

The origins of Chanukah

in a nasty little class war among the Jews blues

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Here's the general outline of the melody, which needs to be adjusted in every verse to handle the varying numbers of unaccented syllables. Give the pairs of eighth notes a bit of swing feel; divide them about 60:40 instead of 50:50.

And here's what might be done with that melody in verses 1, 14, and 21. Note the loss of one and a half measures out of the usual twelve-bar pattern between the first two lines of verse 14.

Well, the "o - il and mi - ra - cle" ver - sion may be fine for the mas - ses,
 But we can do bet - ter, and there - fore, be - fore the night pas - ses,
 Let me give you the back - ground to Chan - ³u - kah as clash be - tween clas - ses.

And when Ja - son the Priest out - bid his fa - ther's el - dest son, he
 Did - n't just send the King buc - kets of milk and of ho - ney,
 But Tem - ple sil - ver that was bought with the peo - ple's mo - ney.

At the Tem - ple's al - tar, where on - ly the best ox - en burn,
 A new high priest, Me - ne - la - us, took o - ver in turn,
 Ha - ving out - bid Ja - son, u - sing trea - sure that he did - n't earn.

Now, since this is folk music and not grand opera, there's no point in your trying to learn my adjustments to every line; you'll need to make up and learn your own adjustments in order to feel comfortable with and remember them.

Complete lyrics overleaf

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There are 31 verses, but in six of them (indicated by ~ ~ at the end of the first line) it makes more sense to leave out one and a half measures of musical fill between the first and second lines. By my calculations, that makes this, on the average, an 11.7-bar blues.

Well, the "oil and miracle" version may be fine for the masses,
But we can do better, and therefore, before the night passes,
Let me give you the background to Chanukah as clash between classes.

Now, we could start with Homer, for this story begins with the Greeks.
Then it's four hundred years till the last day Socrates speaks,
But from then to Alexander only thirty-three hundred weeks.

Alexander the Great wasn't Greek, but he liked what he found.
He thought their idea of the city was basically sound,
So he took the Greek language and city and spread them around.

By then the Greek city was governed by its upperclass males.
They sent their sons to the gym, tilted justice's scales,
And watched naked athletes who had all of their original details.

Though the Jews were bound by covenant to practice circumcision,
There were some who wanted this practice to undergo revision
When the Hellenistic culture and the Jewish came into collision.

For Alexander had conquered Judea, as it came to be known.
But when he died young, there was no one to sit on his throne,
So the empire split, with Judea in Egypt's zone.

In 198 (counting backwards), there were conquests anew.
A Syrian king, Antiochus the Third, came through,
Displacing the Ptolemies of Egypt. His empire grew.

Antiochus tolerated local faiths because ~ ~
That meant less trouble, so he sent a decree with a clause
That guaranteed the rule of Judea under Jewish laws.

So the Jews continued to worship their God in their lands,
In the kind of situation where everyone involved understands
That the real control of the Temple stays in the King's hands.

For, of the cities once held by Alexander the Great,
Jerusalem was different from others around at that date,
The High Priest was also head of government, head of state.

The High Priest served as liaison twixt Jews and the King.
There were matters of law to discuss, and tributes to bring,
And an unwritten rule of King's praises the Priest had to sing.

Twenty-three years later, another major change occurred.
The death of Seleucus, who followed Antiochus the Third,
Left his brother, Antiochus the Fourth, of whom you have heard.

The normal succession of Priesthood from father to son ~ ~
Was interrupted, for a bidding war had begun,
And the High Priest's brother offered four hundred forty. He won.

And when Jason the Priest outbid his father's eldest son, he ~ ~
Didn't just send the king buckets of milk and of honey,
But Temple silver that was bought with the people's money.

The High Priest, Jason, bought the right to establish a gym,
A place where powerful, Greek-speaking males like him
Could send their sons for improvement of mind and of limb.

For a new kind of liberal thought was emerging then.
It said that the holy books, written on parchment with pen,
Were not the orders from God but inventions of men.

So, in promotion of peace, ideas, and trade,
They wanted to alter the laws their ancestors made,
And join their neighbours as they worshipped, they ate, and they played.

A city like others would be good, so these Hellenists felt.
But out in the countryside, the places where the poor people dwelt,
The folk were fundamentalist; the modern term is "Bible Belt".

The countryside priests, following the ancient ways,
Believed that the Torah, its every obscure word and phrase,
Still held the rules for conducting their lives and their days.

And groups called "Chasidim" were organized to defend ~ ~
The traditional ways, opposing this Hellenist trend,
For they saw no way for the two different cultures to blend.

At the Temple's altar, where only the best oxen burn,
A new high priest, Menelaus, took over in turn,
Having outbid Jason, using treasure that he didn't earn.

So Menelaus was effectively head of the Jews,
Supported by the elite for his Hellenist views,
But still just a puppet the Syrian king got to choose.

The forces of Jason and of Menelaus collided.
The masses rebelled against both. Antiochus decided
To support his High Priest from whom tribute was being provided.

Those Jews concerned with preserving their traditions saw ~ ~
That Menelaus, who should have been defending their law,
Became the sharpest talon in King Antiochus's claw.

Not only did he permit the Temple's pollution,
But he supported the campaign of severe persecution,
Condemning the keepers of the Sabbath to quick execution.

The Maccabees met this threat to their people's existence,
With organized guerilla warfare and prayers for assistance
As the keystones of over two decades' successful resistance.

And in the war's long story, this chapter drew to its close
When Menelaus, the high priest the foreign king chose,
Was executed as the chief cause of all of these woes.

Now, it's always the victors who get to write the history lesson,
To choose the fine words for conveying the proper impression,
That the good guys won in the end by resisting aggression.

And so, each year, when the Chanukah candles are lighted,
The dreidel is spun, and the standard tale recited,
We're supposed to think that the Jews of the day were united.

But there were two factions. Favoured by King and by court ~ ~
Were secular humanists, corrupt, and mad about sport,
It was the rigid fundamentalists who had the Maccabean support.

Here's your take-home lesson: when King Antiochus number Four
Chose as High Priest whoever came and offered him more,
He set the stage for a class-based civil war.

I was invited to perform at a Chanukah concert at the end of 1996. Having nothing appropriate already in my repertoire, I thought I should try learn more about how the attractions of Hellenism led to the Maccabean revolt, something I had not encountered in my childhood Jewish education but only in James Michener's novel *The Source*, and build a song around what I learned. I quickly found myself in the much more interesting class conflict part of the story. These were my primary sources, both of a scholarly, footnoted sort:

Bickerman, Elias. *The God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979.

Tcherikover, V. *Parts One and Two (Chapters 1-5) in Schalit, A. The Hellenistic Age: Political History of Jewish Palestine from 332 B.C.E. to 67 B.C.E., which is also The World History of The Jewish People, First Series: Ancient Times, Volume Six*. Rutgers University Press and Jewish History Publications Ltd. (Israel—1961), 1972.

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The text has varied somewhat over the years 1996-2003 as I've tried to make the story clearer.