



# FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

## Chanukah Development, Globalization and the Miracle of the Maccabees

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### How to Use this Publication

*From the Sources* is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to engage in the texts and use them in your community to teach and take action. **Use *From the Sources* to:**

- **Learn with others.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises.
  - **Enrich your own learning.** This resource aims to inspire thought-provoking and challenging perspectives on the holiday texts.
  - **Teach.** Invite others to share in this learning. Use it as the basis for a *dvar Torah* or to motivate action in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.
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### Introduction

Chanukah commemorates the victory of Jewish sovereignty against the Greek/Hellenistic empire. The Greeks, and later the Romans, brought great advances in science, technology and philosophy that profoundly shaped Western culture—and influenced Jewish practice and tradition—for millennia. They also brought religious persecution, strict political hierarchy and a foreign elite. Under the Greek king Antiochus IV, many Jewish practices were outlawed and Greek religious symbols were forcibly installed in the Second Temple. Eventually, the Maccabees rose up against the Greeks and reasserted Jewish rule in Judea.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are also witness to great advances—medical, technological and economic—that reach to the corners of the world. However, these advances also raise concerns about the imposition of particular cultural norms and ideologies from the West. Chanukah offers an opportunity to explore the conflicts and tensions that accompany globalization and development.

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<p><b>Al Hanisim (Liturgical formula recited during Chanukah)</b></p> <p>In the time of Mattityahu, the son of Yochanan, the Hasmonean High Priest, and his children, the evil Greek empire confronted Your righteous people to make them forget Your Torah and to divert them from the laws of Your choosing...</p>	<p><b>על הנסים</b></p> <p>בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול חשמונאי ובניו כשעמדה מלכות יון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחקי רצונך . . .</p>
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- How does Al Hanisim, a liturgical text, characterize the encounter between the Greek Empire and the Jewish people?

***Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition, Erich S. Gruen, p. xiv***

The degree to which acculturation took place in Judea itself and the time when it began in earnest elude any certainty... "Judaism" and "Hellenism" were neither competing systems nor incompatible concepts. It would be erroneous to assume that Hellenization entailed encroachment upon Jewish traditions and erosion of Jewish beliefs. Jews did not face a choice of either assimilation or resistance to Greek culture... The prevailing [Hellenistic] culture of the Mediterranean could hardly be ignored or dismissed. But adaptation to it need not require compromise of Jewish precepts or practices. The inquiry can be formulated thus: how did Jews accommodate themselves to the larger cultural world of the Mediterranean while at the same time reasserting the character of their own heritage within it?

- How does Gruen characterize the encounter between Greek culture and the Jewish people?
- How does your own experience as an American Jew relate to these two texts?

<p><b>Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33b<sup>1</sup></b></p> <p>R. Judah, R. Jose and R. Simeon were sitting, and Judah, a son of proselytes, was sitting near them. R. Judah commenced [the discussion] by observing, "How fine are the works of [the Roman] people! They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths." R. Jose was silent. R. Simeon b. Yochai answered and said, "All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places to set harlots in them; baths to rejuvenate themselves; bridges to levy tolls for them."</p>	<p><b>תלמוד בבלי שבת לג:</b></p> <p>דיתבי רבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון, ויתבי יהודה בן גרים גבייהו. פתח רבי יהודה ואמר: כמה נאים מעשיהן של אומה זו: תקנו שווקים, תקנו גשרים, תקנו מרחצאות. רבי יוסי שתק. נענה רבי שמעון בן יוחאי ואמר: כל מה שתקנו - לא תקנו אלא לצורך עצמן, תקנו שווקין - להושיב בהן זונות, מרחצאות - לעדן בהן עצמן, גשרים - ליטול מהן מכס.</p>
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- What does R. Judah think are the positive contributions made by the Romans? Why does R. Simeon b. Yochai disagree with him?
- Mapping this passage onto the contemporary reality of globalization, which "works" do you think R. Judah would praise today? How would R. Simeon b. Yochai critique his praise?

<sup>1</sup> For a humorous alternate take on this passage, see "The Aqueduct" clip from Monty Python's "The Life of Brian" at <http://tinyurl.com/2k9wz4>.

**“Culture: Cultural Diversity, Cultural Production and Identity,” Fatma Alloo et al., *Another World is Possible*, p.213**

The increasing demand by peoples and communities to have their cultural identity preserved comes in a world context we now call globalization, which many perceive as taking us towards a progressive homogenization at a global level...The process of globalization manifests itself as a two-headed creature. One has an unprecedented capacity for communication and exchange on a global scale...The other manifestation, in contrast, is the imposition of a Western socio-economic-cultural model throughout the world.

- In what ways do you see globalization as bringing opportunity? In what ways does it impose homogeneity?
- How does Alloo’s assessment of globalization as “two-headed” offer commentary on the views expressed by R. Judah and R. Simeon b. Yohai?

**“Global Covenant: A Jewish Perspective on Globalization,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Making Globalization Good*, p.224**

Globalization, writes Zygmunt Bauman, “divides as much as it unites... What appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signaling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate” (Bauman 1998: 2). There can be no doubt that some of the economic surplus of the advanced economies of the world should be invested in developing countries to help eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, ensure universal education, combat treatable disease, reduce infant mortality, improve work conditions, and reconstruct failing economies. As with *tzedakah*, the aim should be to restore dignity and independence to nations as well as individuals. Whether this is done in the name of compassion, social justice, or human solidarity it has now become a compelling imperative. The globalization of communications, trade, and culture globalizes human responsibility likewise. The freedom of the few must not be purchased at the price of the enslavement of the many to poverty, ignorance, and disease.

- What argument does Rabbi Sacks make in favor of globalization? What is the “compelling imperative” that he identifies?
- How does Rabbi Sacks’ view relate back to the traditional telling of the Chanukah story?
- Contemporary development includes elements of “communications, trade and culture.” Imagine the beneficiaries of that development writing their own version of Al Hanisim. What might they say?
- What do these texts teach us about how to support those in the Global South, given our people’s historical experience of oppression at the hands of the Greek and Roman globalizers?
- Does it make a difference if *tzedakah* is done in the name of compassion, social justice or human solidarity? How would you characterize these three approaches?



## Conclusion

For the Jews during the time of the Maccabees, the Hellenistic imposition of development, assimilation and cultural imperialism were sufficiently disruptive that the Jewish people chose to resist with violence. Now that we, American Jews, are in some ways on the other side of the equation—supporting development in the Global South and benefiting from the economic forces of globalization—we should be particularly sensitive to the ways in which we approach those whom we seek to help. This Chanukah, let us struggle with the question: How can we balance our aspirations to improve people’s lives while avoiding the tendency to impose our own agendas and values?

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## Chanukah

### Development, Globalization and the Miracle of the Maccabees

#### *From The Sources* Supplementary Resource

#### Introduction

The Chanukah *From the Sources*, explores globalization, and in particular, the fine line between working towards shared global values and imposing cultural values on those we seek to help. This supplementary resource will examine these issues in greater depth, and respond to the questions: What is globalization?; What are the challenges and opportunities globalization presents for pursuing global justice?; and How can we promote global values in a culturally diverse world?

#### Challenges and Opportunities

Globalization—or the growing interdependence and interconnectedness of markets, communication, ideas and people across borders—is a key feature of our world today. People around the world share cultural identifications (Michael Jackson and McDonalds) and participate in the same economic and trade systems. We communicate across thousands of miles with new technology (Facebook), and uphold mutual values and regulations (international human rights law).

One of the key features of globalization is the pursuit of economic growth through the expansion of capitalist markets. Instead of generating greater prosperity for everyone, this pursuit has translated into growing economic inequality. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was 30 to 1 in 1960; 60 to 1 in 1990; and 74 to 1 in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Access in today's world—to medical advances, technology and critical resources like food and shelter—largely depends on one's ability to purchase these goods and services. As a result, globalization has created a polarized world of haves and have-nots, increasingly isolating the have-nots from the technologies and systems that are transforming our world.

At the same time, globalization presents great opportunities to promote global justice and address issues such as poverty, health and human rights. As advances in medicine and technology spread around the world, doctors and farmers can share best practices to heal their patients or grow better crops. Our growing interconnectedness has implored us to re-evaluate our obligations to those outside our community, country and regional geographic area. Communities across the developed and developing world have taken up the shared language of human rights to address injustice. International human rights and environmental movements have proliferated in the past few decades, raising awareness and commitment to global issues such as climate change, international labor stands and women's rights. International human rights organizations and the media are also able to use new technologies to increase the visibility of human rights violations to better protect affected communities.

#### Impact on Culture

The economic institutions and processes of globalization have had an enormous impact on the ways of life and cultural expressions of communities around the world. As a result, many people feel that globalization has put cultural diversity at risk. Some of the backlash against globalization today has taken the form of cultural relativism—groups insisting on the distinction and isolation of their culture from Western culture.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Development Report, 1999.

Yet, cultures are not distinct and isolated; they reflect countless outside influences. For example, the Passover Seder, a ritual meal that Jews identify as distinctly Jewish, contains borrowed customs from a Greco-Roman symposium. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE and sacrifices were no longer possible, Jews adapted the traditional sacrificial meal. From the Greco-Roman symposium they incorporated reclining; eating a mixture of fruit, nuts and wine; holding a somewhat formal and organized meal; and creating opportunity for discussion around food.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing the hybrid and constantly-evolving nature of culture is an important challenge to cultural relativism. However, in many cases, developing countries have not been given an adequate voice in developing the economic, social and political processes that characterize globalization. The backlash against “Westernization” can be seen as a response to this disempowerment.

## Responses

How can we harness the potential of shared global values and institutions to address poverty and inequality without imposing, or seeming to impose, our own values on those we seek to help? First, global processes must be accompanied by local ownership. As governments, international institutions and international non-governmental organizations make decisions on trade, economic policy and development, it is critical that developing countries have an equal voice at the decision-making table.

Second, as we become more interconnected and intertwined through globalization, we need to allow space for cultural difference and sensitivity. For example, human rights or other shared values can provide a starting point for conversation but cannot provide the full picture. Just because the language of human rights is used around world does not mean that human rights mean the same thing everywhere. The Passover Seder may reflect certain customs of the Greco-Roman symposium, but these customs mean something different to Jews today. And, even the meaning of these customs differs depending on whose Seder table you visit. Similarly, when a particular community uses human rights in their struggle against injustice, the way human rights are expressed, understood and prioritized are deeply adapted and contextualized to make sense in that community. Interactions between people, governments, international institutions and non-governmental organizations need be guided by a respect for cultural difference, and an acknowledgement that the ways people experience and interpret shared values will differ across the world.

## Conclusion

Global values, such as human rights, provide an example of how global processes can be a positive force in this world. We can harness these positive forces to address the challenges of poverty and inequality that are also exacerbated by globalization. However, as we engage with a shared global framework of values and action, it is critical that we integrate respect for cultural difference and local ownership. Otherwise, we risk imposing our agenda and values and diminishing cultural diversity in our world today.

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<sup>2</sup> Kulp, Joshua. “The Mystery of the Four Cups.” *CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism*, Spring 2009.