

# The Age of Hellenism

## Diverse Strategies for Survival

### investigate

- What were the temptations for Jews to adopt the ways of their new rulers even when they conflicted with Jewish values and culture?
- What helped Jews resist the temptation and maintain their Jewish identities?
- How do our lives in today's diaspora mirror those of our ancestors?

### Key Words and Places

Judea	Septuagint
Hellenism	Seleucid Kingdom
Ptolemies	Maccabees
Archaeologists	



### The BIG Picture

In 331 BCE, less than two hundred years after the rebuilding of the Temple, Jerusalem was conquered by Alexander the Great. Alexander was King of Macedonia and one of the greatest military geniuses who has ever lived. By the time he died, Alexander's empire stretched from Greece to India. A lover of Greek culture, Alexander aimed to unite his empire by blending Greek culture with local customs, religions, and traditions.

Like other peoples who were conquered by Alexander, the Jews felt conflicted. On the one hand, Hellenistic culture was exciting and advanced. On the other, it threatened the traditional ways of life the Jews valued.

331 BCE

- Alexander the Great conquers Jerusalem

323 BCE

- Alexander dies; Egypt and Judea placed under control of Ptolemy

200 BCE

- Judea becomes part of the Seleucid Empire

about 169 BCE

- Jews rebel against Menelaus, the High Priest, and Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid King



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Imagine you were living in the land of Israel around 100 B C E, about a century after Alexander the Great died. What kinds of changes might you see in your everyday life? The first would be that Judah would now be known by its Greek and Roman name, **Judea**. Other signs of **Hellenism**, or the blending of Greek culture with the local culture, may have appeared in the form of decorated Greek vases sold on market day in the larger villages. Or perhaps Jewish soldiers who served in the army would bring back gifts of Greek clothing, perfumes, and jewelry.

Greek culture did not conquer the ancient Near East as quickly as Alexander's army had. Hellenism spread gradually and unevenly.

It was strongest in urban areas where the population came in contact with Greek soldiers and merchants, and where Greek was adopted as the language in which to conduct business. It is natural that the more frequently people come in contact with an idea, language, or culture, the more quickly they adopt it.

164 BCE

- Maccabees capture Jerusalem from Seleucids; Temple purified and rededicated

141 BCE

- Seleucids defeated by Hasmoneans; Judea independent again

about 100 BCE

- **World History:** Anasazi Native American culture first develops in what is now Arizona and New Mexico





By introducing Greek culture to the Middle East, Alexander the Great had a tremendous influence on the development of Judaism.

ree colonists brought their literature, theater, sporting competitions, and religious festivals to many of the conquered cities. ree temples, amphitheaters, and schools began to dot the city landscapes. he cultural offerings in newly established ree cities, such as alexandria in Egypt, attracted Jews and non Jews alike.

Hellenism came far more slowly to rural areas of Judea, where farmers had less contact with the ree colonists and their institutions. Even so, all Jews in Judea felt the impact of Hellenism's reach.

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fter alexander died, in B E, his empire was divided among three of his generals Ptolemy, ysimachus, and Seleucus. Egypt and Judea were placed under the control of Ptolemy. He and his successors, nown as the **Ptolemies**, were tolerant rulers. he Ptolemies wanted to moderni e the agriculturally rich ile valley. Seeing prosperity, great numbers of Jews floc ed to Egypt. i e other immi grants, they were protected and favored because they wor ed in the ing's service. here were Jewish agricultural laborers, metal wor ers, weavers, and merchants. any Jews were also soldiers in the Ptolemaic army.

he Jews living in Egypt and other Diaspora communities along the editerranean were, in



Just as Jewish women wove cloth for centuries in the Land of Israel, so, too, did many of them weave cloth in Hellenistic Alexandria.

An archaeologist is a person who studies the artifacts, or remnants, of earlier cultures. The artifacts, which often have become buried over time, may include items such as tools, wall paintings, and pottery. Archaeologists help us learn about history and the lives of the people who came before us.

a number of ways, like Orthodox American Jews today. They lived near one another so that they could participate in religious and Jewish communal life. They also gathered together in prayer houses. Although **archaeologists** and historians don't know exactly what went on in the prayer houses, some think prayer houses were the forerunners of synagogues.

Like most Jews of today's Diaspora, Hellenist Jews also adapted to their surroundings. This included adopting the Greek language and style

**You Are There**

Idea

Imagine that you are living in Judea at this time. How might you respond to the spread of Greek culture? Your Jewish neighbors are responding in three separate ways. At one extreme there are those who react to Hellenism with *resistance*. They refuse to participate in or adapt to any aspect of Greek culture. At the opposite extreme are those who support complete *assimilation*, totally shedding their Jewish identities to entirely accept Hellenization. Between these two extremes are those who favor *adaptation*. These people accept parts of Hellenism but remain faithful Jews.

Why do you think it was tempting to assimilate into the Hellenistic culture?

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Why do you think some people chose to resist?

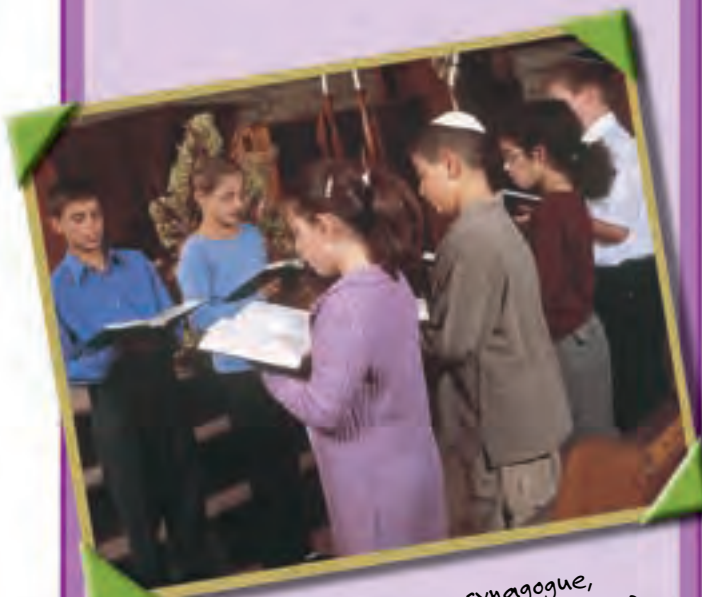
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Hellenism had a strong impact on the Jewish communities of the Diaspora; it even influenced the way they practiced Judaism. As a result of adopting Greek as their language, for example, many Jews grew up without learning to speak and read Hebrew. So, just as translators interpreted and explained the Hebrew text of the Torah in Aramaic in the time of Ezra, the Jews now adapted by translating the Torah into Greek. The written translation is called the Septuagint. By translating their most sacred book, the Jews could keep Jewish traditions and values alive and pass their religion on to the next generation.



At prayer services in your synagogue, would you miss the English translation of the prayers and Torah reading if they were not included? Why or why not?



The Septuagint made it possible for Jews who did not know Hebrew to read and understand the Torah. But not everyone supported the idea of translating the Torah. Many Jews argued that the Torah could not be translated without losing much of its meaning, because each Hebrew word had been chosen by God.

of dress, and giving their children ree names and sending them to ree style schools.

Despite their adaptation to ree culture, many Diaspora Jews maintained their ties to Judaism and to the Jews of Judea. heir relationship can be compared to that of today's orth merican Jews with sraeli Jews. n the one hand, we have many shared values and traditions, such as the value of studying orah and celebrating the High Holidays. n the other hand, we have many distinct traditions. n contrast to the Diaspora, in the modern State of srael the orah is taught in secular schools and religious schools, and Jewish life is strongly controlled by the government.

## the Seleucid Kingdom

The Seleucid Kingdom, named for Alexander's former general Seleucus, was based in Syria. It was formed out of the eastern portion of Alexander's empire. Judea lay on the edge of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Kingdoms. The two Kingdoms continually battled over where the boundary line between them should be drawn. In 198 BCE, the Seleucids gained control over Judea.

At first, daily life in Judea continued as before. But trouble was brewing. Conflict broke out between the High Priest Jannias Hanan and his younger brother Jason Joshua. Jannias wanted to limit the influence of Hellenism in Jerusalem, while Jason wanted to turn Jerusalem into a Hellenistic city to bring it wealth and culture.

When, in 175 BCE a new ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, rose to the Seleucid throne. He quickly earned the hatred of the Judeans by doubling their taxes. Realizing that Antiochus was starved for cash, Jason bribed the king to make him High Priest instead of his brother. Jason's move caused a stir in Judea, for the position of High Priest traditionally was passed down from father to eldest son. Without Antiochus's blessing, Jason further divided the population by making Jerusalem into a Hellenistic city, building a sports arena next to the temple. Some of the younger priests neglected their duties because they preferred to take part in the neighboring athletic competitions. Traditional Jews were horrified and vowed to resist Hellenism.



Encouraged by new opportunities that were available under Hellenistic rule, Jews established communities in modern-day Egypt, Greece, and Turkey.



These glass bottles are from the time of the Second Temple. Like other ancient artifacts, they were made by hand, not machine. How do they compare with the glass bottles and vases in your home?

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Despite Jason’s attraction to Greek culture, his Hellenism program had limits. He continued to respect the holiness of the temple and did not interfere with sacrifices and other rituals. But soon after Jason’s appointment, a more extreme Hellenist named Menelaus offered Antiochus an even larger bribe than Jason had given. As a result, Jason was out as High Priest and Menelaus was in.

Whereas Jason favored adaptation, Menelaus believed in assimilation. Thus, tensions were

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When people’s points of view are at opposite extremes, what is described as lawless by one person may be seen as enlightened, or forward thinking, by another. The text below is from the First Book of Maccabees 1:11–15. (The Book of Maccabees belongs to a group of ancient texts that were not included in the Bible.)

“In those days there arose in Israel lawless men [led by Jason] who misled many, saying, ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen [people who do not believe in God—Hellenizers] around us....’ And they built a gymnasium [Greek-style sports arena] in Jerusalem, in heathen fashion..., and abandoned the holy covenant [with God]. They united with the heathen and became servants of evil.”

Based on this passage, describe the writer’s view of Hellenism.

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Rewrite the quote as a Hellenist Jew might have described the situation.

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## Sound Familiar?

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Are you surprised that Temple priests became corrupt? Today, as in biblical times, people in positions of authority sometimes misuse their power.

Name three qualities that you look for in a leader as proof of the person's trustworthiness.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Write a classified ad for Menelaus's replacement as High Priest. Describe the character of the person you want to hire and what that person's approach to Hellenism must be.

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If you had to write a classified ad for a rabbi to work in a summer camp, how would your description of the rabbi be the same as the High Priest's? How would it be different?

**Same**

**Different**

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already high when Menelaus stole holy vessels from the temple and arranged to have them melted. In 167 B.C., Menelaus's opponents, led by Jason, revolted. Judea descended into civil war.

Antiochus considered the uprising to be a revolt against his rule. He marched into

Jerusalem with troops, slaughtered many of the protesters, and sold others into slavery. Antiochus looted the temple and entered the Holy of Holies—a place forbidden to all but the High Priest on Yom Kippur. Jerusalem became an occupied city, with a new military fortress overlooking the temple.



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Antiochus was still not satisfied. Considering the Jews to be a disruptive force in his empire, he forbade the observance of Jewish rituals, Shabbat, and holidays. He outlawed the study of Torah and converted the Beit Hamikdash into a Greek temple. He placed a statue of Zeus near the altar and even ordered the sacrifice of pigs in the temple.

For the next two years, a country priest named Mattathias the Hasmonean, along with members of his resistance, fought a guerrilla war against the Seleucids. Although they were outnumbered and had only primitive weapons, the rebels had the advantage of knowing the land of Judea. They knew the best routes to take and where to hide. Another advantage they had was the secret aid of a sympathetic Jewish population.

After Mattathias died, his son Judah took command of the rebels. Judah's men nicknamed their bold leader Hachabai, which means hammer. The rebels became known as **Maccabees**. They lived up to their name, dealing hammer blow after hammer blow to the Seleucids. But Judah's victories were modest, in comparison to those that could be achieved by a large and sophisticated army.

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In the Jewish month of Kislev in 165 B.C.E., the Maccabees captured Jerusalem from the Seleucids and purified the temple. The temple was rededicated on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, the third anniversary of the day it had been defiled by Antiochus.

Judah and his men styled their dedication after the eight-day festival of Sukkot, which they had not been able to celebrate a few months earlier. The new festival eventually became known as Hanukkah, which means dedication. On this day, Hanukkah begins on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, which usually falls in December, and is celebrated for eight days.



*In Hanukkah, we eat foods cooked in oil, such as potato latkes and sufganiyot (donuts). This custom honors the tradition that the oil in the rededicated temple's candlestick miraculously lasted for eight days.*

**Independence**

The Hasmoneans' struggle to win independence from the Seleucids continued for another twenty-three years. In 137 B.C.E., the hated Seleucid fortress overlooking the temple was finally destroyed. The Jews were free once again.

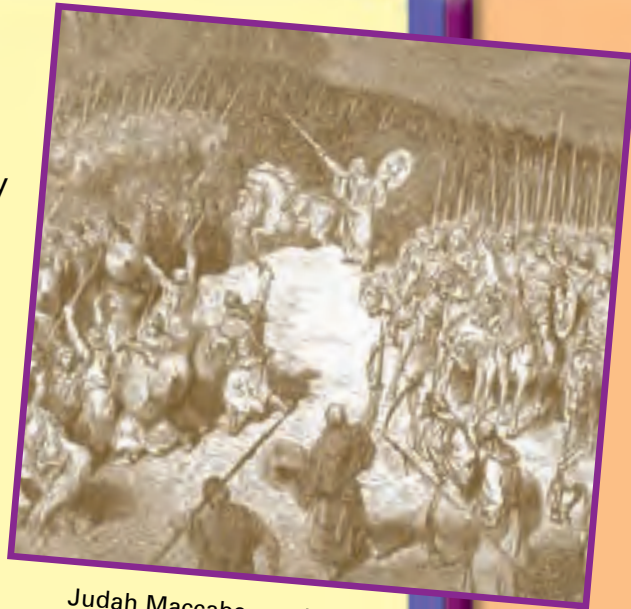
## Famous ★ FIGURES

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Judah Maccabee was a great military leader who conducted an early form of guerrilla warfare. Because the Seleucid forces were superior in both numbers and arms, Judah avoided open battle. He and his band of rebels executed a series of daring and successful night attacks that made use of their superior knowledge of the land.

Judah died on the battlefield in 161 BCE. His brothers succeeded him, securing the independence of Judea twenty years later.

Use the space below to draw a picture or write a poem that portrays the courage of Judah and his band of followers.



*Judah Maccabee and his followers armed themselves with captured weapons.*

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A legend recorded in the Talmud suggests another reason why the Hasmoneans, the family that led the revolt against the Greeks, created an eight-day festival. When the Maccabees purified the Beit Hamikdash, this story says, they found enough oil to light the Temple's branched candlestick for only one day. According to the story, the oil miraculously lasted for eight days.

Attathias's only surviving son, Simon, was proclaimed High Priest and Prince of the People. This signaled a change from the past because Simon was not a member of the traditional high priestly family. In the minds of some Jews, he was no more a legitimate High Priest than Menelaus had been. Simon's grandson would go one step farther and proclaim himself King of the Jews, a position that many Jews believed could only be held by a descendant of King David.

Although Judea was independent, it was still part of a region dominated by Hellenism. So the question Jews continued to face was Do you support resistance, assimilation, or adaptation? Ironically, the descendants of the Maccabees were in favor of adaptation. For example, they minted coins that used both

Hebrew and Greek and some included symbols that were not uniquely Jewish, such as anchors, palm trees, and wheels.

Orthodox American Jews continue to face the issue of resisting, assimilating, or adapting to Diaspora cultures. But it hasn't divided us to the same extent that it divided the Jews of Judea. Under the Hasmoneans the bitter divisions would bring tragic consequences.



This Hasmonean coin has a Jewish symbol. It is a seven-branched menorah, a symbol of the Temple's branched candlestick. If you were creating a coin for the modern State of Israel, what symbol would you put on it? Why?



# then & NOW

A conflict of values caused disunity among the Jews under Hellenistic rule. Those who were drawn to Hellenism and wanted to assimilate pointed to the greatness of Greek philosophy, literature, and theater. They valued the excitement of Greek athletic competitions and the richness and beauty of Greek culture. Those who resisted Hellenism argued that the Greeks had an inferior culture. They argued that the Greeks glorified war, oppressed the poor, and indulged in drunkenness and idolatry. They saw Hellenism as a direct threat to Judaism.

In modern times, the conflicts of assimilation versus resistance or adaptation are also most intense during the month of December, when both Hanukkah and Christmas are celebrated.

1. Why do you think this issue continues to be a problem for Jews?

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2. What suggestion(s) do you have for addressing the problem?

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