

Hannukah

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

Hannukah, the Festival of Lights, begins today. Hannukah marks the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem after the Hebrew victory over Antiochus IV, the Seleukid king. This victory by the Maccabees established Jewish independence and that independence was reflected in the first truly Judaic coins.

The Israelites were captive in Babylon when the Greeks invented coinage. When they were liberated, the Jews came out into a world that was monetized on silver. However, as pastoral people with their attention on heaven, they took little interest in coinage. Indeed, the second commandment prohibited graven images and Greek coins invariably carried a pagan god or goddess. However, the utility of coinage was undeniable and a rabbinical decision set the shekel of Tyre as the standard coin of the Israelite kingdoms.

About the year 330 BC, the Persians issued a series of small silver coins with the legend "YEHUD". Shortly after this, Persia fell to Alexander the Great.

Relations between the Hebrews and their Hellenic neighbors took a turn for the worse when Antiochus IV defiled the temple of Jerusalem in 168. Led by Judas Maccabees, the Hebrews triumphed in 165 and they purified and rededicated the temple.

The first truly Jewish coins were struck by John Hyrancus I who ruled from 135 to 104. An anchor on one side and a lily on the other are devices on this coinage. These were small bronze coins about half the size of a modern dime. This type of coinage was typical of Hebrew kings even into Roman times, though the devices changed to include cornucopias, pomegranites, and other symbols.