "Rabbi Kehana said to Mar the son of Rabbi Huna, 'But this verse speaks of the words of Torah.' He replied, 'Nevertheless, the verse is never devoid of its plain meaning (*ayn mikra yotzeh midei p'shuto*).'"

The Bible may valorize military power, but the talmudic rabbis already live in anticipation of the Messiah. Talmudic men distinguish themselves not in physical battle but through the jousting of halakhic argumentation—what the Rabbis rather deliberately term "the battle of Torah." Hence, in Rabbi Kehana's view, the psalm speaks metaphorically, not of a warrior but of a Torah scholar who, as Rashi explains, keeps halakhic arguments at his side ready for deployment in battle. But the Talmud concludes otherwise: the verse must also retain its literal meaning. Metaphors are

compelling only if their objects of comparison ring true.

The issues addressed in this passage touch on some of the central themes of Western thought: the ideal of manhood, the tension between intellectual and physical prowess, poverty and politics, and the possibilities and limitations of human perfection. But the Rabbis do not engage these questions through philosophy or theology; they do so through the specific regulations of halakhah. What begins as debate over a niggling detail in the laws of Shabbat becomes a discussion of humankind's ultimate destiny. The reverse, however, is equally true: assessing the ideal man is forever tethered to the minute details of Shabbat observance. The compelling, sometimes maddening genius of halakhah is that its analysis of human thought cannot be disaggregated from its regulation of human behavior.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10

A Meditation on Maoz Zur

By Ismar Schorsch

The question of what we celebrate when we light the Hanukkah menorah raises the larger question of God's role in history. In the rabbinic view, Hanukkah commemorates a single, transient moment of historical redemption. The ultimate, eternal redemption has not yet arrived; it must take place outside of history. In the Zionist narrative, by contrast, Hanukkah marks the military victory that paved the way to Jewish national sovereignty in the Jewish land; it was the beginning of a redemption that takes place within history itself.

Ismar Schorsch is the son of Emil Schorsch, who was the last rabbi of Hanover. The family fled Germany in 1938, during the Hanukkah that was shattered by Kristallnacht. Ismar Schorsch served for 19 years as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In this 1988 essay, "Meditation on Maoz Zur," he suggests that the conflict between these two conceptions of redemption—within history and beyond history—is neatly encapsulated by the famous Hanukkah hymn, whose much maligned and misunderstood final stanza calls for divine retribution against Israel's enemies. Schorsch argues that this last verse, often characterized as a bombastic polemic, is in fact a serious theological counterweight to the first five stanzas, with their ring of historical redemption.

We republish the essay by permission of Judaism (American Jewish Congress), where it first appeared. Footnotes to this article may be found at www.jewishideasdaily.com.

— The Editors

Family history has graced me with a special affection for the holiday of Hanukkah. Fifty years ago, back in the fall of 1938, it literally marked a moment of redemption. As the last rabbi of Hanover, my father, along with thousands of other German Jews, was interned by the Nazis on the still unimaginable night of Kristallnacht. Several weeks later a visa to England, secured through the good offices of Joseph H. Hertz, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, managed to effect his release, and, like our ancestors in Egypt, we left Germany in haste, by plane, on the first day of Hanukkah. My father was fond of recounting that in that fateful year we lit the first candle in Germany and the second in England. I had just turned three a month before and our dramatic flight was to become my only tangible memory of Germany.

The conjunction of Hanukkah with our personal escape from Nazi tyranny prompted my father later on to enliven our celebration of the festival with a lusty rendition of the tra-

ditional hymn, *Maoz Zur*. While the practice among American Jews generally is to sing only the first stanza, and maybe the fifth, we sang all five, skipping only the sixth and final stanza. The poem's theme of redemption seemed to offer a poignant comment on our family's experience. Thus, in time, I developed an existential interest in the poem, spiced by the curious omission of its final stanza. When questioned, my father would simply declare that the stanza was a later and inferior addition.

The purpose of this meditation on *Maoz Zur* is to reclaim it for the liturgical enrichment of Hanukkah. The sudden popularity of Hanukkah, spurred by Zionist achievement and American need, has outgrown the traditional liturgical garb, predicated on a different valence for the festival. In this bind, we are ill-served by dispensing with a poetic ornament that actually accords with our historical and religious sensibilities. Nor should we be satisfied by an act of tokenism—the retention of a single stanza mistranslated to mask its real meaning.

In its present form, *Maoz Zur* consists of six stanzas. Since the days of Leopold Zunz, the first five have been ascribed to an unknown German poet named Mordecai, who lived sometime before the middle of



the thirteenth century and whose name survives as an acrostic formed by the first letter of each stanza. Each stanza of four lines is laced with a complex and varied rhyming pattern, while each line contains two equal halves of six long syllables. Though the use of the quantitative metrical principle is a trademark of medieval Sefardic poets writing under Arabic influence, the well-known lilting melody by which the hymn is traditionally sung, echoing the strains of a fifteenth-century German folksong, seems to underscore the Ashkenazic provenance of the original text. Congruently, the poem is absent from the Sefardic rite.

One is tempted, therefore, to argue that *Maoz Zur* conveys the collective anguish of a community stunned by three Crusades in the span of a single century and threatened with a deteriorating political situation. But, for medieval Jews, *Galut* (exile) was a state of mind even during interludes of tranquility, and the pervasive angst of its religious poetry was often generic rather than specific. If *Maoz Zur* does, in fact, bear witness to the darkening horizon of thirteenth-century German Jewry, its testimony is delivered with disarming restraint.

The setting of the original poem of five stanzas is somewhat indeterminate. The speaker is clearly the national voice of Israel addressing God with customary immediacy. But when? My preference is to date the moment of dialogue not long after the reconquest of the Temple. *Maoz Zur* is a song of thanksgiving for the recurring and unailing instances of divine compassion for Israel. The rescue from “Greek” tyranny triggers a recollection of earlier cases when God’s intervention redirects the course of Jewish history. In stanzas two through four the poet recalls, in chronological order, the experience of national degradation in Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia, with the slide into oblivion reversed each time only through a dramatic exhibition of divine power. The redemption at the time of the Hasmoneans, described in the fifth stanza, is seen retrospectively to be yet another confirmation of God’s guardianship of Israel which guarantees its survival. And soon thereafter, in stanza one, the voice of Israel celebrates the destruction of its arrogant foe and the resumption of its cultic link to eternity. The introductory stanza thus anticipates the mood of exultation that follows the climactic act of redemption emphasized by the poem.

But the imperfect tense employed by Mordecai in that opening stanza injects a touch of fertile ambiguity. The suffering of

Israel was only momentarily interrupted by Hasmonean victory. The fate of Israel in the poet’s own age continues to hang in the balance. The fluidity of time suggested by what might grammatically be construed as a continuous present (a form well known in the Bible) points to past as well as to future exultation. Collective memory posits the assurance of ultimate messianic salvation.

What may, indeed, tenuously connect *Maoz Zur* to the age of the Crusades is its conception of the Jewish experience in terms of persecution. A deepening sense of exile seems to be constricting what is worth remembering to episodes of national humiliation. While a full-fledged “lachrymose” theory of Jewish history would have to await the more worldly Sefardic historians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the chronicles and poetry of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ashkenazic liturgists surely testify to the oppressive reality of mounting insecurity. A compression of the ancient history of Israel to four salient crises has all the earmarks of an inchoate worldview born in dark times. Yet, the mood of *Maoz Zur* is not funereal, or else its traditional melody would be grotesquely inappropriate. Each crisis is recalled to emphasize its well-timed resolution and to visualize the blessing of God’s enduring protection. The suffering of Israel, whatever its cause, is always relieved by an act of salvation.

With the exposition of the five authentic verses of *Maoz Zur*, our analysis might easily be ended, adequate and unexceptional. But what has come to intrigue me, in fact, is the addition of the sixth stanza, an unabashed messianic plea for divine retribution upon Israel’s Christian oppressors, often left untranslated by the modern prayerbooks that deign to print it. To probe the reasons for this poetic codicil is not only to clarify the meaning of the original poem by Mordecai, but also to confront the religious doubts evoked by the defiant autonomy of history.

Internal evidence like the acrostic is not the only basis for decoding the lateness of the sixth stanza. External evidence is provided by a German halakhist at the end of the seventeenth century who relates having found several different versions of a sixth stanza affixed to the original text of *Maoz Zur*. Obliging, he cites all three, including one penned by none other than Moses Isserlis, the renowned Polish rabbinic authority of the sixteenth century. However, the version which eventually gained currency appeared anonymously, perhaps because the acrostic of its first three words spelled

the bracing command, *hazak*—“be strong.” According to our source, all three versions strove for the same effect—to update and complete *Maoz Zur* by reference to the fourth and final overlord of Israel’s endless subjugation.

Classic rabbinic messianism, based on the apocalypse of Daniel, had plotted the plight of Israel on a grid of four empires—Babylon, Persia-Media, Greece, and Rome. Inevitably, medieval Jewish history had imposed modifications on the identity of the Imperial players, but the schematic framework held firm, and the Hebrew cognomen, Edom, came to encompass medieval Christendom as well as ancient Rome. From the number of additions to *Maoz Zur* that were in circulation by the seventeenth century, it is obvious that Jews who had endured the recurring expulsions from German principalities in the late Middle Ages and had witnessed the colossal breakup of the Papal empire itself suddenly invested the old prayer with fresh messianic fervor. The lack of any allusion to the fourth kingdom and its downfall was now felt to be intolerable.

The language of the anonymous stanza that was finally accepted bristles with particular hostility. Besides a blunt entreaty for revenge against “the wicked kingdom,” it dares to allude to the internecine struggle fracturing the unity of the Christian world: “*dehei admon be-zel zalmon*—vanquish Christianity (*admon*, a variant of *edom*) in the very shadow of the cross” (*zalmon*, a variant of *zelem* and here standing either for the Papacy or the heartland of Christianity). Understandably, somewhat later, the stanza was softened by universalizing the line: “*mehei fesha ve-gam resha*—erase all sin and transgression.” Left untouched, though, is the rousing messianic finale—“and send forth the seven shepherds,” a passage from Micah (5:4) which the rabbis took to mean the reappearance of a phalanx of seven biblical figures led by David (Succah, 52b).

The various additions proffered thus confirm my reading of Mordecai’s poem as a song of thanksgiving set back in the days of the Maccabees. The authors behind them also understood the opening stanza as primarily a celebration of Maccabean reconquest and rededication. Ultimate messianic redemption had to await the travails of yet a fourth kingdom—Rome. The vision of *Maoz Zur* did not clearly extend beyond the third—that of the “Greeks,” rendering it slightly sterile for the impatient victims of the most formidable of all the kingdoms.

But the addition of the sixth stanza al-

tered subtly the theological message of the entire poem. Mordecai had found consolation in the constancy of divine concern; the author of the codicil implied displeasure at the brevity of the result. Evidently, not all instances of divine pathos were of equal efficacy. The messianic temper questioned the long-term value of earlier redemptive acts. What prompted this criticism was not only experience but also exegesis. In the final analysis, to comprehend fully the issue on which the completed poem turns, we must turn to its literary source. For *Maoz Zur* is a commentary on an exquisite piece of midrashic thought.

That midrash is to be found on Psalm 31, the biblical quarry from which Mordecai had hewn the opening phrase of his poem—"O mighty Rock of my salvation." The Psalm itself is the entreaty of a tried and beleaguered man who has always experienced his trust in God to be mercifully rewarded. The second verse aptly captures the mood throughout: "I seek refuge in You, O Lord; may I never be disappointed; as You are righteous, rescue me." The midrash seizes on the problematic word "never" (*leolam*) to ponder the efficacy of God's protection. The word, as well as the whole Psalm, seems to imply that, once bestowed, God's salvation will never lapse. The person so blessed will never again know shame and discomfiture. Indeed, Isaiah confirmed that very proposition when he declaimed: "Israel has won through the Lord triumph everlasting. You shall not be shamed or disgraced in all the ages to come!" (45:17)

After this prologue, the midrash weaves a dialogue between Israel and God in order to confront the harsh divergence between history and theology. The people ask God for

immediate redemption, because their state of subjugation is forever accompanied by degradation and disgrace. "Redeem us and we shall be rid of degradation. Why? Because Your redemption is everlasting." And they buttress their case with the verse from Isaiah. But God rejects the underlying assumption. "I have already redeemed you in the past and I will be your redeemer again in days to come." He, too, cites scriptural evidence of past intervention and continued engagement.

Nevertheless, Israel remains unmollified. "To be sure, You have already redeemed us through Moses, through Joshua, and through some judges and kings. But we have once again been subjugated and endure degradation as if we had never been redeemed."

To which God responds that, in fact, those were cases of redemption effected by mere mortals, beings of flesh and blood. "Your leaders were men, alive one day and buried the next. It is for this reason that your redemption was only redemption for an hour. But in days to come I, who live and endure forever, shall redeem you Myself. I shall redeem you with an eternal redemption, as it is said: 'Israel has won through the Lord triumph everlasting.' Consequently, 'You shall not be shamed or disgraced in all ages to come!'"

In short, the sordidness of history need not confute the purity of theology. The courage to distinguish between relief effected by men, no matter how exalted and inspired, and redemption through unmediated divine interjection affords a fragile reconciliation between what we see and what we believe. God's fleeting presence is insufficient to bring history to its rightful end,

though it has left traces of enduring and sustaining brilliance.

I am convinced that the final stanza of *Maoz Zur* rests on this profound and sober midrash. Centuries after Mordecai, another Ashkenazic Jew, stirred by the tremors and aftershocks of the Reformation, appended his messianic codicil. Prior achievements of national redemption, from the Babylonian exile to Syrian oppression, were of limited duration because mediated by men. The passing references, in earlier stanzas, to Zerubbabel, Mordecai, and the Hasmoneans suggest as much. In contrast, the fourth kingdom could be overcome only by God Himself. Hence the form of direct address—"Bare Your holy arm," which, given its original redemptive use by Isaiah (52:10), is redolent with messianic urgency. Short of such direct intervention, every respite attained by human hands, even with divine aid, is flawed and perishable.

Taken together, the two strata of *Maoz Zur* blend into a liturgical reflection on Jewish history—the precariousness of minority existence, the reality of divine concern, the consolation of collective memory, and the rarity of true messianism. Paradoxically, the final stanza, with all of its messianic fervor, accentuates the modern emphasis on the human role in the Hanukkah story. The hunger for irreversible redemption is not to be satisfied by human counterfeit. Messianism, properly understood, leads to political restraint. To my mind, no lesson is more vital to a generation like ours which is so prone to misread the signs of recent Jewish history.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11

Partition, Then and Now

By Allan Arkush

The organizers of last week's New York University panel discussion on the two-state solution couldn't help but congratulate themselves on their lucky timing. Sponsored by the Taub Center for Israel Studies, the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization, and the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, the long-scheduled event took place only five days after the United Nations General Assembly voted to accord

the Palestinian Authority the status of a non-member observer state. But even if the Palestinians had done nothing special this year, the choice of an early December date for the discussion would have made perfectly good sense. The event's primary purpose was to celebrate the imminent publication of a book, *The Two-State Solution* (Bloomsbury), about UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which called for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. That resolution was adopted almost exactly 65 years ago, on November 29, 1947.

The new volume contains essential documents relating to Resolution 181 as well as

recent essays illuminating its significance. The volume's editor, the distinguished Hebrew University law professor Ruth Gavison, expressed her admiration for the powerful and nuanced eloquence of the official statements that accompanied the passage of the resolution in the 1940s; and she stressed that the new essays represent a variety of different perspectives, including Arab ones. But she and her colleagues were less disposed to analyze and criticize the book than to use it as a point of departure.

The director of the Taub Center, historian Ronald Zweig, reminded the audience of more than 100 that the partition of Palestine

was something that pre-partition Zionists always found difficult to swallow. From the time the British proposal to divide the territory into Jewish and Arab states surfaced in 1937, the Zionist movement was deeply divided on the subject. Even when the movement accepted the proposal in principle, it insisted on a different and better map. In a crucial vote in 1946 over whether to reaffirm Zionist readiness to accept partition, David Ben-Gurion couldn't bring himself to do anything more than abstain, even as he made sure that there was a large majority in favor of the favorable decision that he thought necessary.

When the Zionists ultimately accepted the map drawn up by the UN in 1947, they did so despite the fact that the territory assigned to the Jewish state would include a very substantial Arab minority. Whatever may have led to the departure of most of these Arabs in the course of Israel's War of Independence, Zweig said, it was worth noting that all of the official planners for life in the new Jewish state operated on the assumption that the Arabs would stay put.

While Zweig focused mostly on the events of the 1930s and 1940s, he also made reference to current events. He ventured to characterize the General Assembly's 2012 resolution elevating the Palestinians' status

as being "equally historic" with the one adopted in 1947, an event capable of having a decisive impact on the Palestinian national movement. He expressed the hope that it would help to end the debate between Palestinian extremists and moderates by demonstrating the superiority of the "practical path through accommodation," a hope shared by the panel's moderator, J.H.H. Weiler, Joseph Straus Professor of Law at NYU.

Ariel Zelman, a postdoctoral fellow at the Taub Center, traced the shifting attitudes of Israeli Jews toward partition through the decades since its implementation. After the War of Independence, he showed, the prevailing attitude was mournful; it remained so for nearly 20 years. After the Six Day War, Israelis' joyous embrace of their reunited homeland gained, then lost intensity. And now, Zelman claimed, with the support of a statistics-laden PowerPoint presentation, most Israelis see that it is necessary to accept the principle of partition, even if they are wary of putting it into practice.

Responding to Zweig and Zelman, Gavison first noted that *The Two State Solution* was the English-language version of a Hebrew volume produced several years ago by an institution of which she is founding president, the Metzilah Center for Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought. Even among Israelis, she told the audience,



the memory of the history surrounding the partition resolution was growing dim and needed restoration.

Gavison compared the UN resolution of 1947 and the resolution that the UN had adopted the previous week. The discussion surrounding the new resolution, she noted, had none of the complexity and subtlety marking the one that took place more than half a century ago. Both the 1947 and the 2012 resolutions were, in themselves, nothing more than recommendations. The 1947 resolution granted legitimacy to the two-state solution but failed to bring about an agreement among those who needed to be parties to such a solution. The Jews accepted it, but the Arabs went to war to undermine it. The resolution had a lasting impact only because the Jews of Palestine deployed military power to implement it. The 2012 resolution reinforces the legitimacy of the partition idea but provides no new incentives for either Israel or the Palestinians to translate it into reality. If, as seems likely, both parties continue to pursue their own interests, subject to the constraints that have so far impeded an agreement, the new resolution offers little basis for hope in the region.

Professor Gavison concluded her remarks with a quick survey of the current situation throughout the Middle East. "It's a mess!" she finally exclaimed—but an extremely fascinating one. She cheerfully invited the audience to come back again in another 65 years to chew over the events that will by then have taken place.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12

The First War of National Liberation

By Diana Muir Appelbaum

The first Book of Maccabees describes the military victory that became part of the story of Hanukkah. But the book did not enter the Jewish scriptural canon, and the rabbinic Hanukkah focuses not on the Maccabees' military achievement but on the eight-day miracle of the oil. There are differing theories of why the narrative of the holiday changed so dramatically. One view calls attention to the surprisingly contemporary character of the Maccabees' revolt. Their uprising—in its underlying aim, its particular triggering event,

its strategic and tactical methods, and its political complications—can lay claim to being the first war of national liberation. Here we republish Diana Muir Appelbaum's account of why the Book of Maccabees is so modern and so dangerous. —The Editors

This is the 2,179th anniversary of the world's first war of national liberation. There have been many since. To a surprising extent, such wars have followed the pattern first established by the Maccabees. They, like later heads of independence movements, were leaders of a people conquered and occupied by a great empire. They fought to claim the right of national self-determination.

Resentment of foreign rule may simmer for a long time, but war is often remembered as beginning in a dramatic incident. In

Switzerland, this memory belongs to William Tell. He was the national hero who in 1307 refused to bow to a hat belonging to the Hapsburg governor, which was set on a tall pole in the center of Altdorf for the sole purpose of forcing Swiss freemen to genuflect to it. Tell's defiance sparked the fight for Swiss independence.

The story about Tell may be true, but it was not recorded until the 1560s. The Jewish "William Tell" moment occurred in the Year 167 B.C.E., when a priest named Matityahu (Mattathias) refused an order to make a sacrifice to a Greek god. Matityahu's story is better documented than Tell's, since it comes from the Book of First Maccabees (not the later II, III, and IV Maccabees), a text actually written in the Maccabean period.

At the time, the wealthy and powerful

Jewish residents of Jerusalem had made a “covenant with the Gentiles”: They followed Hellenistic ways, had their circumcisions surgically effaced, and built a Greek gymnasium for training in Hellenistic sports, literature, ethics, and philosophy. But the Seleucid Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes upset the equilibrium, ordering that Jewish texts be destroyed and Jews forced to eat pork and break the Sabbath.

Matityahu, with his sons, fled Jerusalem for his ancestral village of Modi’in. There, a Seleucid officer ordered him to make a public sacrifice to Zeus. Matityahu refused. “I and my sons and our kinsmen,” he said, “shall follow the covenant of our fathers.”

Other Jews had said as much: “Many Israelites strongly and steadfastly refused to eat forbidden food. They chose death in order . . . to keep from violating the Holy Covenant, and they were put to death.” What made Matityahu a great leader was the fact that he refused to accept the necessity of choosing between violation of Jewish law and death. Instead, he chose to vindicate the Jews’ right to determine their fate as a nation by organizing an army and driving the Seleucids from the land of Israel.

After Matityahu refused to make the pagan sacrifice in Modi’in, another Jewish man stepped forward to make the sacrifice—and Matityahu “slew him upon the altar.” He then killed the Seleucid officer, destroyed the altar itself, and fled with his sons into the hills, shouting, “Everyone who loves the law and stands by the covenant follow me!”

Suddenly we are on familiar ground: the modern war of national liberation. There are no prophets in the book of Maccabees, and no miracles. This is the story of a man and a nation, faced with the awful choice of watching their nation die or risking their

own death, who take their fate into their own hands and fight for their right to be governed by Jewish rulers under Jewish laws—the right we call national self-determination.

Most aspects of the Maccabees’ ancient war are uncannily familiar. Not the Seleucid army’s elephants, of course; but the Greek war machine was beaten by Matityahu’s untrained volunteers, just as modern wars for independence often feature well-equipped imperial armies fighting ad hoc forces. Other familiar patterns are also there in I Maccabees. The Jews convened national assemblies, much as modern liberation movements do. They struggled to form a unified command structure. They sought aid from the Seleucids’ rival great powers, Rome and Sparta.

The Maccabean war was also just as messy as modern wars of national liberation. The Jews fought against a great empire; but Jews also fought other Jews for principle and power, Jewish Hellenizers against Jews who stood for the ancient covenant.

Despite these ambiguities, the victories won under the leadership of Matityahu and his five sons produced two centuries of autonomous Judean government, giving Jewish intellectuals the time and opportunity to cement an enduring Jewish culture. Without those two centuries of self-government, it is doubtful that Jewish identity would have withstood two millennia during which Jews in Israel lived under foreign occupation and most Jews lived in exile.

The Book of Maccabees is found in the

Coptic, Orthodox, and Catholic Bibles; but few Jews have ever read it. Though it was written in Hebrew by a Jew, it survived antiquity only in Greek translation. This is because it is a very dangerous book. To read Maccabees is to risk being persuaded that peoples like the Jews had and have rights to national self-determination. Acting on such an idea, by starting a war of national liberation, is a perilous thing to do.

In August, 2009, the government of Sri Lanka finally put down the war of national liberation that the Tamil people had waged against the central authorities for 35 years. As the government drove the losing Tamils from their homes, it kept journalists away,

so no one can say how many were killed. Hundreds of thousands now live in exile, and their prospects within Sri Lanka are bleak.

Jewish leaders struggling for a Jewish future in the second and third centuries knew about such consequences. Large-scale Jewish uprisings aimed at national liberation had failed in the years 70, 115, and 132 C.E., with horrific results. Matityahu was well aware that the idea of a right to national self-determination

was the most dangerous idea the Jews could possibly have entertained.

Hanukkah, the holiday that celebrates Judean independence, was tamed in later years by focusing on its purely religious aspects. The Book of Maccabees was not added to the Jewish canon. Hebrew copies were not made. But this incendiary text exists. Pick it up and read it. I dare you.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13

Chemical Warfare in the Middle East: A Brief History

By Alex Joffe

At this time of Hanukkah’s memories of Syrian tyrants past, there are reports that the Syrian tyrant present, Bashar al-Assad, has begun to assemble chemical weapons for use against the spreading rebellion. The Obama administration, the United Nations,

and European leaders have warned the Syrian regime that its use of such weapons would trigger Western intervention. Israeli leaders are equally concerned, if not more: it has been reported that Israeli air strikes against Syrian chemical weapons installations were twice vetoed by Jordan.

In fact, chemical warfare has a particularly long history in the Middle East. Why have the legal and cultural prohibitions on its use been so regularly ignored in the region?

Appropriately enough, one of the earliest examples comes from Syria. In 256 C.E., Sassanian Persian forces besieging Roman defenders at Dura Europos dug a tunnel at the base of the city wall, where they apparently ignited bitumen and sulfur crystals and created a gas that rose into a Roman tunnel above and killed the defenders. Though the site was excavated during the 1930s, the evidence of chemical warfare was recognized only in 2009. When the reports appeared, the Islamic Republic of Iran de-

nounced them as defamatory.

Many such episodes of chemical warfare, and of biological attacks through means such as infected animals, have likely occurred throughout history but gone undetected by archaeologists and historians. The bloody golden age of chemical weapons, however, began in late 1914, when the Germans attacked British forces in France using chlorine gas, which formed hydrochloric acid that dissolved the victims' lungs. Countermeasures led to the still more deadly phosgene and mustard gases. Wilfred Owen's poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est," captures the horror:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of
fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and
stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or
lime . . .
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless
sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking,
drowning.

The British themselves appear to have been the first to use gas in the Middle East, during the Second Battle of Gaza against the Ottoman Turks in April 1917—although, one chronicler reported, the gas shells "were too few to produce the expected results." At war's end, gas had killed some 100,000 soldiers on all sides and maimed over a million. The trauma was so great that in 1925, a protocol was signed in Geneva prohibiting the use of poison gas in warfare.

But the fascination with poison gas persisted. "I do not understand," Winston Churchill had noted in 1919, "this squeamishness" about the use of gas:

. . . It is sheer affectation to lacerate a man with the poisonous fragment of a bursting shell and to boggle at making his eyes water by means of lachrymatory gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes. The moral effect should be so good that the loss of

life should be reduced to a minimum. It is not necessary to use only the most deadly gasses: gasses can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror and yet would leave no serious permanent effects on most of those affected.

There was little squeamishness in this regard during the 20th century. It was long alleged that the British used poison gas against rebellious Assyrian tribes in northern Iraq in 1921. That charge was disproved, but other "uncivilised tribes" were not so lucky. The Spanish used mustard gas against Berber rebels in northern Morocco between 1921 and 1927. During the Italians' 1935-36 invasion of Ethiopia, mustard gas was used liberally and even observed by Dr. Marcel Junod of the Red Cross. Junod's reports were suppressed by his organization, whose president later testily explained that the reason was "not indifference or lack of courage" but the "responsibilities" of "a body which must always remain capable of offering to all parties a guarantee of the most objective possible judgment . . ."

In the modern era, Egypt used gas during the civil war in Yemen between 1963 and 1967 (with a short break for the Six Day War) but denied the charge. The United Nations General Assembly issued a condemnation, but Secretary General U Thant said he was "powerless" in the matter. The Soviet Union used gas against civilians during its long Afghan war, and Syria apparently used gas against Muslim Brotherhood rebels in Hama in 1982.

The epitome of modern chemical warfare occurred during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Iraq initiated the war in September 1980 and by November, in a desperate response to Iranian human wave tactics, was using gas. In 1984 Iraq became the first nation ever to use nerve gas. Many Western countries had provided Iraq with dual-use technologies and precursor chemicals; Egypt and China helpfully supplied specialized munitions.

In 1988 Iraq also used gas against rebellious Kurds, killing perhaps 15,000. In the immediate aftermath, the U.S. government blamed Iran; the Central Intelligence Agency maintained this position into the 1990s.

Deterred by U.S. and Israeli weaponry, Iraq did not use chemical weapons against the Americans during 1991 or 2003 or against Israel. For the same reason, however, Israel, despite a series of missile strikes against it in 1991, did not use unconventional weapons against Iraq.

Perhaps the 21st century will be different. But Russia still maintains that reports of Syrian chemical weapons are mere

rumors. Syrian officials call the reports false, mere lies being spread to justify a Western invasion—indeed, Syria says U.S. and European governments may actually have given chemical weapons to terrorists within Syria so that the West can later claim their use by the government. Such claims will resonate locally, recalling Egypt's assertion that the charges of its use of gas in Yemen were a conspiracy

to cover up "Israel's use of napalm during the Arab-Israeli war."

But the question raised by Churchill's characteristic bluntness—whether the means of slaughter matters—lies at the root of the issue. Western countries and Israel have accepted international accords on chemical weapons and, more important, have culturally internalized their prohibitions. Even so, the West has abetted, averted eyes, and forgiven when chemical weapons have been used. Elsewhere in the world, instrumentality regularly overwhelms morality and the fig leaf of international law, leaving only deterrence and retribution as protections.

The only real difference in Syria today is the significant probability that the al-Assad regime will collapse and its chemical and biological weapons fall into the hands of Islamists possessed of a different moral and political calculus. That prospect should spread its own "lively terror." Whether it will be enough to prompt a Western invasion of Syria remains to be seen.

