

Miketz Sermon 5778

Rarely a week goes by without our hearing about religious fundamentalists somewhere who cannot abide unbelief or unbelievers. These people are, in a word, fanatics who think nothing of killing those whose beliefs run counter to their own, and will even kill one of their own if they are deemed too cooperative or cozy with people of other faiths. Here is one example I read about this week that is representative of that kind of thinking: A man who is part of a religious minority went to take part in a public ecumenical ceremony, but a religious fanatic, whose religion this man shares, drew a sword and killed him in public for doing so. The name of that fanatic was Mattathias the Hasmonean.

That is how the story of Hanukkah might have been told from the point of view of the Syrian Greeks that the Hasmoneans were fighting. Had Mattathias and his sons not succeeded in their rebellion against Greek rule, they might have been remembered as religious fanatics, fundamentalist zealots who re-established the traditional forms of worship that had preceded Greek rule, and who could not stomach the assimilationist tendencies of their fellow Jews. The true nature of the Hasmoneans deserves to be studied not only to understand Jewish history better, but also to get a more nuanced understanding of those who act in the same way today in the name of any religion.

What was it that got the Hasmoneans so riled up? The Greek empire had brought a common language and culture to many people throughout the Mediterranean basin, accompanied by a wide range of economic and educational opportunities. It must be said that a good number of Jews in ancient Israel were very happy to be counted as members of that society and take part in the civic culture of the time. It is no small irony that the level of Jewish immersion into Greek

culture is evident in the names of the Hasmoneans themselves: Mattathias, John Hyrcanus, Judah Aristobulus, Antigonus. These were not traditional Jewish names; they are names of a minority group that has opted into the dominant majority culture. But when a minority begins to feel that the majority has crossed the line from creating a shared public culture to imposing that culture, things get dicey, all the more so when the culture clash has deep religious implications.

Everything was hunky dory with the Greeks until they decreed that the Temple rites would include Greek sacrifices, namely swine. There are a lot of things that a conquered people can put up with, but that was where the traditionalists drew a line and said 'no more.'

When Mattathias killed a Jew who was preparing to sacrifice to the Greek gods, he was defending tradition. But was he justified in responding the way he did? How can we hold up his example while condemning acts of violence perpetrated in the name of religion in our own time? When Muslims extremists kill fellow Muslims or non-Muslims for what they see as the imposition of foreign ideas, how different are they from Mattathias? Closer to home, when the ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem throw rocks at passing cars on Shabbat, they see themselves as standing up for tradition in the same way that Mattathias did, stopping the assimilationists from crossing boundaries that must not be crossed. Some of us see them as violent fundamentalists.

I want to touch on the story of Joseph in order to suggest a way of understanding the nature of the Hasmoneans in the broad sweep of Jewish history. Joseph's great ability was his facility with dreams. On three separate occasions, his own dreams and his interpretations of others' move him away from his family, down to Egypt, into and then out of prison and finally to a position of great power in Egypt. When his brothers come to him to save them from famine in Canaan, he first toys with them, but ultimately reveals his identity and tells them that although

they were responsible for selling him into slavery, that it was ultimately God's will that he go down to Egypt in order to save life in the future. As the events were happening, neither Joseph nor anyone else suspected such a thing, but in hindsight it is clear that had his facility with dreams not gotten him to where he now was, all would have been lost.

This bears on the history of the Hasmoneans, because a similar historical process occurred with them. Had they not won the battles they did, militarily and religiously, Judaism itself might have been extinguished. Going along with pigs on the altar truly would have been the end of Judaism; they were right about that. But the Hasmoneans were unable to sustain either their independent power or their religious ideals. As a hedge against other foreign powers, they invited Rome into Jerusalem as an ally; we know where that led. And the Hasmoneans themselves soon enough Hellenized, assimilating into Greek culture and becoming less interested in tradition than with the trappings of power. It would be the next era's great leaders who would nurture and sustain a style of Judaism that was fiercely devoted to tradition yet knew when to bend when necessary and knew when to get out of town and start again when all seemed lost. They were the rabbis, and even though they felt little affinity with the Hasmoneans, it cannot be denied that the rabbis owed everything to them. Just as Joseph's travails were part of a larger story that made it possible for the people to survive, so too did the hardships under the Greeks lead to the conservation of Jewish culture over the short term so that Judaism in another form could survive and thrive later.

But to get back to those fanatics: I am tempted to say 'one person's fanatic is another's freedom fighter,' and that it all depends on which side you are on. But that seems too easy, merely a way out of grappling with the problem. I think that what has changed since the time of

Mattathias, and what separates us from him, is the revolution in thought during the Enlightenment period in the 17th century. The triumph of rationalism and the firm establishment of the ideals of equality, law and civil discourse in the Western world meant that religious wars should be a thing of the past. Governments might draw inspiration from religion, but they would not henceforth impose religion on their citizens. As long as that mindset holds, Jews will not need another Mattithias, because there will not be another Antiochus. Modern law does not impose religion, and the trade-off is that modern religion cannot refuse the law. If there ever was a time when religious fanaticism had a place, it has long since passed, having played its part as a bridge to a nobler and more reasonable kind of society, whether that is here in America, in the Arab world or in the modern, democratic state of Israel.

Shabbat shalom and Hanukkah sameakh