

## FOCUS: Reinventing Chanukah

# The Secret of Jewish Survival

*The Maccabees not only won a great military victory; they came up with the quintessential survival strategy that has kept us from extinction.*

BY MICHAEL L. FESHBACH

Every Chanukah we thank God for the miracle of the season. But what *was* the miracle? Simply this: the Maccabees and their legacy survived.

*This is a miracle*, you ask? The parting of the Red Sea—now *that* was a miracle! The manna from heaven? That was a miracle too. But *survival*—the most basic of human instincts? Granted, Jewish survival is a great accomplishment, given our history of persecution. But why single out this one event, call it a miracle, and celebrate it for eight days every year for the past two thousand or so years.

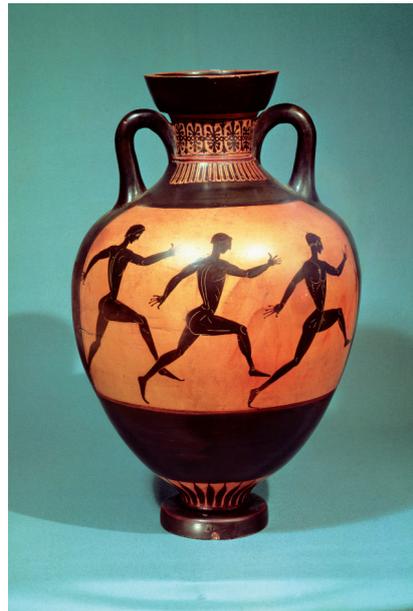
Simply because our ancestors not only won a great military victory; they came up with the quintessential survival strategy that has kept us from extinction ever since.

Consider: of the many ancient peoples that went up against Greek civilization, we Jews alone have lived to tell the tale. The Edomites, gone; the Phoenicians, history; the ancient Egyptians, a pale memory.

Why couldn't these other nations compete with the Greeks? Because Greek culture was all the rage—sophisticated, attractive, excelling in the arts and sports. They had the Olympics. Travel and trade opportunities abounded. Big business flourished. To be all that you could be, Greece was your ticket, assuming you had the drachmas.

And this very cosmopolitan society was willing to accept the Jews. Many Jews, tempted by the “in” society, reasoned, “We’re not really all *that* differ-

*Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach serves Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, Maryland.*



**Of the many ancient peoples that went up against the sophisticated, aesthetic, athletic, and prosperous Greek civilization (symbolized here by a 5th century B.C.E. vase depicting a foot race in Athens), we Jews alone have lived to tell the tale.**

ent. Well, we do circumcise our males, so they look different when competing nude in athletic games...maybe we don't really need that ceremony. Besides, we've heard that doctors in Jaffa can undo or reverse circumcisions.

“We believe in one God, and they believe in many. But they have a chief god called Zeus. Well...we could pray to one god at a time, couldn't we? We wouldn't want to be rude and not join them in the prayer at the opening of sports events.”

And in line with these assimilationist sentiments, many urban Jews taught their children Greek before Hebrew

and built a Jewish community center in Jerusalem that combined study and service with sports—modeled on the Greek gymnasium, which, after all, had religious overtones.

When more traditionally minded religious Jews rose up in protest, the assimilationists called in the Greek authorities to intervene. It was a colossal mistake: King Antiochus Epiphanes IV seized the opportunity to *outlaw* the practice of Judaism altogether and install statues of Zeus and himself in the Jerusalem Temple.

Now, with the defiled Temple out of service, Jewish festivals went unobserved, even the festival of Sukkot, when Jewish farmers offered praise and gratitude to God for a good harvest. Not only was this an agricultural gamble; it was an affront to the Almighty!

And that's when it happened. In the small village of Modi'in, the Maccabean elder, Mattathias, caught sight of a Jew bowing down to an idol and struck him dead. This act set off the revolt against the Greeks. Using guerilla tactics, the outnumbered farmer-warriors, led by Mattathias' son Judah, defeated the Greeks, restored the Temple, and observed a belated Sukkot in the month of Kislev for eight days. Judah did not survive the extended conflict, so his brother Jonathan took over. Then, in 140 B.C.E., their brother Simon established an independent kingdom, giving rise to the Hasmonean dynasty, which lasted until 37 B.C.E.

Secure in their independence, these Hasmonean kings adopted Greek-style names, and their Jewish subjects followed suit, once again imitating the