

Separation of Synagogue and State

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Hanukah commemorates the success of the Maccabees in gaining independence from the Seleucid Empire. The Hasmonean dynasty, which lasted from 164-63 BCE was the only period of Jewish sovereignty in Israel from 586 BCE until 1948 CE. Why did the Maccabees' success last a mere century? What lessons can we learn for the modern State of Israel to ensure our long-term prosperity?

One of the major problems that challenged later Hasmonean rulers was their claim to be both *kohen gadol* and king. The Torah envisions a separation of powers between the king, priesthood, prophet, and legislature. Rabbi Sack writes in his recent book, *Not in God's Name*:

In the ancient world, the Pharaoh's of Egypt, like the kings of Mesopotamian city states, combined temporal and ecclesiastical power. They were both head of state and head of the religion of the state....But the religion of Abraham was born in a *protest against* this very phenomenon.

The Hasmoneans, however, ignored this model and we have both textual and numismatic evidence that this caused great unrest among the Jewish people. Josephus reports that the Pharisees reviled John Hyrcanus, the grandson of Mattathias, and charged that he should be content with the monarchy and leave the spiritual leadership to the a descendent of the Zadokite family, the legitimate high priestly dynasty. The Babylonian Talmud echoes a similar complaint against Hyrcanus' son, Alexander Yannai who reigned from 103-76 BCE.

Here is a bronze *perutah* coin minted by Alexander Yannai that reads, "יהונתן הכהן הגדול וחבר היהודים" "Yehonatan the High Priest and the Council of the Jews," on one side and has a pair of cornucopia with a pomegranate in the center on the other side.



Yannai was successful in greatly expanding the borders of Israel but was also infamous for killing tens of thousands of Pharisees and other Jews in civil wars. The Pharisees were particularly bothered that he declared himself king as well as high priest. Here is coin that reads “King Alexander” in Greek around an anchor on one side, and on the other, “יהונתן המלך,” within the spokes of a star diadem. Notice that the “Council of the Jews” has been omitted.



The controversy surrounding the shift from being just high priest, as reflected in the first coin, to claiming the monarchy as well, as shown in the second coin, becomes apparent in yet a third coin. This *perutah* originally read King Yannai, as in the second coin, but was then overstruck to read Yahonatan the High Priest, as in the second coin. Apparently, Yannai’s usurping of the title king was so offensive that people would not tolerate that title on their coins. One can still see remnants of the original stamp on this overstruck coin.



The Torah envisions a separation of spiritual leadership from temporal power in its ideal governing structure. The former was reserved by the Levites and priests while kingship was the exclusive inheritance of the tribe of Judah. Ramban writes that because the Hasmoneans, who were priests, illegally usurped the title of king as well, they were punished and lost their dynasty within a mere one hundred years.

Hanukah has appropriately become one of the most popular holidays across the religious spectrum both in America and in Israel. We celebrate hope and light even in the face of persecution and darkness, and we assert our right for religious freedom and political independence so that we can fulfill our destiny to be a light unto the nations. The downfall of the Hasmoneans, however, also serves as a reminder of the importance of the Torah’s vision to separate religion from politics. As we witness the ever-growing miracle of the State of Israel in its 72nd year, we pray that Hashem grant wisdom to both its political representatives and its spiritual lights to ensure a long and prosperous future for our nation.

Hag Urim Sameah!