

The Sixth Maccabee

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Everybody thinks they know the story of Hanukkah — how the five Hasmonean brothers became the Maccabees, how King Antiochus outlawed Judaism and about the war against him, how the Temple in Jerusalem was restored, and finally how the oil miraculously burned for eight days. But almost nobody knows about the sixth Maccabee, the little Maccabee sister, Elisheva. Here's the story of Hanukkah, with Elisheva's part back in:

THE HASMON FAMILY DIDN'T LIVE IN JERUSALEM. They lived a few miles away, in a small village called Modi'in. In the Hasmon family there was old Mattityahu — who was the priest in Modi'in. There were his five sons —who were named Judah, Yochanan, Shimon, Eleazar, and Yonatan. And there was Mattityahu's daughter, Elisheva, the youngest.

On the day he got killed, Mattityahu came to Jerusalem to take care of some business and his five sons tagged along, partly to help him, but also to see the sights. They left Elisheva at home. To Mattityahu and to the brothers, Elisheva was still a child. As a matter of fact, she was almost twelve, which in those days was almost grown up, especially for a girl.

Elisheva's mother had died when Elisheva was just a baby. Because of this, and because she was the youngest, and because she was the only girl in the house, her father and brothers tended to spoil her and to be more protective than she really would have liked. She personally thought she was just as tough as any of her brothers, and a lot smarter.

Those were hard times in Israel.

You'll remember that when Alexander the Great died, his empire, which included Israel, was carved up by his generals. The piece with Israel in it was taken over by a general named Seleucus. That piece of the empire, still with Israel in it, later came to be ruled by King Antiochus Epiphanes.

Antiochus pretended he wanted everybody in his kingdom to be Greek, or at least act like they were, but really he was just bossy and cruel and mean. One of the mean things he did was to outlaw the practice of the Hebrew religion. And to show he meant business, he ordered his soldiers to set up a statue of the Greek god Zeus in the Great Temple in Jerusalem, and to sacrifice pigs to it. The Greeks were perfectly happy with pigs in holy places, but it was a horrible insult to the Jews.

Mattityahu Hasmon and his five sons had no sooner arrived in the city when everything went terribly wrong. They got to the Temple just as a big crowd was watching some men about to sacrifice a pig. The Hasmons knew this was going on, like every Jew in Israel did, but they had never actually seen it for themselves. There were plenty of Greek soldiers standing around, but the men who were actually going to sacrifice the pig were Jews.

Mattityahu flew into a terrible rage at the sight. "How can you do this?" he shouted.

The men holding the pig all looked at him. The soldiers looked nervous.

"It's the only way to have peace," said one of the Jews.

"Think about our families," said another.

"You're all traitors," yelled someone in the crowd.

"To what?" shouted back the first man. "Get with the times!"

Mattityahu was not a calm man, and he wasn't very good at compromise. Now he stepped forward, his eyes snapping with anger. "To what?" he demanded in a deep voice. "To what? To God, to your people, to your country, that's what!"

Before anybody realized what he was doing, he rushed up and hit one of the Jews in the head as hard as he could with his staff. The man collapsed, blood running from his nose and ears. The soldiers immediately surrounded Mattityahu and ran him through with their swords. He fell to the stone steps, bleeding.

Now everything went completely crazy. Soldiers ran everywhere, waving spears. People were screaming and trying to get out of the Temple square.

In the confusion, the five brothers slipped away. There was really nothing more they could do, except get themselves killed for nothing. They had to leave their father's body where it lay on the Temple steps, next to the body of the Jew Mattityahu had killed. Lots of people knew they were Mattityahu's sons, and where they lived. The best thing was to get away now, and deal with everything else later.

So they ran. I mean, they actually *ran*. They were young and strong and they ran all the way to Modi'in. They were sure the soldiers would come after them, and they wanted to get back before anybody found out what had happened in Jerusalem. No phones or radios in those days.

Tears streamed from their eyes as they ran, but there was no time to stop.

It was dark when they got home. It seemed like a thousand years had passed since they left there just that morning. Now Mattityahu was dead and nothing would ever be the same.

The five brothers slipped into their dark house. Their little sister Elisheva was there, but she and the servants had already gone to bed. Most people went to sleep very early. No TV or electric lights in those days.

The brothers woke Elisheva, then they sent the servants back to their own homes.

Jews were not supposed to own weapons, by order of Antiochus, but the brothers had hidden some swords under the floor. Many Jews did this. The brothers grabbed the swords, and some food and blankets, and then they were off again. They were afraid to wait even an extra moment in Modi'in, because they knew it was the first place the army would look for them. Of course, this time they took Elisheva.

Elisheva was still too small to run in the dark with them, so she rode first on one brother's back, then another's.

They ran and walked all through the night until they came to the mountains, where they thought they would be safe. These were wild, steep mountains, with no roads, and no people. There were forests of thorn trees, and plenty of wild animals, including lions. But the brothers were hunters, and they knew all the secret trails.

Judah also knew about a cave, and that's where they headed. It was almost dawn when they finally got there. They were sad, and frightened, but mostly they were exhausted. They rolled up into the blankets they had brought and fell asleep and slept most of the day. When night came again, they built a fire near the mouth of the cave and had an important meeting. They didn't ask Elisheva to the meeting, because she was just a girl, but she sat by the fire and listened anyway.

Judah was the oldest, so he talked the most. He told them what they already knew, which was that they could never go home again, because if they did the Greek army would find them and they'd be killed.

They didn't ask Elisheva to the meeting, because she was
just a girl, but she sat by the fire and listened anyway.

They sat in silence for awhile. Things seemed pretty bad.

Then Shimon sat up. "Well, what have we got to lose?" he asked. "If we're just going to be killed anyway, why not turn our little fight into a big fight? I say we declare war on them!"

They all looked at each other. Then they all shouted at once. They grabbed each other's hands and danced around in the dirt. They elected Judah general.

This wasn't quite as foolish as it sounds. They knew that many Jews were as mad as they were, and the brothers figured they could count on some of them being willing to join them, and in that way they could make an army, even if it was just a small one. Maybe they'd have a chance, maybe not. It was better than just sitting around waiting to be caught.

They decided to change their name to *Maccabee*, which means *hammer*. That was Judah's idea. They got out their swords and held them all together and took a very solemn oath to be brave and to fight to the last man, and so on. They didn't ask Elisheva to take the vow with them.

Elisheva personally thought this solemn oath stuff was silly, but she said the vows to herself in a whisper anyway.

The next day Shimon snuck back to Modi'in, to let a few people know where they were and what they were doing. Then they took turns sneaking into other villages. They held more secret meetings, and invited

any Jewish man who felt the same way they did, and who was ready to fight, to join them, and help start the new Jewish army.

They didn't invite any women. Elisheva was the only girl in the camp.

Over the next days and weeks more and more men did find their way up into the wild mountains where the Maccabees were hiding. It was amazing, but in a couple of months the Maccabees had the beginnings of an army.

Then they started their war.

For their first battle they attacked a Greek caravan, which was carrying supplies for the Greek army — food and blankets and swords, things the new army needed.

There were only a few Greek soldiers guarding the supplies, and they were not very alert, because of course they weren't expecting any trouble. They had no idea there was a Jewish army.

The Greeks were on a narrow road between steep hills, when all of a sudden the Jews, who were hiding on the other side of a hill, came running down, yelling and waving swords and sticks. A few men had grain sickles or knives.

The Greeks were surprised and terrified. The Jews killed a couple of them, but the rest ran away. Then the Jews took away as many of the supplies as they could carry and set fire to the wagons. It was an amazing victory, and made the Maccabee brothers think that maybe their crazy idea wasn't so crazy after all.

Months went by. Then a year. And the war went on. And on. It was a real war.

Life was hard in the ragged little army of the Maccabees. They didn't dare have a permanent camp, but instead they were always on the move. They never had enough food, never enough rest.

Of course, Elisheva stayed with her brothers. There was no time to take her somewhere safer. In fact, there *was* nowhere safer. She was almost twelve when the war started, but living a life like that makes you grow up quickly. After a year, when she was thirteen, she had become strong, and tough, and had a sun-burned face. She could walk all night, and hardly feel it. She could sleep wrapped up in her cloak and could get by on whatever dry food there was, just like any of the soldiers.

The Maccabee Army fought a lot of battles, and Elisheva was there

at every one. You might think she was just in the way, but you'd be wrong. She had a very important job, but she did not carry a sword or a spear. Instead of a weapon, she carried a big bag of bandages and herbs and other medical supplies. She was the army doctor and the army nurse, all wrapped up in one, the only one they had.

Like most girls and women of those times, Elisheva knew a little bit about herbs and first-aid, even before the war. She helped to take care of her brothers when they got sick or got scrapes and scratches. But now she learned about *serious* wounds, more than she had ever wanted to know, wounds made by arrows and spears and swords. There was no one to teach her. She learned on her own, just by doing whatever she had to. The men understood, and were patient with her, and helped her when they could. They were new to soldiering and really didn't know much more than she did. And gradually, as time passed, she learned how to stop bleeding, and how to sew up deep cuts, how to cut arrows out, how to clean wounds so there was no fever, and how to drain infections if they happened anyway. She even learned how to tie up the stumps of arms or legs that had been cut off. She learned how to give herbs to ease the terrible pain of all these things. Sometimes all her efforts failed, and then she learned how to hold the young men's hands and watch over them while they died.

Plus, there was always someone sick, or with blisters on his feet, who needed her help. She did it all.

Judah was a stern general, fierce and grim, like any war leader of those days. He and his men thought of themselves as the mighty Hammer of God. Before a battle, they would pray together, and then they would fall like a storm upon the enemy. Sometimes they even fought on the Sabbath. Many of the soldiers hadn't wanted to do this at first, but Judah threatened to get rid of any man who would not dedicate himself completely to the cause.

Here is how the Maccabees fought.

Let's say they sent out a scout and the scout came back and reported a troop of enemy soldiers somewhere. The Jews would then march all night from wherever they were, and with the first light of morning, they

would swoop down out of the hills onto the enemy troop, hopefully as a complete surprise.

The battles were ferocious, a deafening confusion of swords and spears, and crashing armor and shields, and arrows flying like deadly hail, and screaming horses and cursing men.

As soon as the Jews had killed as many of the enemy as they could, they would run away, stealing whatever weapons they could get their hands on, because they were always short of weapons. They would quickly disappear back into the trackless mountains, where the enemy army would never be able to find them. They carried their dead and wounded with them.

If the Jews *won* the battle, they would kill every single enemy soldier. They had no place to keep prisoners, and certainly couldn't spare any men to be guards. But they never really *lost* a battle, because if it didn't look good for them, they would just slip away and disappear.

All through these terrible battles, Elisheva would watch, crouching in a dry gully, or behind a rock, clutching her medical bag, her eyes dry and empty. After the battle, when it was safe — or sometimes even before it was safe — she would dart out and tend to the injured Jews. When the army ran away, she would run with them, until they got somewhere where they could stop safely. Then she would cut and clean and bandage and sew, until she was covered with blood herself and so tired she could hardly see. If there had been time and she had had a chance, she probably would have tended to the enemy soldiers as well, because all wounds looked the same to her, all crying sounded the same. But even if there had been time, Judah would never have let her.

This was the worst kind of war, and it seemed to Elisheva it had gone on forever, for a lifetime.

But in the end, as you know, there came a day when Antiochus and the Greeks decided they'd had enough of fighting an enemy they could never find, and simply left Israel. It took three years. Elisheva was fifteen.

Judah's ragged troop marched into Jerusalem. But it wasn't so ragged anymore, and it wasn't small. They had become a huge army, with banners crackling like a forest fire, and swords glinting in the sun, and rams-horn trumpets blaring as if it was the end of the world.

Judah and his brothers came first, riding tall black horses, and behind them came the rest of the proud cavalry. And after the cavalry came the clattering foot soldiers. After the foot soldiers came the supply wagons, the food carts, the blacksmith's carts, and all the other things it took to run an army.

And finally, last of all, after the army had passed, came the little Maccabee sister, her bag of bandages slung over her shoulder. She gazed up at the hills and stone buildings of Jerusalem in wonder. She had never been there, even though she grew up less than a day's ride away.

But now Jerusalem was a holy mess. Rubble and garbage littered the streets. The air was full of smoke, and stank to high heaven. Of course by now such horrible things hardly bothered Elisheva.

The first thing the brothers did was to go up to the Temple, up on its hill. They took Elisheva with them.

The Temple was the worst. It lay almost in ruins. The big doors were hanging off their hinges. The walls were stained and chipped. All the beautiful tapestries and fine golden utensils were gone, stolen. The roof was broken in. The remains of sacrificed pigs were heaped in the littered courtyard, by the statue of Zeus. Flies swirled like clouds.

The brothers stood for a while, looking at the place on the Temple steps where their father Mattityahu had been killed. Elisheva stood next to Judah and he put his arm around her shoulders. But she still didn't cry.

Of course Elisheva had never seen the Temple before the war, but she knew what it had been like from stories her father had told her. If she closed her eyes, she could almost see the flickering torches, the crowds, hear the chanting of the priests, the bleating of goats, smell the incense.

Judah found an open market-place near the Pool of Siloam, where it was a little less filthy, and set up his headquarters camp there. Then he sent crews of soldiers to take down the statue of Zeus, and to start hauling stones and timbers to repair the Temple.

Meanwhile, there was still a small force of the enemy holed up in the Acra, which was a small fort on the hill across from the Temple. Judah and his brothers were very busy, trying to get them out without getting killed.

Elisheva was left by herself during those first confusing hours. For the first time in a long time, she had no doctoring to do.

The city really wasn't safe yet, so Judah had ordered her to stay in camp. But instead she took to wandering around to see the sights. After all

she'd been through, she didn't see the point of hiding away now. But she took her medical kit with her, like she always did, just in case.

On her second day in Jerusalem she was exploring the narrow alleys around the base of the Temple Mount when she came across an enemy soldier lying hidden in a ditch. She was scared at first and jumped back, but then she realized his eyes were closed. She saw that there was a Jewish arrow sticking out of the man's chest, so Elisheva thought he had probably been trying to sneak out of the Acra. Elisheva thought of him as a man, because he was a soldier, but really he was a boy, not much older than she was.

She kneeled down beside him. She thought maybe he was dead, but when she touched him he began moaning with pain, and then she realized he was terribly wounded, but alive.

The long months of war had made Elisheva very strong. She dragged the enemy boy out of the ditch, out of sight of the Acra and the Temple, and into an empty stone hut. She had tended to hundreds of arrow wounds, so she knew just what had to be done, and she did it without hesitating. She opened her kit, took out her knife, and cut the arrowhead out. The arrow had barely gone past the boy's ribs, which was a good thing. She poured wine from her little flask into the wound. The boy cried out once, a small sound, like a child, and then he fell into a deep sleep. By nightfall he was shivering and covered with a cold sweat, but his skin was burning hot.

Elisheva knew that his wound had given him a fever, but that if he could survive the fever he might live. She also knew he would certainly die if he couldn't be kept warm. She didn't care who he was, enemy or friend. All she cared about was that he was alive, and she wanted him to stay that way. She was so tired of seeing people die.

It was the cold month of Tevet. Outside, an icy rain began to fall. It got dark.

Elisheva crept out of the hut. If she was going to save this boy's life, she would need some supplies. Cold and wet, she snuck back into camp and took her own blanket from her tent. But that wasn't enough. She needed food and water and more wine. Honey for the wound. And most of all, she needed an oil lamp, for light, and for heat.

In a supply wagon, she found some bread and cheese, and a canteen full of clean water, and a jar of wine, and another of honey. The guards knew

her, so they didn't pay any attention. There was also a lamp in the wagon. But there was no lamp oil. What good would the lamp be without oil? She didn't want to ask anybody where there was oil, and maybe have them ask what she wanted it for.

She stopped to think. Where could she find some oil? That is, where could she find oil that she could *get* to, in the middle of the night, a small girl with a dying enemy boy on her hands? There was only one place she could think of.

The Temple.

Silently, her steps hidden by the night and the drifting rain, carrying a bag with her supplies and the lamp, she made her way up the Temple Mount.

It seemed a lot scarier now than it had during the day with her brothers around her. The Temple loomed up over her like a cave in the night. It was pitch black and silent except for the dripping of rain. The air was full of the smell of wet stone, and the stink of rotting pigs. She could just barely see the altar platform where the great statue of Zeus sat. She hoped it was not looking at her.

There was one more place where there might be oil,
if she dared to go there.

Holding her breath, she passed between the huge pillars and past the broken doors, and into the dark empty Temple. There was no oil here. What had she been thinking of?

For a moment she felt desperation. She had to get back to the hut. Her enemy boy would die if she didn't hurry.

There was one more place where there *might* be oil, if she dared to go there.

She stole quietly through the echoing shadows of the main room of the Temple, until she came to the innermost sanctuary, to the threshold of the Holy of Holies, where women were forbidden, where *everyone* was forbidden, except the High Priest, and even *he* could only go inside on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year.

She peeked in through the small arched door, its purple curtain now torn and crumpled in a corner. The roof tiles were broken and lying on the floor like teeth, and the sacred room was open to the sky and the cold rain. It

was said that God's spirit lived in this very room. Could she feel it? Would God kill her for being here? She stepped into the little room and stood with her eyes closed and her teeth.

Nothing happened, except that she got wetter and colder.

Maybe that was God's way of telling her it was okay. She opened her eyes.

The stones of the walls were bright with rain. She took a deep breath. Rummaging around on the littered floor, she found a small clay oil bottle. She shook it. There was oil in it, but it was a small bottle. There was only enough for maybe two days. There was a wax seal over the stopper of the bottle, so Elisheva knew this was *holy oil*, oil specially prepared by the priests for the *Ner Tamid*, the Everburning Lamp. But she didn't care. Surely God would understand how important this was. But she could be flexible. She would *share* with God. She opened the bottle and poured *half* the oil into her lamp, taking enough for one day, and leaving enough for one day.

Then she fled the haunted room and the looming cold walls of the Temple, and ran all the way back to her hut.

The next day it was still raining, and the day after, and the day after that. The sky was dark and low. The enemy boy moaned and tossed in his fever, and Elisheva sat close and held his hand and wiped his pale face. She washed his wound with wine and honey. The light from the lamp was warm and golden and made a little cave in the cold for them.

She did not know that up the hill, in the Temple, the Maccabees had temporarily repaired the roof of the Holy of Holies, and had relit the *Ner Tamid*. But they had only found enough special sacred oil for one day. They lit it anyway, and sent runners to find out where the priests had fled to, and get more.

The cold wet weather continued. The sky pressed down gray and heavy on the ancient hills. There was no breath of wind.

Elisheva, in her little hut, did not know that up in the Temple the new Holy Lamp continued to burn, day after day, even though the oil should have been long gone. She was not aware of how the Jews gradually gathered in the Temple around the Lamp, as they began to realize a miracle was taking place.

Elisheva was not even aware of how her *own* lamp continued to burn, with a clear and sweet light, day after day, long after *it* should have been empty too. She was only aware of the enemy boy, of his wound, his pain, his fever.

Eight days passed. The runners Judah had sent out returned with more holy oil, sealed by the High Priest, and the lamp in the Temple was refilled, and the Maccabees and the rest of the Jews bowed down in amazement and gratitude.

Down the hill, in the little hut, the enemy boy's fever broke and he raised his head and asked for water.

Elisheva looked around her and realized with sleepy wonder that her lamp was still lit, whereupon the lamp dimmed and went out. The lemon-colored sunlight of Jerusalem poured into the hut. Elisheva's eyes filled with tears, and tears ran down her cheeks.

After that, there was not much for her to do. She gave the boy water and rebandaged his wound. When dark came again she helped to sneak him out of the city. They did not speak each other's language, but he thanked her as well as he could.

Later still, Elisheva told all this to Judah the Maccabee, and he sat in silence, his dark eyes clouded. He stroked his beard.

"We knew you were missing for all those first days," he said thoughtfully. "We feared that something had happened to you. That you had been killed, perhaps. But there was so much to do, we didn't have time to look. I suppose I cannot now get too angry at you for disobeying my orders, or for using your skills upon an enemy. But let us consider this mystery. Why did *your* lamp also burn for eight days? Was it because your oil was taken from the bottle of sacred oil, which had been blessed by the Lord in preparation for the Great Miracle? Or was it because you were so close to where the Miracle was happening, and the power of the Miracle simply spilled over onto your lamp, as it might have onto any nearby lamp?"

Elisheva didn't answer him. She knew what the real miracle had been.

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