About the person:

Judas Maccabeus, Hebrew: Yehuda HaMakkabi, was born around 190 B.C. in Modin as the third son of the priest Mattathias. He was killed in 160 BC at the Battle of Elasa, a field battle fought as part of the Maccabean Revolt near the modern-day city of Ramallah in the West Bank. The Maccabean Revolt was a Jewish uprising against Seleucid rule in Judea. The revolt began in 167 BC and lasted for several decades. The Seleucids had been attempting to increasingly Hellenize the Jews. As a devout Jewish priest and defender of the Torah, Judah Maccabee took over the leadership of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes after his father’s death in 166 BCE. Antiochus had desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and banned Jewish customs. Judah, whose nickname “Maccabee” means “hammer,” organized a successful guerrilla war. He defeated superior Seleucid armies at Emmaus and Beth-Zur and entered Jerusalem in 164 BCE. There, he purified and rededicated the Temple. This is the origin of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, which will be celebrated from December 5 to 12, 2026. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Judah Maccabee about his beliefs, his struggle against the Seleucids, and what he thinks of Israel today.

By Sacha Wigdorovits

Judah Maccabee, you were a priest and became a warrior. Were you able to reconcile this with your faith?

Judah Maccabee: Yes. As a priest, I fought for the law and the covenant of our fathers (with God—Ed.). I told my men, “But we are fighting for our lives and for our laws.” Combat and faith were one and the same when the Temple and the Torah were under threat.

Today in Israel, strictly religious Jews refuse to fight, leaving it to the rest of the population. They say they support the State of Israel through prayer. What do you say to that?

Judas Maccabeus: I don’t understand this. When they desecrated our sanctuary and sought to ban our law, my father said, “Whoever is zealous for the law, follow me!” We took up the sword because prayer alone would not purify the Temple. Anyone who can protect the people and the sanctuary but fails to do so is breaking the covenant.

What motivated you to fight the Seleucids?

Judas Maccabeus: What drove me was the sacrilege committed against God and His house. They banned circumcision, the Sabbath, and sacrifices; they set up an idolatrous altar in the Temple; and they sought to exterminate us, women and children alike. I fought so that Israel could once again live according to the Law and worship the Lord in the sanctuary.

What did you consider to be the central essence of the Jewish community?

Judas Maccabeus: The central essence was the covenant with the God of Israel: the Torah, circumcision, the Sabbath, and the Temple as the dwelling place of His presence. Whoever kept this covenant belonged to the people. Anyone who abandoned it and followed the Gentiles was an apostate. We fought and died for this covenant and this people.

Did you have human laws in addition to the divine laws?

Judah Maccabee: Yes, but they were not allowed to contradict the law of God. We lived according to the Torah, the covenant of our fathers. The decrees of the elders and priests served to protect this law. When the Seleucids issued human decrees prohibiting circumcision, the Sabbath, and sacrifices, we rejected them. Divine law stands above all human commandments.

Instead of fighting, couldn’t you have tried to achieve your goal through negotiations?

Judas Maccabeus: We didn’t try because the Seleucids were the ones who broke off negotiations first. They came with arrogance, intent on destroying us. When they later offered religious freedom, we continued to fight for our people’s political freedom.

Is there such a thing as religious freedom without political freedom for the Jews?

Judas Maccabeus: No. Without our own rule, the Temple and the Law are always at risk again. We didn’t just want to be allowed to pray; we wanted to live freely under God’s covenant. That is why we continued to fight for Israel’s independence even after the rededication of the Temple.

Then you understand that Jews are still fighting today for their own Jewish state?

Judah Maccabee: Yes. Just as it was then, religious freedom alone is not enough. As long as foreigners rule over the land and the sanctuary, the covenant remains in danger. Those who fight for the life and laws of Israel and establish their own state are acting in the spirit of what we gave our lives for.

How did you feel when you recaptured Jerusalem in the year 164 (B.C.) and were able to rededicate the Temple?

Judah Maccabee: It was the greatest day. We cleansed the Temple, built a new altar, and rededicated it on the 25th of Kislev. We celebrated with joy for eight days. Everyone fell on their faces and praised Heaven, which had granted us victory. That was the salvation of Israel.

Why were you and your fellow fighters willing to sacrifice your lives for the Temple?

Judas Maccabeus: The Temple was the place of God’s presence, the only place for the daily sacrifice, and the center of our covenant with Him. Without the Temple, Israel was without a heart. We were ready to die, because the desecration of the sanctuary meant the destruction of the people themselves. “It is better to fall in battle than to witness the desecration of the sanctuary.”

All that remains of the Temple today is the western wall, known as the Wailing Wall. Instead of the Temple, there is now a mosque on the Temple Mount. Yet even today, Jews are still fighting for the right to pray on the Temple Mount. Do you understand that?

Judah Maccabee: Yes. The Temple Mount is the place God has chosen. If foreign rulers have established a different religion there and are preventing the Jews from praying, that is the same desecration as it was back then. Anyone who honors the Lord’s place must fight for the right to pray there—with the sword or with words, whichever is necessary.

The Jews in present-day Israel are not threatened by the Seleucids, but by other enemies who want to destroy them. What do you say to them?

Judah Maccabee: If they come to destroy the people and seize the land from them, then the same words apply as they did then: “We fight for our lives and for our laws.” Take strength from the law, trust in heaven, and defend yourselves with everything you have. Whoever flees when the time for battle has come brings

shame upon himself.

Note: This conversation with Judah Maccabee is based on the Bible. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our goal is to use AI to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include:

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, the Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, the writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, religious scholar, and writer

Hannah Arendt, the journalist and outspoken thinker

Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews

Paul Grüninger, the St. Gallen police commander who was dismissed and convicted for helping persecuted Jews

Raoul Wallenberg, the young Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest and was then abducted and killed by the Russians

Oskar Schindler, who, as the head of a factory in Poland, saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews and became famous through the film “Schindler’s List”

King David, who as a young man defeated Goliath and saved the Jews from the Philistines, then established a great kingdom andwrote the Psalms;Queen Esther, who saved the Jews in the Persian Empire in the 5th century B.C. from annihilation

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Sacha Wigdorovits is President of the Fokus Israel und Nahost association, which runs the website fokusisrael.ch. He studied history, German and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked as a US correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, was editor-in-chief of BLICK and co-founder of the commuter newspaper 20minuten.