6. The Most Beautiful Unknown Story of Hanukka

This is the story of one of Yehuda Maccabee's battles, likely unknown to most readers, which I only recently learned about by reading the Book of Maccabees directly. The most chilling aspect of this story is its relevance to the present – specifically, to Israel and the Jewish world in 2023 and 2024. In this story, there is an invincible Jewish army achieving crushing victories over its enemies and the ensuing adverse reaction of the gentile world to Israel's victories. This resentment towards the Jew's triumphs in Judea translated into antisemitic hostility against the Jews in the diaspora. What happened then is SO similar to what happens today that it's frightening. And then there is the "icing on the cake": what Yehuda Maccabee does in an extraordinary act worthy of Moshe, Yehoshua, or the Messiah. Something, in some form, I wish will be repeated in our days. I would have loved to expand on this story and delve into each sentence to show the reader the parallels between the past stories of the Hashmonayim battles and the present of Israel. But I will resist this temptation and leave that task to the reader. With much emotion and admiration for our Maccabean heroes, I share with you the most beautiful unknown story of Hanukka.

Israel. 164, BCE. The neighboring gentile nations witnessed the Jewish army's incredible triumphs and their overwhelming victory over the Great Seleucid Empire. They were not pleased. But they knew that the Jews were too strong to confront directly.

The Jewish triumphs made them thirsty for Jewish blood, and they needed a weaker, more accessible target. The natural candidates to channel their resentment were obviously the Jews of the diaspora.

A tremendous wave of Antisemitism erupted, among other places, in the region of Gilead (today, northern Jordan), where tens of thousands of Jews lived. The massacres began, and the Giladites Jews were forced to entrench themselves in fortresses.

Desperate and terrified, they sent an urgent message to Yehuda HaMaccabee.

"Our gentile neighbors – the Ammonites – are organizing an attack against us, led by General Timotheus. We are trapped in the Gilead fortress, under siege, and they are preparing to enter and kill us. They have already killed a thousand Jewish men and taken their wives and children captive. Please help us and save us before it is too late!"

Yehuda and his men had just rededicated the Temple and experienced the well-known miracle of Hanukka (one small jar of oil could keep the Menorah ablaze for eight whole days) when they received this message.

He immediately took eight thousand men and, joined by his brother Yehonatan, headed Eastward to help his fellow Jews in Gil'ad.

They traveled over three days– crossing the Jordan River, tracking through the desert for 150 kilometers– and were exhausted. They encountered the Nabateans, a nomadic tribe, who confirmed the desperate situation of the Jews in Gilead and informed Yehuda that Timotheus indeed planned on destroying the Jewish fortresses and massacring all the trapped victims –the very next day!

Without pausing for a break, Yehuda and his men reached the city of Bozrah and found the enemy soldiers carrying ladders and battering rams on their way to kill the Jews. In Maccabean custom, Yehuda and his men blew their Shofarot, called out to God for Divine assistance, and bravely charged into battle. When Timotheus' men heard that the famous Yehuda HaMaccabee

had come to fight against them, they dropped all weapons and fled for their lives.

Yehuda pursued them and killed thousands and then proceeded to strengthen the other cities in the Gilead. Timotheus assembled a much larger army, hiring local Arab mercenaries to bolster his forces, and stationed them by a turbulent and dangerous river. The Jewish army approached from the other side, and Yehuda led the way, crossing the river without hesitation or fear, and his men followed. When seeing this, Timotheus' men, taken aback by the Maccabean bravery, abandoned their weapons and fled in fear.

But our Maccabees were not done yet. They knew further action needed to be taken in order to permanently save their brothers, who were constantly vulnerable to enemy attacks.

Yehuda made a wise and historic decision: he gathered the Jews of Gilead and led them back to the land of Israel.

They crossed the Jordan River together, as Yehoshua Bin Nun had once done, and embarked on a journey reminiscent of our Exodus from Egypt. The Jews crossed the Judean desert until they reached Bet She'an and the fortified cities in Israel, where fellow Jews joyfully welcomed the Olim Chaddashim (new Jewish immigrants) back home.

Their next stop was the Bet HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, where the newcomers offered sacrifices to God and thanked their Creator for saving them from certain death and for protecting Yehuda's army, which had miraculously suffered no casualties.

"And Yehuda gathered all Israel who were in Gilead, from the smallest to the largest, along with their wives, children, and belongings, forming a vast camp to return to the land of Judea. And they crossed the Jordan into the great valley before Bet She'an. Yehuda gathered all the stragglers and encouraged the people throughout the journey until they arrived in Judea. They ascended Mount Zion with joy."

HEBREW:

Excerpt from the Original Hebrew Text and Translation:

Maccabees, Chapter 5

“In the morning, [Yehuda and his men] lifted their eyes and saw a countless multitude carrying ladders and machines to capture the fortress and fight against the Jews… Yehuda said to his soldiers: ‘Fight today for our brothers!’ He went out with three groups behind them, blew the shofarot, and cried out to Heaven in prayer. When Timotheus’ camp knew it was the Maccabee, they fled from him, and he struck them with a great defeat.”

“And Yehuda gathered all Israel who were in Gilead, from the smallest to the largest, along with their wives, children, and belongings, forming a very large camp to return to the land of Judea.”

“And they crossed the Jordan into the great valley before Bet She’an. Yehuda gathered all the stragglers and encouraged the people throughout the journey until they arrived in Judea. They ascended Mount Zion with joy.”

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