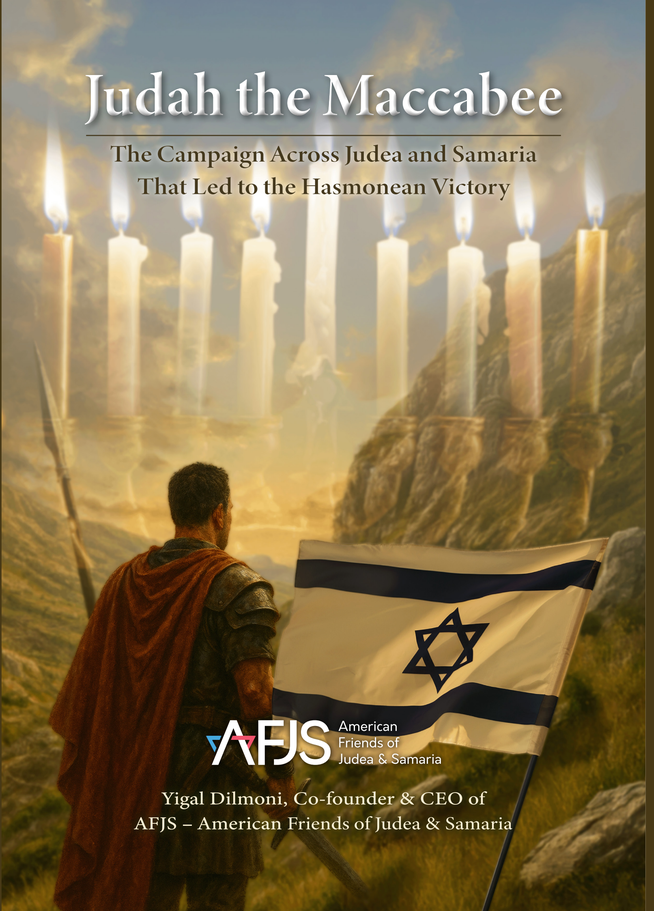

Judah the Maccabee

The Campaign Across Judea and Samaria That Led to the Hasmonean Victory

AFJS American Friends of Judea & Samaria

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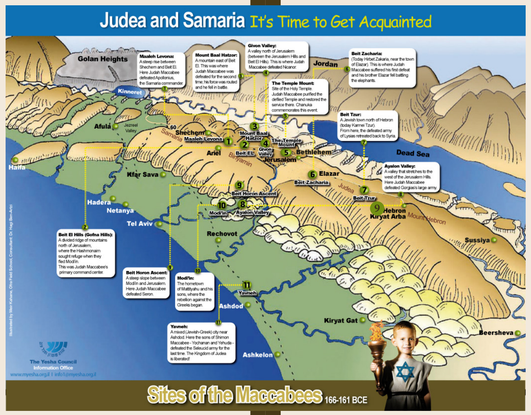
Very soon, Jewish communities around the world will celebrate the festival of Hanukkah. In major cities, giant menorahs will be lit, proclaiming the miracle of faith and perseverance that took place more than 2,200 years ago. Few moments in Jewish history have placed the fate of Jerusalem and the future of the nation on such a knife's edge as the days of Judah the Maccabee. Many will speak of the astonishing victories of a small, brilliant, and determined Jewish force - with no advanced technology - against the vast Seleucid Empire, which ruled the great Hellenistic world of the time.

This was not merely a military triumph; it became a symbol for the ages. The mighty empires that rose against the Jewish people - Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Mamluks, the Ottomans - all disappeared. The Jewish people endured. A small nation, steadfast and proud, anchored in its faith. And in the past century, we have merited to return to our homeland - to Israel, and to the ancient heartland of Judea and Samaria.

As you gather this year with your families and communities to light the menorah and publicize the miracle, there is special meaning in revisiting the extraordinary stories that unfolded here. Every Jew - and every friend of Israel - should know the miracles that took place in the hills of Judea and Samaria, where it all began.

Most of the battles fought by Judah the Maccabee took place around the mountains of Gofna, in the region stretching from modern-day Ariel to Jerusalem, centered around Beit El. It was a struggle for every ridge, every village, every mountain pass - a struggle for Jewish survival and for the defense of the Temple. These mountains provided Judah with strategic depth, natural protection, and space to train new fighters. Here, the Hasmonean spirit of courage was forged - a legacy that echoes through the generations.

Despite overwhelming numerical disadvantage, Judah and his brothers prevailed through daring, mastery of the terrain, and brilliant military tactics that changed the course of history. **Join us on a journey through these battles - in their historical order - across the land where Jewish national consciousness was reborn.**



Battle 1 - Ma'aleh Levona: The Clash That Ignited the Revolt

Between Samaria and Benjamin, above the village of Levona, Judah faced the Greek commander Apollonius in the first battle of the revolt. The rugged terrain gave the Jewish fighters a decisive advantage. Judah launched a surprise attack through the narrow mountain passes, defeated Apollonius, and seized his royal sword - which he carried proudly in later battles.

This victory fueled national morale and brought much-needed weapons to the rebel army. It inspired a surge of support across Judea.

Modern locations: the Jewish communities of Eli, Shiloh, Ma'aleh Levona, Givat HaRa'eh, and Givat HaRoeh.

Battle 2 - Ma'aleh Beit Horon: The Narrow Pass That Toppled Empires

In this steep, strategic ascent - still contested terrain today - the Seleucid army again walked into a trap. The narrow pass became a deadly bottleneck. Judah's fighters attacked from above, cutting down the Greek soldiers one by one.

This crucial victory expanded Judah's control from the northern Gofna region around modern Beit El, down to the area of Mizpeh near today's Giv'at Ze'ev outside Jerusalem.

Modern location: along Highway 443 from Modiin to Jerusalem, near the community of Beit Horon.

Battle 3 - Emmaus: One of the Most Brilliant Operations in Jewish Military History

Near today's Latrun, by the community of Mevo Horon and the Ayalon Valley, Judah executed a masterful ambush. Hidden by the valley's morning fog, he circled behind the Greek encampment and struck without warning. The Seleucid forces collapsed and fled.

This battle opened the road to Jerusalem and allowed the Maccabees to seize the Akra fortress overlooking the Temple Mount - the turning point of the revolt.

Battle 4 - Beit Zur: The Southern Gateway to Jerusalem

South of Jerusalem, near today's Gush Etzion, lay the strategic fortress of Beit Zur on the road from Hebron. The Greeks attempted a southern offensive, but Judah knew the terrain and defeated them again. This secured Jerusalem's southern approaches and paved the way for the most emotional moment of all: the liberation of Jerusalem and the rededication of the Temple.

Judah and his fighters purified the Temple, rebuilt the altar, found a single sealed jar of pure oil, and on the 25th of Kislev lit the menorah once again - a moment of national and spiritual rebirth still celebrated in every Jewish home today.

Modern location: near the community of Karmei Tzur.

Battle 5 - Beit Zechariah: Eleazar's Heroism and the Cost of War

Between Gush Etzion and Bethlehem came a dramatic confrontation. For the first time, the Greeks brought war elephants - ancient shock-weapons meant to terrify and crush opposition. The battle was brutal. Judah did not win this time.
Eleazar, Judah's brother, crawled beneath an elephant, killed it, and was crushed as it collapsed - an act of unmatched bravery remembered to this day.

Although the Maccabees retreated, this battle led to an important political achievement: the Seleucids recognized Jewish religious rights and retreated from their campaign of forced Hellenization.

Modern locations: near the communities of Rosh Tzurim, Alon Shvut, and Elazar.

Battle 6 - Kfar Shilma: The Mountains Become a Tactical Weapon

The Greeks now tried to push into the mountains north of Jerusalem. But in the area of Kfar Shilma, near modern Giv'at Ze'ev, Judah once again used the terrain to his advantage - rapid movement, surprise raids, and disappearance into the hills. Hundreds of Greek soldiers fell. Another unlikely Jewish victory.

Modern locations: Giv'on and Giv'at Ze'ev.

Battle 7 - Hadasha (Adasa): The Victory That Freed Jerusalem for Good

Hadasha, near today's Gofna foothills between Giv'on and Modiin Illit, was a strategic crossroads. The Greeks launched another major attempt to crush the rebellion. But Judah knew every ravine and slope. In this decisive battle, the Greek commander Nicanor was killed, and the remainder of his army fled to Gezer on the coastal plain.

The Talmud marks this as "Nicanor Day," celebrating the complete liberation of Jerusalem.

Battle 8 - Elasa: The Fall of Judah the Maccabee

After a string of astonishing victories, the Greeks set a trap in the mountains near today's Ramallah. Their ambush separated Judah and his commanders from the main force - and Judah fell in battle.

Here ended the life of the leader who sparked a revolution, freed Jerusalem, rededicated the Temple, and shaped one of the greatest chapters in human history.

Modern locations: near the communities of Beit El, Psagot, Kokhav Ya'akov and Ofra, by Mount Ba'al Hatzor, the highest peak north of Jerusalem.

The Legacy We Celebrate Today Was Born in the Hills of Judea and Samaria

Judah's campaign was more than a sequence of brilliant victories. It was the birth of a national consciousness - a consciousness of responsibility, courage, and the sanctification of the land through action.

The mountains and valleys - Ma'aleh Levona, Beit Zur, Beit Zechariah, Emmaus, Beit Horon, the Gofna range - are not merely ancient battlefields. They are the places where Jewish sovereignty was reborn, where a small nation proved it could outlast and outfight the greatest empires.

And so, every Hanukkah, as the menorah's lights shine in our windows, they also shine across the mountains of Judea and Samaria - the very mountains where Judah the Maccabee and his fighters shaped our history.
Today, we continue to return to those hills, to build thriving Jewish communities and illuminate them once again with the light of hope and redemption.

Join Our Mission

Scan the QR code, and join today!

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