



Mark Fasman - Rabbi

## A Perutah For Your Thoughts

Alexander the Great tetradrachm  
ca. 325 BCE



Obverse: Herakles (Hercules)



Reverse: Zeus with eagle; inscription:  
"Of Alexander"

Hasmonean perutah  
Alexander Janneus (103-76 BCE)



Obverse: "YNTN High Priest  
and the Jewish 'hever'"



Reverse: double cornucopia

Some of you know that I have developed an interest in collecting artifacts connected with Jewish history. In addition to oil lamps and other pottery as much as 4,000 years old, I have begun a collection of ancient coins of the Land of Israel.

On my most recent stay in Jerusalem, last July, I added several coins to my collection, including the two shown above. On the left is a silver Alexander the Great tetradrachm, approximately 2300 years old, found in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The obverse (front) depicts a young (beardless) Herakles (the Romans called him Hercules) wearing a lion skin headdress, with the lion's paws tied at his neck. The reverse depicts a bearded Zeus, naked from the waist up, sitting on a backless throne, holding an eagle in his right hand and a scepter in his left hand. The Greek inscription translates into "Of Alexander."

We know that Alexander the Great conquered the Land of Israel in 332 BCE, as part of his campaign to conquer all of the known world of his time. Although the Second Temple had been built by this time, the Judeans were part of the Persian Empire, paying their taxes regularly, but otherwise allowed to practice their rituals and live in relative freedom in their established communities. To all of the lands that he conquered (Egypt to India), Alexander brought Greek culture, including the pantheon of Greek gods. Note that the coin contains an image of the most powerful of the Greek gods, Zeus, along with one of Zeus' many half divine/half human children, the demi-god Herakles. In addition to bringing Greek gods to the Land of Israel (supplanting or augmenting the existing Persian pantheon), the new Greek rulers also brought philosophy, public athletic contests, theater, music, public bath houses, and other entertainments.

Though there are few historical documents from the Second Temple period (ca. 500 BCE – 70 CE), it seems as though the Judean leadership of the time had already become used to living under the political control of others. First there was the Babylonian exile – actually, three separate exiles beginning in 597, 586, and 581 BCE and ending in 537, when the Persian emperor Cyrus allowed the Judeans to return to their land and to rebuild their Temple. Thus, the Judeans lived first under Babylonian rule, and then under Persian rule (either in the Land of Israel or in Babylonia) even after the "exile" ended.

As long as the ruling authorities left the Judean community alone (other than collecting taxes and imposing forced labor), and as long as the Temple ritual remained untouched, it seems that the majority of Jews (as they were now beginning to be called) accepted this new status quo. They were content to continue to believe in and to worship their one God as well as to behave according to established Jewish norms. I suspect that their attitude was similar to that depicted in Fiddler on the Roof: "May God bless and keep the czar ... far away from us."

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However, over time there developed an increasing problem with Jews assimilating into Greek culture. To get a sense of this tension between Torah and Greek philosophy, I recommend the book, *As a Driven Leaf*, by Milton Steinberg.

There are four extant books of Maccabees, not included in the Hebrew bible, but certainly known to the rabbis who shaped our tradition. After the death of Alexander the Great (in 323 BCE, at the age of 32), his empire was divided up among his three generals. Seleucus got the Land of Israel (along with Anatolia/Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia). Between 323 and 60 BCE, there were no fewer than thirty Seleucid kings over this empire. By the time that Antiochus IV Epiphanes had risen to power (175 BCE), the process of assimilation between Jews and Greek culture had progressed so far that it would only take a small push to start a civil war between those Hellenized Jews and the “traditionalists.”

The “push” came in 168 BCE. Two years earlier, Antiochus had begun a campaign against Egypt, conquering all but Alexandria. Two years later, after the king of Alexandria allied himself with his brother, the “puppet” king of Egypt, Antiochus invaded again, with similar results. However, this time, he was met by an envoy from Rome, who told him that he must immediately withdraw from Egypt and Cyprus. Antiochus responded that he would have to talk it over with his council, so the envoy drew a line around him in the sand and told him to “think about it here.”

That famous line in the sand led to the withdrawal of Antiochus from Egypt and Cyprus, and in his frustration and anger, he organized an expedition against Jerusalem (on his way home). He brutally murdered many Jews and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Jewish community was experiencing plenty of internal turmoil already. The attack on Jerusalem emboldened a priestly family (that of Matitياهو, Kohen ha-Gadol – known as the Maccabees) who began their revolt initially against Hellenized Jews who were willing to accede to the Seleucid demand for religious loyalty, a demand that meant relinquishing their exclusive loyalty to the One God of Israel.

For Matitياهو and his sons, this was their line in the sand. Jews could not be permitted to assimilate to the extent that they gave up their Jewish religious particularity – their unique beliefs and behaviors. It took three years, but the Maccabees ultimately defeated the Seleucid army and established a dynasty – the Hasmoneans – who ruled over Judea for 102 years, from 165 to 63 BCE (when the Romans took control). The Hasmoneans were, in many ways, as brutal as Antiochus had been; but this time, their brutality was directed against the Hellenized Jews. They combined the role of King and High Priest (forbidden by Torah as well as politically foolish). They engaged in forced conversions to Judaism – the only time in our history that this occurred.

On the other hand, the Hasmonean dynasty reestablished Temple worship and traditional Jewish practices within the land that they controlled. They also minted their own money. At the beginning of this article you see a Hasmonean bronze perutah, essentially like a penny. It was with this coin that Rabbi Akiba later said that a man could acquire a wife. Note the writing on the obverse (front) of the coin. It is in ancient Hebrew script, not the Aramaic script (with which we are familiar) that had already come into common use.

I now own ten ancient coins from the Land of Israel, the oldest being the Alexander the Great tetradrachm pictured above, and the newest being 136 CE (a year after the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt). The only coins from this 468-year period of time that contain Hebrew (in either ancient or Aramaic script) are from this Hasmonean period and from the two periods of revolt against Rome. Only the former were “legal tender” – the latter two types carry with them the death penalty, since they were created by over-stamping a Roman coin, literally de-facing the Emperor.

Most of the time the language on the coins is Greek and Latin, since these were the languages of the dominant empires of the period; only sovereign rulers were permitted to mint money. Thus, from 597 BCE until 1948 CE, the only “legal” coins produced by Jews were produced during the century that Jews ruled themselves: 165 to 63 BCE.

We are a nation without a nation, a people without a land. Israelite religion transformed itself to meet the needs of living in exile beginning 2,600 years ago. During the intervening years, it became Judaism and continued its transformation designed to meet the exquisitely difficult balancing act between beliefs and practices of the Jewish tradition and the beliefs and practices of the ruling culture in which we live.

We live in constant tension, faced with constant conflict (both internally and externally). But the miracle of Chanukah is that this one tiny Jewish spark, kindled nearly 4,000 years ago and handed from generation to generation in every part of the world, shining more or less brightly in dozens of languages and dozens of cultures, has continued to glow, casting light for ourselves and for our world. As beneficiaries of this miracle, we have but one task: don’t let the light go out.

Chag Ha-Urim Sameach – Have a Joyous Feast of Lights.

*Alexander Jannaeus (also known as Alexander Jannai/Yannai), king of Judea from (103 BCE to 76 BCE), son of John Hyrcanus, inherited the throne from his brother Aristobulus, and appears to have married his brother’s widow, Shlamtzion or Shlontzion or “Shelomit”, also known as Salome Alexandra, according to the Biblical law of Yibum (“levirate marriage”), although Josephus is inexplicit on that point.*

*His likely full Hebrew name was Jonathan; he may have been the High Priest Jonathan, rather than his great-uncle of the same name, who established the Masada fortress. Under the name King Yannai, he appears as a wicked tyrant in the Talmud, reflecting his conflict with the Pharisee party. He is among the more colorful historical figures little known, however, outside specialized history, although the impact of him and his widow on the subsequent development of Judaism and Christianity is substantial.*