

What I learned about Chanukkah from the US Army War College- Chanukkah and Warfare

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There are quantitative changes in the nature of warfare, there are qualitative changes in the nature of warfare. There is not a neat line of evolution from primitive hand-to-hand combat, culminating in star wars. The wars of the Maccabees were fought against combatants on elephants- the tanks of their day. This does not represent a radical new technology, just an alternate means of accomplishing a similar end.

New technology radically impacts the conduct of a military campaign; the initial impact of a strategic air campaign was unimaginable in previous centuries. In the 21st century, we can expect new threats in space and cyberspace. The chances of an old-fashioned, land based, tank and infantry war are receding- we've gotten so good at conventional warfare as to render it virtually obsolete.

Some things don't change, though. Contemporary strategic thinker Colin S. Gray notes that "belligerents who find themselves materially challenged will seek strategic compensation primarily by means of adopting asymmetric . . . strategies that might offset their disadvantages." Thus, today's opponents rely on insurgency and asymmetric threats, threats that the mighty US military cannot seem to root out, even with the most advanced technology in the history of warfare.

Which brings us to the story of Hanukkah and the Maccabean warriors. Out numbered and out armed, our ancestors undertook a guerilla campaign in their fight for freedom. The book of II Maccabees depicts the Maccabees as "living like wild animals in the mountains and caves." Ultimately,

the forces of Antiochus learned the same lesson that we are re-learning now- war is not an arithmetic equation in which the bigger number always wins!

Antiochus gave himself the name- Epiphanes, meaning, God incarnate. Beware the leader who thinks he is God! The unwillingness to question one's own strategic thinking and adjust accordingly has been the downfall of military leaders throughout the centuries, and it led to Antiochus decision to halt his campaign.

Victories in small skirmishes led to the capture of weapons and an increased willingness of volunteers to support the Maccabean insurrection. It is important to note that the Maccabees did not target civilians, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was an accepted standard "bayamim ha-hem/in those days."

As the Jewish fighters gained confidence and skill, Antiochus realized that victory was not forthcoming, his treasury was being rapidly depleted, and a negotiated resolution was preferable to an endless and expensive campaign. B.D. Liddell Hart, in his classic work on strategy, refers to this as "self-exhaustion".

Hart reminds us that a good cause is a sword as well as armour. The Maccabees were sustained by their devotion to a good cause- their right to freedom of religious expression. They were fighting for their own spiritual survival, and, were it not for their bravery, the Jewish way of life could easily have disappeared

Not surprisingly, there was no unanimity regarding the Maccabean perspective among the Jews of their day. Sadly, the nature of power is corrosive, and corruption ultimately beset their regime.

The rabbinic tradition, uncomfortable with the

glorification of military prowess which is at the heart of our celebration of Hanukka, shifted the emphasis to the miracle of the oil and the message of the prophet Zecharya- "Not by might and not by power but by My spirit, says God." Or, as Hart puts it, "The perfection of strategy would be, therefore, to produce a decision without any serious fighting."

Such is the vision of a Messianic age of peace for which we hope and pray and work. Until that longed for time arrives, we celebrate Hanukka, recognizing the bravery of those who risk and, indeed, too often, sacrifice their lives, in support of our freedom, then and now.