How Did Chanukah Become a Jewish Holiday?



Chanukah, which commemorates the victory of Judean Jews over Syrian Greeks in the Hellenistic era, is different from other Jewish holidays.

When Judeans defeated their Greek enemies in 164 BCE, hundreds of thousands of Jews were living outside of Judea. Many lived along the Mediterranean coast, in communities that dotted the coastline of North Africa and regions to the north. Other Jews resided in the east, where their ancestors were exiled to Babylonia after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Given that the Hasmonean victory did not directly impact Jews who lived outside of Judea, Chanukah's incorporation into the Jewish calendar is astonishing. How did it become a holiday that, by the early Common Era, was celebrated by all Jews?

Letters written by Judean leaders to Jews living in Egypt dated to the late second century BCE suggest that the project of establishing a widespread Jewish holiday that celebrated the Hasmoneans' victory was no easy task. In the generations following the Hasmonean war many Jews outside of Judea did not adopt the new holiday that Judeans established to celebrate their victory.

The Egyptian Jews who received these Judean letters were probably not fully assimilated into Hellenistic life. Nor were they estranged from Judea. Jews in this region supported the Judean monarchy as a political and religious institution, sent charity to support the Jerusalem Temple, and many gave their children Greek versions of Hebrew names. These acts enabled Egyptian Jews to maintain a sense of connection to Judean Jewry and to keep their non-Jewish neighbors at a distance.

Despite Egyptian Jews' devotion to their homeland, Judean authorities noted that their kin in Egypt were not celebrating the holiday that they had recently established.

In 124 BCE, two generations after the war, they wrote a letter to Egyptian Jews that sent warm greetings and blessings, and closed with a request: Would Jews in Egypt consider observing the new holiday that celebrated the Judean Jews' defeat over the Syrian Greeks?

A Letter to Egypt's Jews

The decision to address Jews living in Egypt rather than Jews living elsewhere was a calculated one. In the second century BCE, Egypt was home to the most vibrant Jewish community outside the Land of Israel. Jews in this region, and in the city of Alexandria in particular, observed the three main identifying markers of Jewish practice at the time: a calendar organized around the Sabbath and special holidays, circumcision of baby boys, and unique dietary practices. Egyptian Jews also engaged with their local culture. They visited libraries, read works written by philosophers, and attended plays.

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The Judean leaders who wrote to Egyptian Jews in 124 BCE probably figured that their goal of establishing a widespread Jewish holiday had the best chance of being realized if Egyptian Jews, who were widely considered by other Jews to be sophisticated and cosmopolitan, adopted the festival.

To convince their kin in Egypt to observe this holiday, Judean leaders did not argue that the Hasmoneans' victory impacted Egyptian Jews in the same way it did Judean Jews. Instead, they suggested that the Judeans' new holiday affirmed God's covenant with the Jews and God's protection of the Jerusalem Temple, the spiritual epicenter of the Jewish People. Their letter, which was added to the book of 2 Maccabees a half-century later, reads:

To our brothers the Jews of Egypt, greetings, your brothers the Jews in Jerusalem and in the land of Judah. A good peace. May God make for you, and may He be good to you, and may He remember His covenant with His faithful servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May He give you all a heart to revere Him and to do His will wholeheartedly and with a willing spirit. May He open your heart to His Torah and to His commandments. May He listen to your prayers and forgive you and not abandon you in an evil time.

And now, here we continually offer prayers for you. In the reign of Demetrius in the year 169 we Jews wrote you, "In the affliction and in the distress which came upon us in the years from the time that Jason and his followers reveled against the Holy Land and the Kingdom. And set fire to the temple gateway and shed innocent blood, we prayed to the LORD, and He heartened to us. We brought animal sacrifices and fine flour, and we kindled the lamps and laid out the showbread." And now we ask you to celebrate the Days of Tabernacles in the Month of Kislev. In the year 188. **(**2 Maccabees 1:1–10a, trans. Jonathan A. Goldstein)

While this letter's warm greeting and heartfelt blessing convey the writers' affection for Egyptian Jews, the discursive features beneath the surface suggest a troubled relationship.

The writers of this letter do not simply wish good tidings upon their Jewish kin in Egypt. Instead, they pray that these Jews will bring good tidings upon themselves. In so doing, they establish the terms by which Egyptian Jews will re-enter divine favor. Egyptian Jews will only bring good tidings upon themselves, these writers imply, if they accept the religious authority of their Judean kin by celebrating a new holiday that they call "the Days of Tabernacles in Kislev."

The letter goes on to cite an older letter that Judean authorities sent to Egyptian Jews one generation earlier, in 143 BCE, which told the story of the Hasmoneans' rebellion. While this older letter asked Egyptian Jews to commemorate the Judeans' victory by celebrating a new holiday, the Jews in Egypt apparently did not accept this invitation. Now, in 124 BCE, Judeans made a second appeal.

A Second Letter

The Judeans who wrote to Egyptian Jews in 124 BCE may have known about another document that had recently found its way from Judea to Egypt.

In 132 BCE, a Jewish man from Jerusalem traveled to Egypt and was unimpressed with what he saw. The Jews of Egypt, he discovered, lacked a proper understanding of their ancestral heritage. To help rectify this situation, he decided to translate a well-known Hebrew book of wisdom that was written by his grandfather into Greek. While translating this book, which today is known as "Ben Sira," the translator added a prologue that described his grandfather's desire that "those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law." This prologue also clarifies that, in contrast with those who read his grandfather's original version, this translated work is "for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law."

For this Judean translator, then, Judean Jews were lovers of learning whose pious members had every reason to hope that they could advance further in their scholarship. Egyptian Jews only wished to gain learning, but had none.

The Case for a New Jewish Holiday

Judean writers of yet another letter to the Jews of Egypt, written in 103 BCE, went even further than the translator of Ben Sira. Building upon the theological claim of divine care for all Jews found in earlier letters, these writers argued that the Hasmoneans' victory was the culmination of numerous miracles that God had performed at the Temple Mount throughout Jewish history. For the writers of this letter, such miracles were evidence of God's special care for those Jews who protect the Jerusalem Temple. Like the earlier Judean letter of 124 BCE, this letter opens with a blessing and closes with an appeal:

The people in Jerusalem and in Judaea and the Council of Elders and Judas to Aristobulus, tutor of King Ptolemy and member of the stock of the anointed priests, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting and wishes for health. Having been saved by God from great perils, we thank Him greatly as befits men who war against a king, for God Himself cast way those who made war on the Holy City … Inasmuch as we are about to celebrate, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Purification of the Temple, we thought we ought to let you know, so that you, too, might celebrate it as when Nehemiah, the builder of the temple and the altar, brought sacrifices.

The writers' self-identification as Judas, a council of elders, and "the people in Jerusalem and in Judaea" indicates that this letter was meant to serve as a public document, and that all Egyptian Jews were invited to read this letter or listen to its recitation. The specification of Aristobulus' priestly identity, moreover, reflects the writers' hope that Jews of priestly lineage would be especially attentive to their story and understand that the Hasmonean victory should have included them.

Egyptian Jews will only bring good tidings upon themselves, these writers imply, if they accept the religious authority of their Judean kin by celebrating a new holiday that they call "the Days of Tabernacles in Kislev."

To convince Egyptian Jews to observe the Judeans' newly established holiday, referred to here as "the Purification of the Temple," the writers describe a miraculous event that took place at the Temple Mount during the early years of the postexilic period, when the prophet Nehemiah guided Judeans back to the Land of Israel, known then as the Persian province of Yehud.

According to this letter, Nehemiah dispatched Judean priests to locate fire from the first Jerusalem Temple that had been hidden in a cave by Jerusalemite priests on their way into exile. In place of fire, however, the priests who entered this cave found only a mysterious liquid, which they poured over sacrificial offerings on an altar. The sacrifice miraculously ignited, which signified to Nehemiah and the priests that God had accepted their offering.

Upon witnessing this miracle, the priest Jonathan uttered a lengthy prayer begging God to gather the scattered people and set free those who had been enslaved by foreign nations (2 Macc 1:34). Jonathan's prayer characterizes the exile as a place of continual suffering that reminded Jews who lived there of their spiritual failures. Though this scene is set at a time when Judeans moved freely within the empire, Jonathan's prayer refers to Jewish life outside the Land of Israel as a space where Jews are enslaved.

By citing a prayer that expresses concern for the welfare of Jews throughout the world and also asks God to put an end to Jewish life outside Judea, the writers of this letter drew themselves close to their Egyptian kin and simultaneously pushed them away. While they avoided condemning Egyptian Jews outright, the message of these writers is clear: The Jews of Egypt should follow the example of Nehemiah and other Judeans of his time by yearning for the exile to come to an end. Such yearning could be satisfactorily expressed through the observance of a newly established holiday that might even earn the Jews of Egypt the same divine beneficence that Nehemiah and his colleagues once received.

The writers go on to claim that they possess a document which identifies the priest who took charge of hiding the fire that Nehemiah searched for as the prophet Jeremiah, a prophet known for encouraging Judahites to submit to Babylonian rule on the basis that God promised the people that they would one day return to their homeland.

Like Nehemiah, Jeremiah was known to Jews in the second century BCE as a biblical hero who asked Judeans to remain loyal to the Torah. Yet while Jeremiah anticipated the exiled people's return to their homeland, Jonathan's prayer, which took place in Nehemiah's time, clarifies that a complete ingathering did not occur. By the time this letter was written, the Jews' complete restoration to their homeland was an abstract concept that the Judeans prayed for, but was not considered to be an imminent reality. Judean prayers, this letter implies, went unanswered because of Jews who opted to remain in exile.

The letter goes on to cite a tradition that Solomon's prayer at the newly built Jerusalem Temple was followed by a heavenly fire that descended onto his sacrificial offering and signified God's approval. This event, the letter suggests, resembled a prayer uttered by Moses that also culminated in heavenly fire. Both Solomon and Moses, then, guided the Israelites at watershed moments in their history and received similar responses to their prayers.

In the letter's closing section, the writers note that the traditions they describe were recorded and preserved in Nehemiah's library, and they offer to send these documents, and others, to Egyptian Jews. By making this offer, the writers imply that as Judeans, they are inheritors of a chain of transmission that authorizes them to instruct all Jews in the matter of religious worship.

Read as a whole, this letter produces historical layers that retroject the writers' message into the biblical past, conveying a sense of continuous Judean authority over Jews outside the Land of Israel. The earlier figures portend the later ones, and the later figures imitate the earlier ones. Egyptian Jews, the writers suggest, can participate in this multidirectional chain of imitation by observing the Purification holiday.

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This letter also expresses anxiety that Egyptian Jews were growing independent from Judean Jews and relying on their access to translations of the Jewish scriptures for spiritual guidance. Yet the Jews' sacred texts, these Judean Jews believed, were not meant to enable Jews to settle outside the Land of Israel. They were meant to bring Jews back to the Land of Israel. For Judean Jews, Torah study and Temple worship were complementary modes of worship that pointed Jews back to Jerusalem.

The Chanukah Chronology

Reading these Judean letters alongside one another, we can surmise the following chronology:

- 164 BCE: The Hasmonean army defeats the Syrian Greek kingdom and regains control of the Jerusalem Temple. Judeans who interpret this unlikely victory as a divine sign that God supports Jews who ensure the sanctity of the Temple Mount establish an annual holiday to commemorate this event.

- 143 BCE: Judean Jews dispatch a letter to Egyptian Jews asking them to observe the newly established holiday that commemorates the Hasmonean victory.

- 124 BCE: Realizing that Jews abroad have not adopted their new holiday, Judean Jews write another letter to Jews in Egypt asking them to observe the holiday. They frame the holiday as an affirmation of their victory's theological significance.

- 103 BCE: Judeans write a third letter asking Egyptian Jews to observe the holiday. This letter connects the holiday to earlier historical moments when God miraculously expressed approval of Judeans who protected the Temple Mount with miracles of fire.

We do not know whether the Jews who received these letters responded. But at some point, Jews in Egypt began to observe what would later become known as Chanukah.

Changing political realities in Egypt may have partly contributed to this decision. As Jews in Egypt became increasingly successful in political, economic, and social strata, they drew the attention of their Greek neighbors, who questioned their claim that Jews could be loyal to both the Greek Ptolemaic Empire and to the Hasmonean monarchy of Judea. For these Greeks, such dual loyalty was unsustainable and compromised the welfare of their host empire. Accusations that Egyptian Jews were disloyal and even traitorous rose to the surface in the late second century BCE, and slowly percolated to a boil until this rhetoric gave way to violence. When news spread in 38 CE that the Judean king Agrippa had visited Alexandria en route from Rome to Jerusalem, rioters stormed the city, killing hundreds of Jews and putting hundreds more to flight. Years later, Roman authorities would attempt to resolve the Jews' dual loyalty not with violence, but with coercion. When the empire quelled the Judean rebellion in 73 CE, they levied the Fiscus Judaicus, a tax that required all Jews in the empire to pay a sum that would fund the reconstruction of the Temple of Jupiter in Rome. This tax was meant to replace the traditional half-shekel tax that Jews had sent to Jerusalem to support the Jerusalem Temple, which Rome had just destroyed.

Jews living outside of Judea who adopted the holiday of Chanukah likely decided that their Greek and Roman neighbors were partly right. While Jews expressed loyalty to their host empire and contributed to their governing societies, the Jews' commitment to Judea, and to their kin who lived there, could never be expunged.

Over time, the question of why Jews would commemorate a war that did not directly impact them became increasingly immaterial. The Hasmonean victory signified to Jews that God protected those who cared for Jerusalem and its Temple. Early conceptions of the miracle of Chanukah lay in this sole fact: spread throughout the world, the Jewish people would remain forever interconnected, and forever committed to the welfare of their homeland.