



Illuminating Words

Chanukah marks the conflict between different groups living in *Eretz Yisrael* in the Second Temple period. Let's look at the words that describe them.

Yavan

At the time, the Land was controlled by the Greeks – the *Yevanim*, יְוָנִים. Those Jews who identified with Greek culture and wished to assimilate into it were known as *mityavnim*, מִתְיָוָנִים – “Hellenists.” The word Hellenist reflects how the Greeks themselves called their country – *Hellas*. The Jews, however, referred to Greece as *Yavan*, יָוָן. This name appears in Bereshit 10:2, as the fourth son of Yafet, and a grandson of Noah. The Talmud (Yoma 10a) identifies the other sons of Yafet with various nations in the region but simply says that Yavan is according to its plain meaning – i.e. Greece. The word *Yavan* is likely related to the name of the Eastern Greeks – the Ionians. The Ionians crossed the Aegean Sea and settled on the west coast of Asia Minor, in today's Turkey. They were therefore the first Greek tribe many nations of the Middle East encountered, so in addition to Hebrew, other languages (like Akkadian and Sanskrit) also refer to Greeks as Ionians.

Makabim

The group that rebelled against the Greeks and their Jewish supporters were known as the Maccabees or *Makabim* in Hebrew. *Makabim* is either spelled מַכַּבִּים or מְקַבִּים, each reflecting a different etymology. The more common spelling today is מַכַּבִּים. It is often explained as an acronym, either from Shemot 15:11, מִי כָמוֹךָ (“Who is like you among the mighty, G-d”) or מִתְיָהוּ כֹהֵן בֶּן יוֹחָנָן – “Matityahu Kohen son of Yochanan,”

after the *kohen* who led the call for rebellion against the Greeks. But both of these etymologies are assumed to be folk etymologies.

A more plausible explanation is that the name derives from the Hebrew word מַקְבֵּת – “hammer” and is reflected in the spelling מְקַבִּים. This theory claims that Matityahu's son Yehuda was called the *Makabi* because he struck his enemies as with a hammer.

A third theory claims that *Makabim* is an inaccurate translation of the Hebrew מַצְבִּיא – “general, commander of an army.” Since we encounter the word first in Greek texts, not Hebrew ones, no Hebrew spelling can be considered authoritative, and so מַצְבִּיא is certainly a reasonable possibility.

The English word “macabre,” meaning “gruesome,” actually derives from the Maccabees. In the art of the Middle Ages, a certain “dance of death,” was known as the “dance of Maccabees” because of the martyrdom of those Jews defying their Greek oppressors.

Chashmonaim

While Yehuda and his brothers were known as *Makabim*, the dynasty they founded was called the חַשְׁמוֹנָאִים – the Hasmoneans. This term does not appear in the post-biblical Books of the Maccabees but is found in the Talmud and other rabbinic works. And like “*makabim*,” there are a number of theories as to the origin of *chashmonaim*.

One theory, as quoted by Josephus, says Asmoneus was the grandfather (or great-grandfather) of Matityahu and the family name derived from this ancestor.

Others say that *Chashmonaim* may come from a place name – either

חַשְׁמוֹנָה (mentioned in Bamidbar 33:2) or חַשְׁמוֹן (mentioned in Yehoshua 15:27). According to these theories, the family lived in or near one of these places before moving to Modi'in (where they lived when the rebellion broke out).

Another theory connects Chashmonaim to the word חַשְׁמוֹן. It is unclear what the word *chashman* means – it appears only once, in Tehillim 68:32. Some explanations of the word do not fit a connection to Chashmonaim – for example, one scholar says it may mean horses or chariots. However, the Septuagint translates it as “ambassador” and other commentaries have “princes.” Therefore the name Chashmonaim referred to the status of the family, and the author of *Maoz Tzur* picked up on this – אֲזִי בִימֵי חַשְׁמוֹנָיִם.

From this interpretation, the word *chashman* developed into the meaning of “an important person,” and eventually became the translation for the Catholic “cardinal.”

Both terms are used in other contexts in Israel today. *Chashmonaim* is the name of a town in central Israel, and *Maccabi* is the name of a large sports organization, a health maintenance organization and a brand of beer.

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