

Parashat Vayeshev 5777, 2016:

Joseph, the Maccabees and Klal Yisrael

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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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Sefer Bereishit contains the narratives of a number of larger-than-life individuals whose values and behaviors guide us until this very moment. In broad terms, it is the story of Adam and Eve, Noah, the *Avot* (Patriarchs), the *Emahot* (Matriarchs) and the first generation of Jacob's children. In particular, our *parasha* portrays the "torch being passed to a new generation," namely, from the *Avot* (Jacob) to Joseph. Moreover, from Parashat Vayeshev onward, the Torah relates to us Joseph's trials and tribulations, and his ultimate ascendancy to the post of Viceroy of Egypt.

Joseph's story is always read in juxtaposition to Hanukkah. This, of course, is not mere happenstance. Instead, deep connections obtain between Joseph's challenges and those faced by the Maccabees. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known widely as "the Rav," formulated this thought in the following manner:

There is meaning and symbolism to every detail of the Jewish calendar. The mere fact that Hanukkah always falls on either or both of the two Sabbaths devoted to the reading of the Joseph story, *Vayeshev* and *Miketz*, bears witness that there is a link between the events surrounding Joseph's sale into slavery and the events leading to Hanukkah; the Joseph story contains elements of the Maccabee's dramatic struggle with the Hellenistic tyrant of Syria. (This, and all quotes, are from *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, Chapter Nine, "Joseph and Hanukkah," pages 155-166, Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler editors, underlining my own)

The Rav notes that Joseph's overall task was similar in kind to that of his father Jacob, since Joseph, like his father, "had to prove that Abraham's covenant could be practiced outside the Promised Land, that the moral laws are not contingent upon geography and chronology." According to Rav Soloveitchik, however, there were two essential differences between the tasks that confronted Jacob and Joseph. First, Jacob "had to prove that the Torah is realizable in poverty and oppression," whereas "Joseph's mission was to demonstrate that enormous success, unlimited riches, admiration, prominence, and power are not in conflict with a saintly covenantal life." Second, Jacob lived a life of spiritual and religious heroism in the midst of a backward pastoral society, and under the hegemony of Laban. In contrast, Joseph "demonstrated his heroic action in the most advanced civilization of antiquity, Egypt."

A careful reading of the Joseph narrative reveals it is replete with high drama that is second to none. As the Rav highlights, it is a story of carrying forth the banner of *kedushah* (holiness) under the most trying of circumstances and of "sacrificial action, heroic decisions, and courageous plans." Upon due reflection, these were precisely the tasks undertaken by the Maccabees, as portrayed by our Sages in the *Al Hanissim* prayer for Hanukkah:

In the days of Matityahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons, when the wicked Hellenic government rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will. But You, in Your abounding mercies, stood by them in the time of their distress. You waged their battles, defended their rights, and avenged the wrong done to them. 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. Then Your children entered the shrine of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courtyards, and instituted these eight days of Chanukah to give thanks and praise to Your great Name.

http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/597182/jewish/Val-Hanissim.htm

At this juncture, the Rav asks a question that is fundamental to understanding the true role of the Maccabees and their relationship to Joseph as his spiritual heirs:

How did the Almighty use the Hasmoneans in order to save the covenantal community? Did He act as He acted in Egypt, where He just informed Moses what He had in store for them? Or did He require of the Hasmoneans total involvement – sacrificial action, heroic decisions, and courageous plans – as He demanded from Joseph?

Rav Soloveitchik's powerful response informs our understanding of the Joseph-Hanukkah nexus as never before:

The Hasmoneans seized the initiative; G-d willed them to defend the sanctuary, to guard the honor of the Jewish women, the pride of the people and the grandeur of the Torah. They fought like lions, selflessly and with unqualified devotion. Of course, G-d defeated the enemy after man did his part. The Hasmoneans were confronted by the same destiny as Joseph, the destiny of suffering. It is a great and heroic destiny, but a very difficult one.

In many ways, the stories of Joseph and the Maccabees serve as a blueprint for living in the pre-Messianic era, whether in *Medinat Yisrael* or the Diaspora, when we, too, are called upon “to guard...the pride of our people and the grandeur of the Torah.” With Hashem's help and our fervent devotion, may we ever have the strength and vision to do so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.