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, 원시. Those Jews who identified with Greek culture and wished to assimilate into it were known as mitiyavnim, 미국이온 – “Hellenists.” The word Hellenists reflects how the Greeks themselves called their country – Hellas. The Jews, however, referred to Greece as Yavan, 와인. 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 מַקָּבִים, each reflecting a different etymology. The more common spelling today is מַכַּבִּים. It is often explained as an acronym, either from Shemot 15:11, מַכַּבֶּה צִבְעַת מִשְׁמוֹרָה (“Who is like you among the mighty, G-d”) or מַכַּבֵּה תַּמִּיָּה מַה לָּשׁוֹן – “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 מַכָּבֶּה – “hammer” and is reflected in the spelling מַכָּבִים. 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 word מַכָּבֶּה – “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 מַכָּבֶּה כֵּן 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 חַשְׁמֹנָאִים – 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 חַשְׁמֹנָה (mentioned in Bamidbar 33:2) or חֶשְׁמֹן (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 חַשְׁמֹן. 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 – הוא ימי חשمونים.

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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