9. Hanukka and The First Independent Jewish State

Shimon and the First Independent Jewish State

During these days of Hanukka, I have tried to convey to my readers that the miracle of Hanukka extends beyond the small jar of oil that lasted eight days. This Providential event marked the beginning of a 23-year period, from 165 BCE to 142 BCE, in which our ancestors, the Hashmonayim, defeated the Greek invaders and their Jewish Hellenized allies, culminating in the establishment of the first independent Jewish state! This story, where miracles combine with unparalleled bravery, is unfortunately not well-known despite its relevance in our times.

Let us now explore the final chapter of the epic saga that we commemorate during Hanukka.

Why Yonatan Does Not Conquer Jerusalem

After the deaths of Eleazar, Yohanan, and Yehuda in battle, only two of the five Hashmonayim brothers remained: Yonatan and Shimon. Yonatan assumed leadership and, after two years of struggle, managed to expel the powerful Seleucid general Bacchides from Israel. However, to everyone’s surprise, when Bacchides fled Israel in 159 BCE, Yonatan did not immediately attempt to reclaim Jerusalem. Instead, he settled in Michmash and became the de facto leader of the Jewish people. But what was Yonatan doing in Michmash, and why didn’t he liberate Jerusalem immediately?

Yonatan spent seven years recruiting and training a powerful Jewish army of 40,000 soldiers capable of confronting invading forces and defending the Jewish people. This marked the first time in centuries that the Jewish people had an army of such magnitude. Now, Seleucid emperors—or those vying for the

throne—not only sought to avoid conflict with Yonatan and his army but also competed to offer the Jews material benefits in exchange for Yonatan's support.

The Importance of Having an Strong Army

At the time, the Seleucid king was Demetrius Soter. However, a young adventurer from Smyrna, Alexander Balas, claiming to be the son of Antiochus Epiphanes, challenged Demetrius and started a civil war for the throne. Both Demetrius and Balas offered various concessions to the Jewish army support. Yonatan sided with Alexander Balas, who eventually defeated Demetrius. Once this occurred, and with the support of the new emperor, now his ally, Yonatan entered Jerusalem without resistance during the festival of Sukkot in 152 BCE and was appointed as the High Priest (Cohen Gadol).

This event was, in every sense, a second Hanukka, as Jerusalem had been under Hellenist control for nine years, and the Bet haMiqdash had been desecrated and used once again as a pantheon for Greek gods. However, a few years later, Demetrius II, the son of Demetrius Soter, defeated Balas and reclaimed the Seleucid throne. Surprisingly, the new king, far from seeking revenge against Yonatan, recognized the importance of having the Jewish army on his side and offered him even more privileges than his predecessor.

The Peace Agreement

Conflicts among Seleucid leaders persisted. Now, Tryphon, a powerful Greek general, sought to usurp the throne from Demetrius II. In 143 BCE, Tryphon arrived in Israel with 30,000 soldiers, intending to retaliate against Yonatan, defeat him, and weaken Demetrius. Tryphon deceived Yonatan by inviting him to Acco for peace talks. When Yonatan arrived, Tryphon killed him.

After Yonatan's death, the leadership of Judea passed to his younger brother, Shimon. With the powerful army Yonatan

organized, Shimon fought, defeated, and expelled Tryphon from Eretz Israel.

The State of Israel

Shimon continued working toward the ultimate aspiration of the Hashmonayim and the entire nation of Israel. He fortified Jerusalem and strengthened his army, and in 142 BCE, 23 years after the great rebellion of Matityahu and his sons, the grand dream became a reality. In the Bet haMiqdash, in Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Shimon, son of Matityahu Hashmonayi and the sole survivor of the five brave brothers, declared the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the land of Israel: Judea □□□□□.

On the day the new Jewish state was established, Shimon declared these immortal words, still relevant to Medinat Israel today:

“We have not taken a foreign land, nor have we seized property that is not ours. We have reclaimed the inheritance of our ancestors, which was unjustly taken by our enemies. And when we had the opportunity and the strength to do so, we recovered our freedom.”

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(Sefer Hashmonayim I, Chapter 15, Verses 34–35)

The new state was immediately recognized by Demetrius II, who, for the first time, exempted the Jews from paying taxes to the Seleucid Empire. Shimon was assassinated in 135 BCE and succeeded by his son Yohanan Hyrcanus, who continued to lead the Jewish people and expand the territory of Judea. The fledgling State of Israel endured, with its ups and downs, for nearly 100 years.