

MACCABEES & MENORAHS

a Hanukkah microrpg by Joe Zarrow

¹ "Judah was called 'Maccabee,' a word composed of the initial letters of the four Hebrew words *Mi Kamocha Ba'eilim Hashem*, 'Who is like You among the mighty, O G-d'" (chabad.org).

Hanukkah commemorates events that took place in the 2nd century BCE, too late to be included in the Torah. All we know about the Maccabees is from two sections of the Catholic bible plus the Talmud, a scholarly book laid out with main text in the middle and commentary around the edges.

² Israeli Tabletop theorist Haggai Elkayam Shalem emphasizes player (as opposed to character) emotional experience. Even when fighting a dragon, "when the players around the table are laughing, drinking beer and eating pizza, we will never have truly scared characters" (gnomestew.com).

I encourage using real names as a nod to this Israeli Tabletop school of design. I'd read more of their work, but most of it isn't translated. I never went to Hebrew school. My father is a secular Jewish man and my mother is Catholic, but when I was young, mom and I went to a born-again protestant church "with a Jewish heart" (per its phone book ad) which held high holiday services in addition to Christian worship. Many Jewish people would consider this Messianic Jewish practice "a dangerous theology that borders on anti-Semitism" (Tara Isabella Burton, vox.com). My dad, who jokingly dubbed himself the church's "heathen auxiliary" when he helped my mom get props for the Christmas pageant, certainly stayed far away. When my parents were still married, our family would remember to light the menorah maybe two nights out of eight.

³ Not so much in the Hebrew bible but later in the Quran and medieval sources, Solomon gets up to all sorts of fun magical hijinks: chatting with ants, writing grimoires, pouring boiling water on two-headed demon children, flying on a 60-mile-long magic carpet. Terrific RPG fodder, none of which I knew when we named our kid Solomon.

⁴ Once I was putting oil and a new battery in my car on Kenmore Street. A young man on a nearby stoop watched the whole process. "You Jewish?" he asked. I ignored him the first couple of times, but on the third asked why he wanted to know. "You look like this Jewish teacher I had once." He was right; a decade prior I had been his sixth grade teacher. It was nice to see him. Often students would ask me, "Zarrow, are you Jewish?" I'd tell them about my mixed background, but they always remembered me as the Jewish one.

⁵ A trumpet made from a ram's horn. For a semester in college I played trumpet in a klezmer band called Yarmulkazi. We were the opening act for the Hillel Purim Party.

⁶ Joshua 6:20

⁷ Raiders 1:47

⁸ True to the welcoming and/or shamelessly appropriative spirit of D&D, I'm sourcing monsters and other material from many cultures: Yiddish, Hebrew, Babylonian, etc. From the Maccabee perspective, Antiochus's attempts to Hellenize local religious practice led to the revolt.

⁹ In "most Jewish religious cultures...texts are not just a medium for some abstract, mental activity. They are deeply integrated in embodied performance" (Yair Lipshitz, *Theatre & Judaism*). Text's centrality to Judaism is typified by the *tefillin*, small leather boxes containing Torah verses on rolled parchment, worn on the body. Exegesis is also central to every D&D session that's ever devolved into combing through hundreds of pages of rules in search of evidence on whether a grapple provokes an attack of opportunity. Sometime in the late 1980s I smuggled a D&D book into the house. I felt so guilty I admitted it to my parents within hours. My mother, panicking about the text's potential satanic influence over me, first highlighted passages she found to be questionable. Later, with my permission, she took the book into the garage and tore it into tiny pieces.

¹⁰ An undead wizard. If a lich's body is destroyed, it "gains a new body in 1d10 days, regaining all its hit points ... The new body appears within 5 feet of the phylactery" (D&D Systems Reference Document, 5th edition). I've seen people argue that the Greek-derived *phylactery*, or amulet, actually refers to the *tefillin*, and that the lich, with its scheming and its arcane knowledge, is built on anti-Semitic tropes. You could say the same thing about those goblin bankers that J.K. Rowling likes, or plenty of other monsters.

¹¹ No longer fearing that it would make me vulnerable to demon possession, I played D&D for the first time in my thirties and was immediately hooked. I let Solomon play with my dice and minis and other D&D paraphernalia, despite his being 5 and having the destructive potential of an Owlbear. My wife is British while I'm American, and we're starting to help Solomon tell his own stories of his mixed heritage. We put up both a Christmas tree and a menorah¹².

¹² There are many ways to play Maccabees & Menorahs. Maybe read this and imagine your own stories. Maybe think about how we do or do not cast Jewish people as heroes or villains. Maybe pour a cup of coffee, gather with your friends online, and talk amongst yourselves about what contradictory roles we play (Religious vs. Secular, Jewish vs. Christian, Parent vs. Child, Pretend vs. Real, Fighters vs. Wizards vs. Clerics vs. Rogues) both in life and on tabletops. Maybe the real adventure was the footnotes we read along the way.

YOU ARE THE MACCABEES, a ragtag band of Judean heroes fighting to liberate the Temple from Mad King Antiochus!

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY MACCABEES¹ & MENORAHS

2 to 5 players, a Dungeon Maven (DM), and two 6-sided dice (2d6).

PLAYER - MAKING A MACCABEE

Take your first name² and add an honorific to it. Roll 1d6 or make up your own: 1. THE STRONG, 2. THE STEALTHY, 3. THE QUICK, 4. THE CLEVER, 5. THE WISE, 6. THE CHARMING. Each player starts the game with a sword, a sling, and 8 little rocks in a pouch. In addition, you get one magic item (roll 1d6):

1. GOLEM: Powerful, slow, mindless servant made of clay.
2. SHAMASH: Helper candle. Like a golem, but tiny, good at fire.
3. KEY OF SOLOMON³: Permits the holder to speak with animals.
4. CRUET OF HOLDING: A small vial of oil⁴, looks only big enough to keep a lamp lit for a day but can hold up to 50 gallons of any liquid.
5. SHOFAR⁵: once per adventure can be blown to sound a thunderous blast that demolishes a wall⁶.
6. ARK OF THE COVENANT: super heavy and unwieldy, once per adventure can be opened to melt the faces of nearby baddies⁷.

ROLLING THE DICE

Any time you do something tricky and the DM decides there is a chance of failure, roll 1d6. Get 4 or higher and you succeed, 3 or lower and face a setback. If you're doing something related to your honorific, instead roll 2d6 and choose the higher result.

DM - PLANNING THE ADVENTURE

Don't plan too much, but here's the starting situation: Mad King Antiochus has taken over the Temple, and the Maccabees want to liberate it. Think of the Temple as a series of layers: an outer wall, an inner wall, and the inner sanctum. Give each wall two different defenses. Then, let the players gather intelligence and plan a favorable route. Here are some ideas⁸ for obstacles:

1. MUSCLE: Knucklehead guards with nasty dogs.
2. TRAPS: Moats filled with alligators, trap doors over pits, etc.
3. LAMASSU: Bull body, human head, eagle wings. Tireless sentinels. Reasonable. Chatty.
4. DYBBUK: Tricky, shapeshifting demons.
5. AQRABUAMELU: Scorpion men, petrifying gaze.
6. TEXTUAL EXEGESIS⁹: Doors locked by magic riddles or bookish guardians who deny passage until a player says something smart.

In the inner sanctum, big bad Mad King Antiochus has yet more henchpeople defending him. Maybe Antiochus himself turns into an extra-nasty monster like a dragon or lich.¹⁰

DM - RUNNING THE ADVENTURE

A role playing game (RPG) is group storytelling, and the DM is the facilitator. You tell the players the situation. They tell you what they want to do. You adjudicate how it comes out (maybe they have to roll dice, if it's a tricky task), and finally you describe the resulting new situation. If the players fail a roll, let it still move the story forward in complicating ways. The most important rule? **Have fun storming the Temple!**¹¹