

Hanukkah 2021

The Rabbis had a problem. They were creating the new version of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple and were doing their best to determine what was worthy of preserving and what was no longer consistent with their approach to our religion. Perhaps the most famous example was the dropping of sacrifices and replacing them with prayer. In that way, they kept the essence of the practice (creating connection with God) but found a more meaningful way to accomplish that objective through prayer.

A lesser-known example of this problem related to Hanukkah. While the essence of the holiday (a small group can accomplish great things when God/right is on one's side) remained meaningful, the rabbis didn't like the Maccabees/Hasmonean dynasty that were at the centre of it. They didn't think that their religious zealotry was consistent with their approach to Judaism, but even more problematic was the fact that they usurped the kingship of Israel from the rightful leaders. They took over both the political and religious components of Jewish life, which were never meant to be held in the same hands.

The Rabbis solved this problem by keeping the essence of the holiday alive through their created story of the miracle of the oil, but largely removed the Maccabees from that story. They didn't put the Book of Maccabees into the Bible and didn't give Hanukkah its own tractate in the Talmud, even though just about every other holiday had one. The core values of the day and its celebration could remain, while removing the problematic figures from the retelling. Even today, think about how few of our Hanukkah songs even mention the Maccabees. Besides Judah, could you name any of the other four brothers? The Rabbis masterfully maintained what Hanukkah was meaning to accomplish while simultaneously removing the problematic figures from its centre.

This struggle continues to this very day in other Jewish and non-Jewish contexts. To what degree do we "centre" problematic figures from our past because they played a key role in our history and in what ways can we still tell those stories without needing to valorize those individuals who we now see as being unworthy of that esteem. Taking our cue from the Rabbis, we can find ways to tell the story without centring the problematic figures. We can find places to acknowledge their place in the story, but do so only in places that allow for the necessary complexity of the conversation. The idea is what matter most, not the individuals we associate with it. And by keeping the values and the ideas at the core of the conversation and the celebration, we can continue to perpetuate important parts of our story in a way that honours what the story was trying to teach us all along.