The Bonds and Betrayals of Brotherhood: From Yosef to the Hasmoneans



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In the second century BCE, at around the same time that the Hasmonean family established an independent monarchy in Judea, hundreds of thousands of Jews lived in Egypt within a vastly complex network of cultural, philosophical, and literary activity. Most of these Jews likely observed Shabbat and their ancestral holidays, practiced circumcision on their baby boys, and kept special dietary laws. They also produced commentaries, novellas, poems, and rewritings that expounded on their scriptural stories. Jews in Egypt were particularly drawn to the story of Yosef, whose character, charm, and integrity affirmed that Jews could live outside the Land of Israel, and in Egypt in particular, and receive divine love.

Jews living in the Land of Israel at this time were also taken with the story of Yosef. Judean Jews, however, latched onto a different aspect of Yosef's life. Rather than focusing on Yosef's unwavering devotion to his ancestral God, Judean Jews were most inspired by the extraordinary compassion that Yosef showed his brothers when he forgave them for their betrayal. Indeed, Yosef's forgiveness had far-reaching consequences. In reconciling with his brothers, Yosef facilitated the fulfillment of God's covenantal promise that Abraham's family would grow into a great nation.

The story of Yosef as a story of fraternal forgiveness would have been especially resonant for Judean Jews who witnessed the Hasmonean monarchy's disastrous collapse. These Judeans understood that the monarchy's dramatic rise and precipitous downfall could be told as a story about brothers. The Hasmonean era was founded upon a unified sense of conviction and courage that was shared by Judah Maccabee and his four brothers, Simeon, Jonathan, John, and Eleazar. Their united mission inspired the people of Judea to bravely confront the Syrian Greek army, and their story became a glorious example of what could be accomplished in the spirit of piety and brotherhood. A century later, however, the Hasmonean monarchy was torn apart when two brothers, the princes Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, vied against one another for control over Judea. Their conflict only ended when Rome, seeing its chance to capitalize on Judean weakness, invaded Jerusalem and began an occupation that culminated in Jerusalem's destruction.

By the first century, it was widely known that fraternal unity led to the rise of the Hasmonean monarchy, and fraternal hatred led to its destruction.

Four Generations of Brothers

The Hasmonean monarchy is divisible into four periods of leadership, and each period can be retold as a story about brothers. In the first period, the sons of Mattathias (or Matityahu) banded together to battle the Syrian Greek government after its king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, issued a series of edicts that prohibited the observance of the Jews' ancestral traditions. Rallying thousands of disparate supporters, the brothers shocked Antiochus and his army with their valiance and acumen in a three-year war that culminated in victory in 164 BCE.

The second period of the Hasmonean era began when John Hyrcanus, the son of Judah Maccabee's brother Simeon, rose to power in 132 BCE. John became ruler after the Seleucid ruler Antiochus VII Sidetes (r. 138–129 BCE) appointed Ptolemy of Abubus governor of Jericho, and Ptolemy consequently entered a political marriage with Simeon's daughter. Ptolemy never intended to forge peaceful ties with the fledgling Hasmonean monarchy. Instead, he murdered his father-in-law Simeon at a banquet.

John was not present at the bloody banquet, but his brothers were less fortunate. According to the book *1 Maccabees*, Ptolemy murdered the brothers at the party (*1 Macc* 16:11–22). According to the first-century CE historian Josephus, however, Ptolemy abducted the brothers and they died later in captivity (Josephus, Antiquities, 13.8). Most scholars believe that Josephus's version is more reliable than *1 Maccabees*. Josephus's account implies that John refused to pay his brothers' ransom, whereas *1 Maccabees*, which tends to exaggerate the piety of the Hasmonean family, probably cleaned up the original story to avoid making John complicit in his brothers' murders.

Despite these ignominious beginnings, John brought the Hasmonean kingdom into its golden age. The early years of John's monarchy were beset by conflicts with the Seleucids, particularly when Antiochus VII Sidetes laid siege to Jerusalem in 132 BCE, and John was compelled to accept humiliating terms of surrender. But after Antiochus II's death, John embarked on a successful campaign that gave way to a period of independence and expansion for the tiny state. By the time John's reign ended in 104 BCE, Judea had achieved a level of extraordinary power that its people had not enjoyed since the First Temple period. Yet few would disagree that the absence of John's brothers was the prime enabler of his political success.

The tenuous nature of the monarchy came to the fore in the wake of John's death, when a series of internal conflicts precipitated a decline in Judea's political affairs. John's son Aristobulus, who claimed the throne, secured his reign by imprisoning three of his brothers and assassinating the fourth. He died within a year. In a haunting passage that recounts Aristobulus's death, Josephus describes the guilt that killed him. "Thoughts of the murder kept troubling his mind," Josephus wrote. "Pure concentrated anguish corroded his guts, and he vomited a copious quantity of blood….in a moment he was dead." (*The Jewish War*, I.81–84).

Aristobulus's successor, his brother Alexander Jannaeus (r. 103–76 BCE), seems to have had a less guilty conscience. After marrying Aristobulus's widow Shlomzion (known in Greek sources as Salome Alexandra), Alexander executed a surviving brother, Antigonus, who had been imprisoned by Aristobulus but was released by Shlomzion. According to Josephus, Alexander did allow one brother to live, because this brother "chose to live a private and quiet life" (*Antiquities* 13.12.1). Over the course of his reign, Alexander fanned the flames of civil conflict and murdered dissidents, including 800 Pharisees, whom he crucified after publicly executing their wives and children.

Alexander died in 76 BCE, leaving the kingdom to his wife Shlomzion. He probably foresaw that leaving the monarchy to his sons, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II would risk more fraternal conflict. To her credit, Queen Shlomzion managed to diminish the civil strife plaguing Judea during her nine-year reign. But when she died in 67 BCE, conflict erupted yet again. Her pro-Sadducee son Aristobulus, who had been granted the monarchy, wanted to consolidate his power by assuming the high priesthood as well, which had been granted to his brother Hyrcanus. Aristobulus raised an army against his brother, and appealed to Rome for support. Rome, meanwhile, saw its chance to take advantage of Judea's weakness and invaded Jerusalem. Its conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE culminated in the deaths of thousands of Jews and marked the beginning of Roman occupation.

Rome assigned an Idumean Jew named Antipas to rule Judea as a client king, and his son, Herod married into the Hasmonean family. Judean Jews viewed Herod and his family as phony interlopers who descended from Idumean tribes and converted to Judaism insincerely when Hasmoneans conquered their territory. For his part, Herod did little to ingratiate himself with the Judean people. To eliminate direct threats to his power, he executed numerous members of the Hasmonean royal family and ultimately executed his own wife, the Hasmonean princess Mariamme. Surprisingly, Herod's descendants managed to remain active in Judean affairs and even made their way back into the Jews' good graces.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of one such descendant is mentioned in a Mishna that preserves a legend about Herod's descendant Agrippa, who ruled Judea as a Roman client king in the middle of the first century. In the Mishna, Agrippa (probably Agrippa I, and not his son Agrippa II), reads from the Torah while standing, even though the Jews' custom was for their king to read the Torah while sitting. When Agrippa reaches the verse in Deuteronomy which mandates that the Israelites must not elect a foreign king over them, Agrippa begins to cry:

אַגְרִיפַּס הַמֶּלֶךְ עָמַד וְקִבֵּל וְקָרָא עוֹמֵד, וְשִׁבְּחוּהוּ חֲכָמִים. וּכְשֶׁהִגִּיעַ (שם יז) לְלֹא תוּכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי, זָלְגוּ עֵינָיו דְּמָעוֹת. אָמְרוּ לוֹ, אַל תִּתְיָרֵא אַגְרִיפַּס, אָחִינוּ אָתָּה, אָחִינוּ אָתָּה, אָחִינוּ אָתָּה

King Agrippa stood and received [the Torah on the holiday of Sukkot] and read standing, and the sages praised him. When he reached, "You shall not place a foreigner over you" (Deut 17:15) his eyes ran with tears. They said to him, "Fear not, Agrippa, you are our brother, you are our brother, you are our brother!" (m. Sotah 7:8)

The rabbis' remarkable consolation of Agrippa in this Mishna is not merely a gesture of acceptance. It is an affirmation of brotherhood and a suggestion that, in light of relationships that had torn siblings apart in the not-so-distant past, the rabbis desired to establish a community of fraternal kinship that would be based not on biological bonds, but on shared values.

The rabbis understood that their own scriptures limited the power of the monarch to make his subjects less vulnerable to his powers. They also knew too well what could happen to the Jewish people when monarchies were passed from father to son and brother to brother. The rabbis' sensitivities to these matters meant that they likely read the story of Yosef in a particular way. For the rabbis, Yosef's forgiveness of his brothers and his facilitation of his family's settlement in Egypt marked the beginning of a new era for Abraham's family. It was in Egypt, in the sandy haze of oppression and tyranny, where the family of Abraham would grow into a people destined to be ruled not by fathers and sons, but by prophets, visionaries, and scholars. By attributing his success to God's providence and reconciling with his brothers, Yosef protected the welfare of a people who were on the cusp of becoming not merely a great family, but a nation.