

My Glorious Brothers

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WHEN I WAS 15 years old and a member of the Irgun underground (by today's criteria, an honest-to-goodness terrorist organization), we sang "(In the past) we had the heroes / Bar Kochba and the Maccabees / Now we have the new ones / The national youth. . ." The melody was a German military marching song.

Why did we look for heroes in the remote past?

We were in desperate need of national heroes to emulate. For 18 centuries, Jews had not fought. Dispersed throughout the world, they saw no reason to fight for emperors and kings who mostly persecuted them. (Though some of them did. The first authentic hero of the new Zionist entity in Palestine was Josef Trumpeldor, one of the few Jewish officers in the Czar's army, who lost an arm in the 1905 Russian-Japanese war and was killed in a skirmish with Arabs in Palestine.)

So we found the Maccabees, the Zealots and Bar Kochba.

THE MACCABEES, in whose honor we celebrated Hanukka this week, revolted against "the Greeks" in 167 B.C. "My Glorious Brothers" Howard Fast called them in his famous novel.

Actually, "the Greeks" were Syrians. When Alexander the Great's empire was divided between his generals, Seleucus acquired Syria and the countries to the East. It was against this mini-empire that the Maccabees rose up.

It was not only a national-religious struggle against a regime which wanted to impose its Hellenic culture, but also a cruel civil war. The main struggle of the Maccabees was against the "Hellenizers", the cultured modernist Jewish elite who spoke Greek and wanted to be part of the civilized world. The Maccabees were fundamentalist adherents of the old-time religion.

In today's terms, they were the ISIS of their time. But that is not what we learned (and what is being taught today) in school.

The Maccabees (or Hasmoneans, their dynastic name) set up a Jewish state, the last one in Palestine, that lasted for 200 years. Unlike their successors and imitators, they had a lot of political acumen. Already during their rebellion they made contact with the up-and-coming Roman republic and secured its help.

Yet the Maccabees won by a quirk. Their revolt was a very risky adventure, and they owed their eventual victory to the problems that beset the Seleucid empire.

The irony of this story is that the Hasmonean kings themselves became thoroughly Hellenized and adopted Greek names.

THE NEXT great rebellion started in the year 66 AD. Unlike the Maccabee revolt, it was a totally mad affair.

The Zealots belonged to diverse competing groups, who remained disunited to the bitter end. Their rebellion, called "The Great Revolt", was also a fanatical national-religious affair.

At the time, messianic ideas filled the air in Palestine. The country absorbed religious influences from all directions—Hellenic, Persian, Egyptian—and mixed them with the Jewish traditions. It was in this feverish atmosphere that Christianity was born and the Book of Job and other later books of the Hebrew Bible were composed.

With the Messiah expected any moment, Jewish fanatics did something that now seems incredible: they declared war on the Roman Empire, which was then at the height of its power. As if Israel today would declare war on the US, China and Russia at the same time—something even Binyamin Netanyahu would think twice about doing.

It took some time before the Romans gathered their legions, and the end was as could be foreseen: the Jewish community in the country was squashed, the temple was destroyed (perhaps by accident) and the Jews evicted from Jerusalem and many other places in Palestine.

Throughout, the Zealots believed in their God. In besieged Jerusalem, already starving, they burnt each other's wheat, sure that God would provide. But God, it seems, was otherwise engaged.

At the height of the siege of Jerusalem, the venerable rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai was smuggled by his pupils out of the city in a coffin, and the Romans allowed him to start a religious school in Yavneh, which became the focus of a new kind of anti-heroic Judaism.

HOWEVER, THE lesson of the catastrophe caused by the Zealots was not learned. Less than 70 years later, an adventurer called Bar Kochba ("Son of a Star") started another war with the Roman Empire, even more hare-brained than the last.

At the beginning Bar Kochba, like the Zealots, won several victories, before the Romans could gather their forces. At that time, the important rabbis supported him. But his megalomaniac nature caused him to lose their support. He is said to have told God: “You don't have to support me, but at least don't obstruct me!”

The inevitable defeat of Bar Kochba was an even greater disaster than the previous one. Masses of Jews were sold into slavery, some were thrown to the lions in the Roman arena. A legend recounts that Bar Kochba fought a lion with his bare hands and killed it.

However, the basic Zionist tenet that the Jews were expelled from Palestine by force and that this was the beginning of the Diaspora (the “Exile”) is a legend. The Jewish peasant population remained in the country, and most became Christians, and later Muslims. Today's Palestinians are probably mostly descendants of this Jewish population which clung to their soil. At one time, David Ben-Gurion supported this theory.

The Jewish religion was actually born in the Babylonian exile, some 500 years before Christ, and from the beginning the majority of the Jews lived outside Palestine, in Babylon, Egypt, Cyprus and many other countries around the Mediterranean. Palestine remained an important religious center which played a significant part in the transition of Judaism into a Diaspora religion based principally on the Talmud.

THE HANUKKA feast symbolizes the basic change of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple—and the counter-change effected by the Zionists in modern times.

The rabbis were against the cult of heroism, whether God-fearing or not. They belittled the battles of the Maccabees and found another reason to celebrate. It appears that a great miracle had happened, which was much more important than military victories: when the Temple was re-dedicated after being defiled by the “Greeks”, the sacred oil left sufficed only for one day. By divine intervention, this small quantity of oil lasted for a whole week. Hanukka was dedicated to this huge miracle. (Hanukka means literally inauguration, dedication).

The Book of the Maccabees, which recounts the struggle and the victory, was not included in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew original was lost.

(Hanukka, like Christmas, was originally a pagan festival celebrating the winter solstice, much as Passover and Easter are based on the pagan celebration of the spring equinox.)

The Jewish sages were determined to stamp out, once and for all, the craving for revolts and military adventures. Not only was Hanukka turned into an innocuous feast of sacred oil, but the Zealots and Bar Kochba were ignored or belittled in rabbinical writings, which shaped Judaism and Jewish life since then until this very day. Jews were supposed to adore God, not human heroes.

Until Zionism appeared on the scene. It resurrected the ancient heroes and turned them retrospectively into Zionists. The Maccabees, Zealots and Bar Kochba became our models. The mass suicide of the Zealots on the Masada mountain after the Great Revolt was celebrated as a glorious deed, generations of children were and are taught to admire them.

Today we have national heroes in great abundance, and really do not need all these ancient myths any more. But myths die slowly, if at all. Still, more and more voices of historians and such are cautiously raising doubts about their role in Jewish history. (I may have been the first, in an essay I wrote some four decades ago.)

ALL THIS may reaffirm the saying that “nothing changes as much as the past”. Or, in the words of Goethe: “What you call the spirit of the times is nothing but the spirit of the lords in which the times are reflected.”

Zionism was a great spiritual revolution. It took an ancient ethnic-religious Diaspora and re-shaped it into a modern European-style nation. To effect this, it had first of all to re-shape history.

It could base itself on the works of a new generation of Jewish historians, led by Heinrich Graetz, who painted a new picture of the Jewish past influenced by the German nationalist historians of their time. Graetz himself died a few years before the First Zionist Congress, but his impact was and remains immense.

While the Germans resurrected Hermann the Cherusker and built a huge statue of him on the site of his great victory over the Romans in the Teutoburger forest, shortly before the Jewish Great Revolt, the early Zionists resurrected the Jewish heroes, ignoring the disasters they caused. Many European peoples, large and small, did the same. It was the Zeitgeist.

Three generations of Israeli children were brought up from kindergarten on these myths. They are almost completely cut off from world history. They learn that the Greeks were the people whose yoke was thrown off by the Maccabees, but learn next to nothing about Greek philosophy, literature or history. It creates a very narrow, egocentric state of mind, good for soldiers, but not so good for people who need to make peace.

These children learn nothing at all about the history of the Arabs, Islam and the Koran. Islam, for them is a primitive, murderous religion, bent on killing Jews.

The exception is the autonomous Orthodox school system which teaches nothing much except the Talmud, and is therefore immune to the cult of heroes, but also to world history (except the pogroms, of course).

The great political change we need must be accompanied by a profound change of our historical outlook.

The heroes of antiquity are perhaps due for another revision of their status.