

Parashat Vayashev - Chanukah 5773, 2012:

On Being the Chosen People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The concept of our being G-d's *Am Hanivchar* (Chosen People) is the essence of Chanukah. On the surface, however, this may not appear to be the case. After all, one could easily view the story of the Maccabees and their incredible victory over the Syrian-Greek regime of Antiochus and his hordes of soldiers and elephants in purely naturalistic terms. When seen in this light, it is an amazing military victory of a small band of Jewish men and women, who, against all odds, defeated the powerful Syrian-Greek army. The essential and, paradoxically, most overlooked aspect of the Maccabean victory, however, was the civil war they waged against the Hellenizing assimilationists among our own people. To illustrate the significance of this idea, our Sages formulated the *Al Hanissim* (On Behalf of the Miracles) prayer recited on Chanukah in the following manner:

You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah. You made a great and holy name for Yourself in Your world, and effected a great deliverance and redemption for Your people Israel to this very day.

(http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/597182/jewish/Val-Hanissim.htm - underlining my own)

Hashem's deliverance of "the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah" denotes an entirely different and parallel battle than that

which was fought between the Maccabees and the Syrian-Greek army. It refers, instead, to the internecine struggle, the civil war, between the Torah loyalists (Maccabees) and the *mityavnim* (the Hellenists, radical assimilationists) among our own people. Rabbi Yechezkel Micha'el ben Aharon Halevi Epstein (1829-1908), popularly known as the Aruch Hashulchan after the title of his halachic *magnum opus*, depicts the crushing defeat of the *mityavnim* in the following manner: "Hashem, the One who desires [the future] of His people Israel, handed over... those Jews who rejected G-d's dominion [and repudiated the Torah] and had joined Antiochus' [cultural revolution] ... to those who followed the Torah way of life (*oskei hatorah*).” The Aruch Hashulchan leaves us little doubt as to the everlasting contribution of Chanukah within the spiritual history of our people. In his view, we are Jews today because of the sacrifices made by the Maccabees, and Hashem's guiding hand in ensuring their victory. In sum, the sacrosanct nature and primacy of the Torah was upheld against overwhelming military and cultural odds.

What was the point of contention between the Maccabees and the Hellenists? Why was the civil war fought? My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) answered this question by suggesting:

The main conflict between the Hellenists and the Jews centered around the concept of *bechirat Yisrael* [the Election of Israel]. The Hellenists wanted the Jews to abandon their awareness of *bechirat Yisrael*. The Hellenists, and later the Romans, hated the Jews, because the Jews believed in *bechirat Yisrael*. Thus, the function of *ner Chanukah* [the Chanukah candles] is to remind us of the *hashraat Hashechinah* [the unique and immanent presence of G-d in our lives]. This is particularly true according to the Ramban [1194-1270] (*Parashat Behaalotecha*), who maintains that the *ner Chanukah* represents the *Menorah* of the *Mikdash* [Holy Temple], and, nowadays, that the *Mikdash* does not exist, the *ner Chanukah* serves as its substitute. This is the reason for the *Mitzvah* of *pirsumai nissa* [publicizing the miracle] by *ner Chanukah*. Not only does the *ner Chanukah* remind us of the miracle itself, but, the *ner Chanukah* serves as the testimony of *gilui Shechinah* [the Revelation of G-d's immanent presence]. One who lights the *ner Chanukah* testifies that the *Schechinah* resides only among the Jews. (*Norot HaRav* volume II, *Two Public Lectures in Matters Pertaining to Chanukah* by Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik, B. David Schreiber, editor, pages 4-5 underlining my own)

Chanukah, therefore, is not only the “Festival of Lights,” it is the “Festival of *Hashraat Hashechinah*.” Consequently, it bears powerful testimony to the unique relationship we share with G-d. He chose us, just as we chose Him. We are unabashedly His *Am Hanivchar*, just as He is our G-d: “My strength and song is G-d, and this is my deliverance; This is my G-d, I will enshrine Him, my father's G-d, I will exalt Him.” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2, translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*) May we be *zocheh* (merit) to appreciate this lesson as we celebrate Chanukah, and bear testimony to this relationship through the manner in which we live each day of our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and Chanukah Sameach!

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