

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Any Maccabees Around Here?" or, "Father Knows Best

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

We recently completed our celebration of Chanukah. The heroes of the Chanukah story are the Maccabees. Have you ever met a Maccabee? Actually, a more accurate question is, have you ever met a Hasmonean? ("Maccabee", which means "hammer," was the nickname of one of their leaders. Maccabee is also an acronym for *mi komocho ba'alim Hashem*, -- who is like You among the powerful, O God," [Exodus, 15:11] -- which was their battle cry.)

The Hasmoneans were a family of Kohanim – Priests who overthrew the Syrian Greeks who had defiled the Temple and tried to destroy Torah Judaism. (See "The Triumph of Chanukah" "The 'December Dilemma' — Bah! Humbug!!") Nachmanides writes that the Hasmoneans were "pious and lofty men, without whom the Torah and Commandments would have been forgotten from Israel." (Nachmanides' Commentary to Genesis 49:10)

No, you have never met a Hasmonean. And you never will. The family is extinct.

Jacob was on his deathbed. His twelve sons surrounded him in the final moments of his life. He blessed them. Where necessary, he reprimanded them. He instructed them.

One of his instructions had to do with the leadership of Israel:

Judah, your brothers will acknowledge you ... your father's sons will bow to you... The scepter will not depart from Judah... (Genesis, 49:8.10)

Every one of Jacob's sons had his own specific role to play. Levi and his family were to be the spiritual leaders. (The Kohanim came from the Tribe of Levi.) Jacob made it very clear that Judah was to be the king. This was not a new concept. When Joseph shared his dreams about his brothers bowing down to him, they suspected that he was out to usurp Judah's position of royalty.

There were temporary leaders of Israel from other tribes (such as King Saul), but for the long term, it was Judah's descendants who were destined to lead Israel. From King David to the Messiah (and beyond), our kings come from Judah.

So what happened in the Chanukah story? Simon, the son of Mattathias, the leader of the revolt, became the High Priest. He also designated himself as the political leader of Israel. He didn't call himself king because he was not from the Tribe of Judah.

Unfortunately, that distinction was lost on Simon's descendants. They called themselves kings, and became corrupted by their own power. Nachmonides points out that in spite of the righteousness of the Hasmonean family, they violated Jacob's command of ... *the scepter will not depart from Judah*. They took the scepter that rightfully belonged to the Tribe of Judah and kept it for themselves. They were Kohanim – from the Tribe of Levi; they had no right to rule Israel.

Why did they do it? What could they have been thinking?

These Hasmoneans, these Maccabees, knew what was at stake. They saw what their enemies had done to the Temple. They saw that all of Judaism was at risk. The Temple had been desecrated and religiously observant people were persecuted. They had to take action.

And take action they did. Israel needed leadership and the Hasmonean Priests, men of peace, took up their swords and threw the bums out.

That was fine. A battle needed to be fought, and they were the ones who had to fight it. That is the part that Nachmonides was referring to when he wrote that the Hasmoneans were people "...without whom the Torah and Commandments would have been forgotten from Israel." They clearly saved the day.

The problem was that once the dust settled after the war, the Hasmonean leaders should have handed the leadership of Israel back over to the House of David. The Hasmoneans were Kohanim; they made a mistake by taking over as Israel's political leaders.

Jacob, the father of Israel, commanded that leadership was not to go to any other tribe. The Hasmoneans, for all their righteousness in saving Israel, ignored that command. As a punishment, within a little over a century, the entire family was wiped out by their enemies. Nachmonides points out that G-d responded in kind -- the Hasmoneans took the scepter from Judah, so the Hasmoneans' servants took that scepter away from them.

The Hasmoneans, no doubt, felt that they had good reason to hold onto the throne. After all, desperate situations require desperate measures. In emergency situations, most Torah prohibitions are set aside. In a medical emergency, it is permitted, in fact **required**, to violate the Sabbath to provide life-saving treatment. A Kohain is normally not allowed to be exposed to the dead. The Hasmoneans did a Mitzvah

when they picked up their swords against their enemies. (The reason they needed eight days to produce more oil is that after their exposure to the dead, they needed a seven-day purification process that would enable them to press olive oil without instantly defiling it.)

The Hasmonean kings, or at least the first leader, Simon, must have felt that the Davidic family was not in a position to provide the leadership that Israel needed at that crucial time. And perhaps at the time, Simon was right. (Note that I wrote "perhaps." It could be that even Simon was wrong.) However, as Nachmanides points out, "...as Israel continued to appoint over themselves king after king from other tribes, not restoring the sovereignty of Judah, they violated the command of the elder and they were punished..."

"...they violated the command of the elder..." The prohibition of appointing a king from another tribe is not one of the 613 Commandments in the Torah. It is simply "...the command of the elder." When Jacob says something, his children ignore it at their own peril.

It is so easy for us to come up with ways to be smarter than the Torah. There are many justifications for non-observance. We know more today, some of these commandments aren't relevant to modern society, etc.

The Hasmoneans thought they knew better. They ended up as a historical statistic.

Go into any shul. You will see Kohanim, descendants of Aaron. (From a non-Hasmonean branch of the family.) They are around, after thousands of years, because they have adhered to their sacred calling as Kohanim. You will see Levites. How is it possible, after thousands of years, for a family to know that they are Levites? Simple. Throughout the millennia they have respected their special, Torah-given role as the teachers of Israel. You will see Israelites. A rag-tag group of jihad/holocaust/pogrom/Inquisition/Temple Destruction survivors who beat the system of historical extinction by tenaciously clinging to "the commands of the elder."

We are who we are because we have stuck to the teachings of the Torah. True, every generation has, unfortunately, seen members of our People decide that they were smarter than "the elder." These are the people who tragically end up like the Hasmoneans. The only difference is that rather than being murdered by their political enemies, many of them disappear from the Jewish screen by committing spiritual suicide.

Our father Jacob gave us a command and a blessing. *"The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet until the Messiah arrives, for his is the kingship."* (Translation of Onkelos)

Jacob assigned Judah to lead our nation. David and his descendants led us in the past. The Messiah, a descendent of David and Judah, will lead us again to a world of peace and a rebuilt Temple. Let's make sure it happens soon and that we're there to witness it.

How do we do that?

By taking Jacob at his word and sticking with "the program."

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

© 2007 Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.