

The Literary Club, December 15, 2015

The Trustees Budget

They Tried to Kill Us. We Won. Let's Eat

or

Latkes Anyone?

Part One: They Tried to Kill Us.

In a Trustee paper last year I tried to introduce some of the traditions of Hanukkah, as well as the enormous influence of Christmas in altering the celebration of this minor Jewish holiday in America. The subject of tonight's lesson, Brethren, explains why this minor holiday exists at all. The title of this paper relates not just to the celebration of Hanukkah but extends to involve the Biblical Books of Judith and Esther, and the raging controversy of the latke versus the hamantash.

At the death of Alexander the Great, 323 B.C.E., one of his generals, Seleucus, became the ruler of the Mesopotamian and Syrian territories and founder of the Seleucid dynasty. A descendant, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, was a particularly despotic king of these lands, which included Judea. He not only reveled in the rich Hellenistic civilization of the time but was convinced that there should be no form of worship of any gods but his. In fact the name he took as king, Epiphanes, means "God Manifest."

Thus the Greek Antiochus joined the long list of peoples determined to destroy Jews and Judaism: Amelekites, Amorites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites, (Chaldeans), Edomites, Egyptians, Hittites...Nazis....an alphabet of woe. Antiochus was responsible for the attempted massacre of observant Jews and the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple. As nineteenth century author Sholom Aleichem's milkman Tevye, the fiddler on that precarious roof, prayed, "I know. I know. We are Your chosen people, but once in a while can't You choose somebody else?"

According to the two Apocryphal Books of the Maccabees, the Jews, led by a Temple elder, Mattiyahu the Hasmonean and his five sons, the most famous of whom is Judah the Maccabee, "the Hammer", led a revolt against the Hellenistic tyrant. Modern scholarship suggests that, rather than trying to destroy all Judaism, Antiochus had decided to intervene in a Jewish civil war on behalf of the Hellenizing Jews, those who were not uncomfortable with their Greek-influenced civilization¹ and who were fighting against the conservative, traditional worshippers of the God of Israel in the countryside. After the Maccabees, employing guerilla warfare tactics,

succeeded against overwhelming odds in conquering the forces of Antiochus, their Hasmonean family dynasty governed Judea from 164 B.C.E to 63 B.C.E. During this century of Hasmonean rule Judea expanded, and not always peacefully, to cover all of Palestine. But we must move forward, as promised, toward the latke.

Part 2: They Tried to Kill Us. **We Won**

After the amazing Maccabean triumph over far superior Seleucid forces in the Jewish civil war, the orthodox or traditionalist Jews at once set to work restoring their desecrated Temple, destroying a status of Zeus placed near the altar, ritually cleansing this altar and building, and then rededicating it to God. The word Hanukkah is derived from the Hebrew for dedication. Now let the miracles begin.

The Temple menorah, with three branching candle holders on either side of a central one, was said to be made of pure gold in the time of Moses and had been used in the portable sanctuary of that time. This menorah was believed to have been deposited in the Jerusalem Temple some three centuries later. Its seven lamps were lit daily with the purest fresh olive oil. There was, however, a major problem at the time of the Maccabees' victory. Antiochus' desecration of the Temple had left the Jewish worshipers with only a small amount of this olive oil, enough to light the menorah for but a single day. With solemn prayer the congregation lit the menorah that first night, saddened that this ritual would end as the flame died. Miraculously, day after day the Temple elders found that there was enough oil to keep the lamps burning for eight days.² Thus was the Temple rededicated with a miracle. This is the story written in the two Books of the Maccabees, which appear in the Catholic Apocrypha, but, interestingly, were never recognized in the Tanakh, the Christian "Old Testament". Not only does the struggle of the Maccabees against tyranny not appear in the Tanakh, but we do not even find the miracle of the oil recounted in any Jewish writing until about 500 C.E.³

Perhaps it was felt wiser not to spread widely the story of Hanukkah as celebrating a successful Jewish rebellion, as the occupying Romans would not take kindly to such a history which suggested that rebellion just might work again. That's one argument the Jews would have learned not to repeat, having attempted two unsuccessful and bloody rebellions which Rome crushed in 73 and 136 C.E. Or perhaps the rabbis who finally decided, probably in the second century C.E., which books belonged in the Jewish canon, found it unseemly to recount a battle between Jewish factions in a holy book. We do not know.

Subsequently, two of the great Jewish scholars of the late first century B.C.E.-early first century C.E., Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, had a significant argument about the ritual involved in the observance of Hanukkah, the order of kindling the lights. Their students battled each other, and not just with words, over this point of ritual, so significant did it seem at the time. Shammai

argued that the great miracle of Hanukkah was on the first day and so the eight lights should be lit on the first day, seven the second, etc. Rabbi Hillel, winner and still champion, carried the debate with the view that stretching the oil over eight days was the real miracle so one should begin, as we still do, with one candle on the first day and eighth candle on the eighth.

Part 3: They Tried to Kill Us. We Won. **Let's Eat**

Now the story gets happier. Certain foods are often associated with special holidays. Hot cross buns are, of course, traditionally eaten on Good Friday to mark the end of Lent. Some believe that the hot cross bun can offer protection from shipwreck and fire. Turkey and Thanksgiving have been linked for many years, probably based on the faulty belief that this tasty bird was a central part of the first Thanksgiving meal in 1621.

The linkage of certain foods to holidays brings me forcefully back to the latke. These are gloriously golden, crispy potato pancakes, strongly linked to Hanukkah. But why? After all, the potato was first cultivated by the Incas about 7000 years ago, but was first brought to Europe only in 1536 and not to Judea even then! So how do we connect the latke to a celebration in the second century B.C.E.? The Hebrew word for the latke, *leviva*, refers in the Book of Samuel⁴ to some sort of dumpling made from kneaded dough. Ancient recipes focused on cheese, legume or other vegetables as the basic ingredients, but when the latke as potato pancake was first conceived (probably in Poland in the seventeenth or eighteenth century), with the potato grated, fried with a bit of flour, eggs, salt, and some diced green onion, its triumph was immediate and complete! The wondrous potato latke came to replace all the other pancake-like foods as the dominant Hanukkah dish. But what could possibly be the association of potato pancakes with Hanukkah? So glad you asked.

What substance must you fry with? Some sort of oil, of course! And it seemed quite logical to connect that oil with the miraculous oil lasting eight days during the reconsecration of the Temple. While the latke has become a traditional symbol of Hanukkah in the West, the fried jelly donut has carried the day in Israel. These may seem to be slightly far-fetched religious associations, but I can vouch for both the spectacular tastes and their meaningful, if unusual, symbolism.

The latke is often eaten with sour cream. *Sour cream* as religious symbolism? Really? Absolutely! Dairy products traditionally played a role in the defeat of the greatly feared Assyrian army by a famous Jewish heroine, Judith. This story, like that of the Maccabees, is found only in the Apocrypha, not the Tanakh, the Old Testament. The Book of Judith described the Assyrians' turn to try to conquer and destroy the ancient Israelites. Judith, a beautiful young widow, indignant that the Israelites were not resisting the enemy with the strength they should have mustered, came alone to the Assyrian camp claiming to have information on the Jewish

military resistance. She cleverly ingratiated herself with their general, Holofernes. She plied him with a salty cheese delicacy requiring considerable amounts of wine to wash it down. When Holofernes fell drunkenly to the floor, Judith promptly seized his sword and decapitated him. The Assyrians were thunderstruck at seeing their enormous commander lose his head, so to speak, and fled.

The story provides yet another example of components of food coming to the rescue of the Jews, analogous to God's miracle of the oil for Hanukkah. So the story of Judith is read on the Sabbath of Hanukkah, accompanied by, of course, dairy products. Well, you can have Judith's salty cheese if you wish, but for me sour cream wins out, really enhancing the taste of latkes.

Sure it's just a legend for many readers, but it does fit, Brethren, into the Biblical genre of "salvation traditions." Judges 4:21, which *is* in the Tanakh, the Old Testament, tells of the Jewish heroine, Yael, who managed to convince the enemy Canaanite commander Sisera to o.d. on wine, then hammered a tent-peg into his forehead! Not great gastronomic material for designating a festival food in that one!

But the story of the tasty latke moves on into modern times, to the University of Chicago in 1946. Here members of that distinguished faculty, led by economist Milton Friedman, historian Daniel Boorstin, and many others began, for sheer fun, a tradition of mock debate as to the merits of the latke and another Jewish delicacy, eaten at the Festival of Purim, the *hamantash*, a pastry which is supposed to remind us of the victory over the evil Persian minister Haman, another potential destroyer of the Jewish community. Haman was outwitted by the Jewish heroine, Queen Esther, in the Tanakhic book of that name, one of only two Old Testament books (the other is the Song of Solomon) where the name of God never appears. This triangular cookie-like specialty, usually filled with a prune marmalade, poppy seeds and honey, or cheese has been imaginatively envisioned as shaped like Haman's pocket where he kept bribery money, or perhaps his three cornered hat, or even, especially in Israel, his ears! Oh well, the three-cornered hamantash is delicious, whatever it symbolizes!

Thus there is an explicit and unending controversy among a people who love to argue and debate. It is an unavoidable, disturbing, and, yes, earth-shaking question. Is the hamantash tastier than the latke or vice versa? Let me provide a few approaches to the Great Latke-Hamantash Debates, occurring nationally during Hanukkah. Two individuals are chosen or assigned to become the champion of either the latke or the hamantash. Comic passions run high. Allow me to pretend that I have become the defender the latke in public debate. I must make use of all available evidence, real or metaphoric, including classical, scientific, and philosophical references, to prove the superior merit of the latke over, as I now see it, the clearly inferior hamantash. My opponent will, in turn, try to defame the wondrous latke, as if that were possible!

For example, I could invoke William Blake's immortal poem:

Latke, latke, sizzling bright

In the skillet, on that night.

O what a skillful hand or eye

Has shaped thy golden symmetry?

In what fragrant oil or grease

Did you rise to please, to tease

Our palate with your crunchy crust,

So soft inside to make us lust,

To fill our hearts with ardent passion

That can't be stilled by hamantashen?⁵

Or, in a different mode of attack on the opponent who is still trying to defend that pathetic little hamantash, I could remind my opponent:

Are you aware, Sir, that in the immortal Halls of Philatkophy, the central method of reasoning is truly dialatkical; that Plato's immortal writings were his dialatkes and that his greatest pupil was Aristotlatke; that the great founder of British empiricism was John Latke; that Karl Marx predicted a revolution of the prolatkariat? Thus the latke has become the fundamental underpinning of Western thought!⁶

I sincerely hope that in future Holiday Celebrations you will continue to latke me enhance your already substantial culinary wisdom.

From the Trustees then: Merry Hanukkah! "Happy Christmas to all, and to all..."⁷ here's Jerry!

Edward B. Silberstein, M.D

21 December 2015

End Notes

1. Largely in Jerusalem.
2. I Maccabees 4:56.
3. in the fifth century Gemara C.E., a newer part of a central Jewish document called the Talmud.
4. II Samuel 13:8.
5. Stankiewicz, Edward. "Ode to the Latke," in *The Great Latke Hamantash Debate*, ed. Ruth Friedman Cernea (Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 2006), 87.
6. Gewirth, Alan. "The Apotheosis of the Latke," *ibid*, 41.
7. Moore, Clement. "A Visit from St. Nicholas," *Troy (NY) Sentinel*, 1823.

Bibliography

Ashton, Dianne. *Hanukkah in America*. New York. New York University Press. 2013. pp.342.

Ausubel, Nathan. *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*. New York. Crown Publishers, 1964. pp. 560.

Cernea, Ruth F. *The Great Latke-Hamantash Debate*. Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press. 2006. pp. 216.

Mazar, Benjamin and Moshe Davis. *The Illustrated History of the Jews*. 1963. pp. 204.

Rips, Nancy. *Hanukkah Stories*. Hollywood, FL. Frederick Fell Publishers, Inc. 1997. pp. 191.

Silberman, Charles. *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*. New York. Summit Books. 1985. pp. 458.