

Is Assimilation
Really so Bad?
Lessons from Hanukkah

Study Session
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KOACH
on campus



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: estrin@uscj.org.

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Background Material

Vocabulary

- Acculturation – the adoption of foreign ideas, mores, and institutions and their adaptation into the existing culture.
- Hellenism – devotion to or imitation of ancient Greek thought, customs, or styles.
- Assimilation – the absorption into an alternative culture by way of abandoning one’s own.
- Hasmonean – an ancient priestly order named after Hashmoni, grandfather of Mattathias the priest.
- Hasid – In the context of the era refers those pious Jews who refused to absorb any of Greek culture.

Key Figures

- Mattathias – Head priest of the Hasmonean family. Refused the orders of the the king and became the first leader of the Hasmonean Revolt.
- Judah the Maccabee (from the Syriac word “maqaba” – hammer) third son of Mattathias. He became leader of rebel group following the death of Mattathias.
- Antiochus IV – (Antiochus Epiphanes) King of Syria (175 BC-163 BC), son of Antiochus III and successor of his brother Seleucus IV. He is best known for his attempt to Hellenize Judaea and extirpate Judaism

Hellenism & History leading up to the rededication of the Temple

Alexander the Great conquered the area known as Palestine in 331 BCE and Judea was absorbed into the Greek empire, along with most of that part of the world. The hellenization of the Jews in the Greek empire was a slow and gradual process and until x most Jews had adopted some aspects of Greek culture although they had not lost their Jewish identities.

During the rule of Antiochus IV, internal and external political pressures increased, particularly from the Syria front. At this point, the majority of the Jewish nation became subject to the Greek rules as Antiochus IV attempted to force assimilation of all Greek ways. Everyone was expected to worship Zeus and was prohibited from observing the laws of the Torah. When that did not obtain the desired results, Antiochus instituted a policy of death for observing the Torah or not

acknowledging Zeus. Every Jew was forced to worship at the altar in front of representatives of the King. Throughout the Empire, those who did not agree readily were “encouraged” or killed by the armies of Antiochus.

During the winter of 166 BCE an officer of the King arrived in Modi'in. There Mattathias, a local priest, prevented a Jew from worshipping at the newly established altar, killing both the Jew and the officer and tearing down the altar. Mattathias and his five sons fled to the wilderness, where others who had refused to make a complete break from Jewish Law also gathered.

Leading the way in resistance of Antiochus with the Hasmoneans were the Hasidim ('the Pious' not the same group as today's Hasidim). These individuals were a highly conservative and religious sect that refused to accept any of Greek culture. This was a fight against those who would give up their distinctive religious ways to become a part of the larger society.

For the next two years, this group, having decided to replace passive resistance with active, waged guerrilla warfare on Hellenized Jews. After Mattathias' death, his third son, Judah Maccabee (The Hammer) led the rebellion, called the Hasmonean Revolt. He expanded the goal of the rebellion from religious freedom to also include political independence. At first, their victories were small but slowly, their importance and strength increased. The war was being fought not for land or riches, but for the right to believe and worship as they chose.

Eventually, the band gained control over the Jerusalem-Jaffa highway (the main road in and out of Jerusalem) and in so doing demanded the attention of the Syrians for having disrupted communications and control. Though the Syrians, with superior numbers and armor, tried, they were unable to win a military victory over the group led by Judah. Eventually Antiochus lifted the ban on observance and the requirement to worship Zeus but retained control of the Temple. Following the death of Antiochus, Judah gathered his forces and liberated, purified and rededicated the Temple. Political independence was not renewed until 25 years later in 140 BCE.

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Facilitator Guide

The Facilitator Guide is designed to direct you through several discussion options. Although it is designed as a progression, you need not follow from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with another. Use the packet in its entirety or choose components based on the time you have available and the students in your group.

Getting Started – the History of Hanukkah

You might open your conversation by asking the group to share thoughts and memories they associate with Hanukkah. Follow-up by asking what they know about the history leading up to the rededication of the Temple and the development of Hanukkah.

As you will see, this is not a typical session on Hanukkah. The activities that follow are based on an assumption of knowledge of the background leading up to the rededication of the Temple. In the “Background Information” section above, a concise overview of the history has been provided. Take just a few minutes to review this background to ensure that everyone is beginning together. Sometimes we take things for granted when using “familiar” texts.

A key point is understanding who was fighting and against what. The Hasmoneans had likely partially acculturated Greek culture into their lives and they themselves could be called Hellenists. It was only after they were forbidden from any practice of Jewish Law that they revolted – they were fighting against a *complete* loss of their ability to *practice* as Jews.

Section One – When do we say too much?

Start this part of the conversation by defining Hellenism, acculturation and assimilation. Ask how we are “Hellenized”, acculturated and assimilated into the world around us today. Answers might include:

- Hellenized/acculturated - We attend Universities, the theatre, join gyms, participate in the Olympics, support the ideal of Democracy and are leaders in many realms of science. All Greek institutions by the way.
- Assimilated – the things we eat, how we dress, football on Shabbat, etc.

Each year, when Kislev comes around, we dig out our Hanukkiot and celebrate the “Festival of Lights”. Yet, look beyond the Rabbinic miracle of the oil to the original conflict and the original impetus for celebration. Classically, this is a story of traditionalist Jews fighting against assimilation into Greek Culture. It is a fight against the Hellenists (Jews who took on Greek ways) as much as it is against the Syrians and Antiochus. Look a little closer and you might discover it is really a story about when acculturation becomes assimilation. It is only after Antiochus has prohibited any observance of Torah and required all to worship Zeus that the story of the Hasmoneans arrives.

It is at this breaking point that Mattathias steps up and prevents his townsfolk from worshipping at the Greek altar and then proceeds to build his armies and fight. Similar is the story of Hannah and her seven sons when they are captured by the troops of Antiochus and commanded to eat pig. One by one they refuse and are tortured to death in front of her.¹

Discussion points.

- What are the benefits of acculturation or assimilation in our lives today?
- What are the drawbacks?
- For the Hasmoneans and Hannah’s sons this was enough. How do we know when we have become too assimilated? How do we know when enough is enough?

¹ II Maccabes 7. See also. <http://209.58.241.78/vjholidays/chanukah/women.htm>

- Where does each of us draw the line today? Are there areas where we might have already crossed over that point and need to back up?
- Values are measured in terms of what a person is willing to pay for them. In the case of the Hasmoneans, they were willing to pay with their lives. What values do we hold today and what would we “pay” to protect them? (e.g. kashrut is a value of Judaism but one is not asked to starve to protect it, good grades might be a value that one “pays” for by not going to the movies every night)
- An additional piece. Today we often find ourselves at odds with the ideas of the Hareidim (contemporary religious extremists). We look at them, stereotypically, people who will not allow modern society to influence their Judaism at all. The Hasidim of the Maccabean era, although similar in their lack of integration of the society around them. They were an integral part of the Hasmonean fight and they too were purists. What changed?
- What about on the national and international level? Are multinational businesses encroaching upon our ability to be individual communities? Are McDonalds, Starbucks and Wal-Mart creating a world in their own image? During the 2000 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, groups protested what they saw as the over-running of the world by these organizations. What process exist today that that have already or may change our society in this way?

Section Two - Assimilation in the Bible

If you want to move beyond the concept of Hanukkah, try paralleling the issues found there with those in two biblical stories of assimilation: Joseph and Esther. Each of these characters can be held up as examples that a *degree* of acculturation is sometimes necessary for Jewish survival. Do a quick review of the two individuals and the results of their assimilation.

- Joseph, whose political ascendance in Egypt is read on Shabbat Hanukkah, saved the Israelites through his absorption into Egyptian society. Yet, when his brothers stood before him we find that he retained enough of his identity to understand their Hebrew conversation.
- Esther incorporates herself into the palace and life of the king from where she eventually saves the Jews. Midrash states that she retained seven sets of servants, one for each day. It was in this way that she was able to observe Shabbat without anyone realizing that she was doing something different on that day.

In both instances, the characters were able to assimilate their Judaism with their external lives, yet retained their core self. When the time came, they were able to draw on their core to save their people.

Questions to consider:

- What do you think about the choices these characters made?
- How do we know when that *degree* of assimilation has been crossed in our lives?
- How have you tried to find that balance that allows you to live in today's society yet remain Jewish at your core? What are the fundamental pieces in this task?

Additional Resources

- The Book of our Heritage by Eliyahu KiTov. Feldheim Publishers. 1968.
- A Different Light by Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre. Devora Publishing.
- A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice by Isaac Klein. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. 1992.
- From the Maccabees to the Mishna by Shaye Cohen. The Westminster Press. 1987.
- Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity by Lee J. Levine. Hendrickson Publishers. 1999.

- First Maccabees. Written in Hebrew around 120bce about the period of 166-135 bce. Describes the Maccabean dynasty and God's choice of their family to save Israel. Probably written for a Judean audience.
- Second Maccabees. Written in Greek for Diaspora Hellenistic Jews. Seeks to show that the revolt was between greedy priests and irrational Greek leaders.