Chanukkah, the Maccabees, and Military Victory in the light of Jewish History

This year the eight day holiday of Chanukah falls on December 6th through 14th when Jews celebrate the miraculous victory of the Maccabees over the Hellenized Syrians whereby in the rededication of the Temple (see Beit HaMikdash library guide) the miracle of the oil lasted the full eight days rather than the expected one day. In Talmudic tractate Shabbat 21b we learn:

*What is the reason for Hanukkah? As our rabbis taught, on the 25th of Kislev began the 8 days of Hanukkah during which eulogies and fasting are not permitted, for when the Seleucids entered the Temple they defiled all the oils that were in the Temple and when the Hasmonians prevailed and defeated them, they sought but found only one container of oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol, containing only enough to light for 1 day. But a miracle occurred in which they lit the lamp from its oil for 8 days. The following year they established those days as a festival with songs of praise and thanksgiving.*

Although there is a phenomena of a military rabbi, known as “kaplan” in German or recently the great Rav Goren in Israel, the rabbis in general with regards to Chanukah do not focus on the military might of the Maccabees, but rather the holiness (kedusha) that they restored in rededicating the Temple.

Ironically the descendants of the Maccabees known as the Hasmoneans, invited the Romans in to rule ancient Palestine, and it was that Roman government that later served as the vehicle of destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. Since 70 CE many Jews remain in galut (exile) because of the Roman Hurban (Catastrophe).

During the diaspora Rabbis classified the categories of different types of war that are mentioned in Biblical history including those of the Maccabees (see King David Power point at: http://libguides.tourolib.org/c.php?g=114157&p=743093. The Maccabee battles against the Seleucides was classified as *milchemet Mitzvah* (commanded war) versus the other two types of war known as milchemet reshut (discretionary war) and milchemet hovah (justified obligatory war). The rabbis however downplayed the military aspect of the Maccabees and in their construction of the prayer known as the *Al HaNisim* (on the miracles) emphasized the foremost importance of the supernal intellectual Torah above military might. The prayer notes:

*You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, the unclean into the hands of the pure, and the arrogant into the hands of those who were devoted to your Torah*

The rabbinic emphasis is on devotion to torah not military prowess. This emphasis is found in the differences between Esauv and Yakov. In the torah portion Toldot, Isaac declares, “the voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esauv.” According to rabbinic interpretation “the voice of Jacob,
is identified with intellectual and spiritual virtue. It connotes Torah study and prayer. The Midrash explains the voice of Ya’akov is “the voice coming out of Academies of Torah learning and synagogues.” The hands of Esauv, who was a hunter and sportsman, refer to the bloodshed of military prowess. The Midrash comments, “no war is successful unless the seed of Esauv has a share in it.”

The Rabbis chose the prophetic reading for the Shabbos of Chanukkah from Zecharia who in chapter 4 verse 6 states:

Then he answered and spoke unto me, saying: 'This is the word of the L-RD unto Zerubbabel, saying: Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the L-RD of hosts

Before the prophet Zechariah the prophet Jeremiah (9:23) who lived just before the destruction of the 1st temple similarly said:

Thus saith the L-RD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth, and knoweth Me, that I am the L-RD who exercise mercy, justice, and righteousness, in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the L-RD.

The prophet Micah (6:8) echoes these ideas in answering Moses question, "what does G-d require" declaring

"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does ETERNAL require of you? But to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your CREATOR?

Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Micah are giving voice “to the voice of Yakov.” The rabbis in the diaspora in general warned in rabbinic texts against engaging in rebellion, war, and military resistance against the host powers (dina de malchuta dina). Attempting to bring messiah by human means according to most rabbis in the diaspora through rebellion, war, or revolution rather than waiting for G-d to bring the messiah constitutes "forcing G-d's hand" (dochin et ha-quetz) and could prove disastrous if Jews were to ascend to Israel in a “wall” (bihomah).

The verse of Song of Songs, " o daughters of Jerusalem do not wake or arouse love before it is wished" was interpreted that Israel not ascend to Eretz Yisrael en masse, nor rebel against their inferior position under gentiles. In response G-d will not allow the gentiles to persecute the Jews "overly much" (yoter middai). Radical Zionism’s call to negate the diaspora, shallal ha-Galut, preceded the decades prior to the formation of the new state in 1948 after the Holocaust.

With the reestablishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as a political entity, Jewish sovereignty was restored to the Jewish people who found that to protect the state from surrounding threats the maintenance of a Israeli military was again necessary for self preservation, raising the question of the rabbinic understandings of war, military engagement, as this relates to religious life, especially as the Middle East conflict is increasingly being polarized as a war of religions, as during the medieval Crusades

A Uniqueness of the Maccabees was that they were characterized by their military success and waged war against their foes as an act of restoring control of Israel against invading Hellenized influences. Before the Maccabbees Jewish leaders such as Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Saul, David all lead the Israelites to military victories. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Amalekites, and Philistines were just the name of 4 peoples with whom the Israelite leaders engaged in war. However the rabbis in interpreting the
reception history of these mighty battles often de-emphasized the military side in favor of rabbinic virtues. Thus Judah Maccabees refusal to sacrifice an unkosher animal on an altar at Modain, emphasizes the Laws of Kashrut, and purity rather than Judah’s action of using the slaughtering knife to stab the Roman official demanding that the unkosher animal be sacrificed just as the Rabbis emphasize that in addition to using only the pure oil of the high priest in the Temple during the Temple dedication, the Maccabees also purified the Temple from statues of Roman gods like Zeus, and immersed the menorah and other vessels in a mikvah as part of the rededication (Hanukat Habayit).

So we see from the Rabbinic reception history and emphasis on the Chanukah story not focus on military victory and military battle per se but rather emphasis on reinstatement of holiness, G-d's presence, the wonder of miracles, thanksgiving to G-d, and as the Al HaNisim prayer states, devotion and faith to G-d, the triumph of righteousness, and “the overthrow of the arrogant.” By downplaying the military conquest the rabbis exalted rabbinic virtues of humility, purity, compassion, and mercy and thereby echoed “the voice of Jacob” in the clarion call of the prophets Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Micah.