

The Maccabees: A Complex Legacy

Chanukah is a holiday when Jews all over the world commemorate the revolt of Judah Maccabee against the oppressive rule of the Greek Seleucid empire which prevented Jews from fully practicing their religion, a revolt which eventually led to renewed Jewish independence in Palestine (until the Roman occupation). Jews everywhere see the holiday as a celebration of struggle for national independence, and for religious freedom.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the Maccabees is more complex than this. The Maccabean struggle was not only directed against foreign occupation, but was also a civil war against the Hellenized upper class in Judea. (Hellenic civilization exerted an enormous attraction in antiquity among the peoples of the Near East, and the Jews were no exception.) There was also a dark side to the Maccabees. They resented the Hellenists not only because they saw them as collaborators with the Seleucid oppressors, but also because they disliked their comparatively loose, open attitude toward Judaism—the Maccabees insisted on strict adherence to religious law. On their eventual victory, they established the

Hasmonean kingdom as a theocracy, and more than this, a theocratic empire. They conquered the whole of Palestine, forcibly imposing Judaism on many of the non-Jewish peoples whom they conquered.

It would be anachronistic to condemn the Maccabees in retrospect for practices that were no doubt common in antiquity. But their legacy is not just a matter of ancient history, since it is celebrated as part of our ongoing religious and cultural tradition. Rather than either idealizing the Maccabees as freedom fighters or condemning them as militaristic theocrats, perhaps it would be best to see their history as a lesson. Struggles against national oppression, however defensible they may be in theory, in practice often become in turn authoritarian, ethnocentric, and allied with religious fundamentalism. This has often been true of both the Jewish national movement—Zionism—and nationalism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Perhaps the lesson is that all such movements should be held to universal values and standards, in accordance with Hillel's famous dictum, "What is hateful to you do not do to others." ♦

Dangers of greater war and conflict in the Middle East

The situation in the Middle East is a grave one. The U.S. has accused Iran of supporting forces fighting against U.S. troops in Iraq. (This accusation strikes us as an example of *chutzpah*—the U.S., having invaded and occupied Iraq, now accuses Iran of meddling in its occupation.) It has launched a series of sanctions against Iran which are clearly intended, not as an alternative to war, but as a prelude to it. Iran's international standing has not been helped by the repressive and obscurantist nature of its regime, personified by its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The U.S. has also accused Iran of harbouring ambitions to make nuclear weapons. The danger of nuclear proliferation is certainly an urgent issue. But the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has stated repeatedly that despite Tehran's attempts to evade controls of its nuclear energy program, it (IAEA) has found no evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program. Further, the issue of proliferation must be broadened to oppose not only the potential nuclear arsenal of Iran but also the already existing ones of India, Pakistan, and Israel. It can only be dealt with by negotiations on all sides, not sanctions designed to pave the way to another catastrophic war. We agree with Akiva Orr, a member of the Israeli Committee for a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: "The safety of all people in the Middle East, including Israelis, rests on a nuclear-free Middle East, not on Israeli nuclear superiority."

In Israel/Palestine, the barrage of rocket attacks

from Gaza on Israel has been followed by the punitive Israeli policy of sanctions against Gaza. Gaza's population has already suffered from the Israeli siege since the election of Hamas almost two years ago, and the more recent violence between Fatah and Hamas. (The latest onslaught was when police of the Hamas regime in Gaza opened fire on demonstrators marking the anniversary of Yasser Arafat's death.) Although Israel is still an occupying power in Gaza, controlling the entries, exits and airspace, it has evaded any responsibility for the welfare of its population by defining Gaza as a "hostile entity." We share the views of Benito Ferrero-Waldner, the European Union's commissioner for external relations, who said, "We understand the distress that is caused in Israel by the continuing rocket attacks from Gaza," but the sanctions "will have very grave consequences for the life of the local population... There should not be collective punishment."

Ten Israeli and Palestinian human rights groups have commendably, although unsuccessfully, petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court against this policy. They point out that "The damage that will be inflicted by the disrupting of electricity and fuel supplies cannot be controlled Deliberately obstructing the civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip is illegal. International law does not allow 'minor' damage: it bans collective punishment entirely."

On Oct. 29 Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz, in the face of international criticism, removed

continued on page 10

Lighting the Chanukah Candles —A Humanistic Ceremony

By Abraham J. Arnold

1. We light the first candle for Matathias the Hasmonean who started the rebellion of the Jews against Syrian-Greek repression in the second century B.C.E.
2. We light the second candle for Judah Maccabee and his brothers who led the Jews to victory over the Syrian Greeks and established Judea as an independent country.
3. We light the third candle for the Maccabean Queen Shlomzion Hamalke, also known as Salome Alexandra, who brought peace to the land after many years of warfare and was the last independent ruler of Judea before the Romans took over the country.
4. We light the fourth candle for Hillel the Elder, the Talmudic rabbi who proclaimed the Golden Rule: Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.
5. We light the fifth candle for Moses Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher who said the only immortality is in one's children and grandchildren and in other creative works that last beyond death.
6. We light the sixth candle for Baruch Spinoza, the 17th-century philosopher who set out to demonstrate that the Bible was incompatible with natural science.
7. We light the seventh candle for Simon Dubnow, the early 20th century Jewish historian who said that Judaism is an all-embracing worldview which encompasses religious, ethical, social, messianic, political and philosophical elements.
8. We light the eighth candle in memory of our daughter Frances Arnold, who was a founder of the Sholem Aleichem community in Winnipeg and always searched for new ways of achieving physical and mental health and well-being.¹
9. We dedicate the ninth candle, the Shamash, or guardian candle, to the memory of Hanna Senesh, the woman who flew from Palestine and parachuted into Yugoslavia during World War II to work with Tito's partisans. She was caught and executed by the Nazis in November 1944 at the age of 23.² ♦



1 The name of another departed friend or relative may be substituted here.

2 The shamash may also be dedicated to one of the Ghetto fighters, e.g., Mordecai Anilewicz or Simon Ringelblum.

EDITORIAL ... Continued from page 3

cutoffs of electricity from the sanctions imposed on Gaza, although he spoke of it only as a “temporary suspension.” But as *Haaretz* correspondent Amira Hass reported (Nov. 7, 2007), “The electricity and fuel supply has already been reduced to below the level of basic human needs.”

The sanctions policy is dubious even from security considerations. The U.S. peace group Jewish Voice for Peace pointed out, “The draconian measures being imposed on Gaza are very effective at stopping the flow of food, power, water ... virtually everything except weapons.” And *Jerusalem Post* West Bank and Gaza correspondent Khaled Abu Toameh predicted that the policy would likely rally “more Palestinians around Hamas and other radical groups.”

Meanwhile, according to Peace Now (*BBC News*, Nov. 7) construction has continued in dozens of West Bank settlements despite Israel's pledge to freeze their expansion. Peace Now Director-General Yariv Oppenheimer commented, “There is no connection between

what is happening in political negotiations and what is happening on the ground.” He accused Israeli leaders of violating their commitments ahead of the forthcoming Annapolis conference.

The crisis can only be resolved, not by another round of vague “peace talks”—which Annapolis promises to be—but by negotiations, with the participation of the elected representatives of both sides, with the clear goal of a genuine end to the occupation and equality of rights for both peoples.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has so far been silent on Iran. He knows that Canadian public opinion must be against following another U.S. drive to war, but is unwilling to alienate his patron in Washington. He has also uncritically supported “Israel” (i.e., its current right-wing government). Canadian policy must change on both issues. It must actively oppose U.S. moves to war, and support negotiated solutions to nuclear proliferation. It must also oppose the continuing 40-year Israeli occupation, and support the legitimate rights of Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, and all peoples in the Middle East. ♦