

Time to be a Maccabee

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Pesach (Passover), Purim, and Chanukah are our historical festivals. *Pesach* is the festival of memory *par excellence*, since its entire purpose is to recount the story and events associated with the Exodus from Egypt. Its books are *Sefer Shemot* and the *Haggadah*. Purim teaches us about the marvelous and, ultimately, mystical occurrences that took place in Persia in approximately 355 BCE. Its book is *Megillat Esther*. Chanukah has a three-part story. It is at one and the same time the festival of the small container of ritually pure oil that miraculously burned for eight days (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 21a), the story of the Maccabees and their incredible victory over the Syrian-Greek regime of Antiochus and his hordes of soldiers and elephants, and the account of the victory of the Maccabees, in their role as Torah loyalists, over the Hellenizers among our people. Unlike *Pesach* and Purim, however, Chanukah has no canonized *sefer* to share its narrative. Its history is, therefore, told at length in the *Al Hanissim* (section of prayer for Chanukah).

The early Greek historian, Livius (59 BCE-17 CE), known in English as Livy, understood the role of history in the following fashion: “The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience

plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid.” (<http://www.historyguide.org/history.html>) History, in his view, teaches us that which is noble and that which we ought to avoid. Indeed, we can find ourselves in history, if only we are willing to expend the effort to do so. If this is the case for history in general, it is certainly the case when we encounter Jewish history. Moreover, for the religious Jew, G-d’s presence in history is writ large and is to be found in each and every event, either explicitly or implicitly.

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), in a posthumously published volume entitled, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Chanukkah*, analyzed three paradigms of the G-d - man relationship as they pertain to history. In the first one, man is passive, a bystander to the cosmic drama that Hashem has wrought:

...G-d may refrain from using man as the fulfiller or executor of His inscrutable will. G-d accomplishes everything by Himself; He decrees, and fulfills His own decree. The initiative is G-d’s, and the realization is His as well. All man can do is watch, admire, and adore. Creation is such an example.

The second paradigm casts man in the role of the herald of his Creator. Man, within this archetype, serves G-d as His trusted prophet-messenger who performs a variety of His tasks. Man’s purpose resides in implementing Hashem’s plans. Thus, while he is no longer purely passive, he is not yet the designer and executor of his own humanly conceived plan:

...G-d may use man not for consummation and execution of His will, but for heralding the Divine message. Man is the prophet who brings good tidings to those in misery and distress. Man acts as the *shali’ah*, the messenger or angel of G-d. He carries out

instructions. This role was assigned to Moses; he was G-d's messenger; but the drama of the Exodus was fully staged by the Almighty.

The third paradigm is most closely associated with Purim and Chanukah. Herein, man is the active agent. He conceives his strategy and its deployment; for in this model, G-d's manifestation is hidden (*hester panim*). Hashem is omnipresent; yet, we fail to immediately sense His presence while simultaneously realizing He is there. Thus, when Esther initially objects to creating an action-plan to thwart Haman's despicable intentions, Mordechai boldly declares: "For if you persist in keeping silent at a time like this, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews **from another place...**" (*Megillat Esther* 4:14, *Artscroll Tanach* translation, emphasis my own) For Rav Soloveitchik, man must become a true hero:

...G-d may let man take the initiative. Man plans the struggle, engages in action, fights for freedom. G-d wants man to play his part seriously, as if the final outcome depended upon him exclusively. Man is apparently the central figure. G-d, of course, determines the destiny, whether man will suffer defeat or emerge victorious. But the struggle cannot be won without total human involvement. In such cases, G-d demands from man heroic action. (All quotes, page 159.)

Mindy Rubenstein is a freelance writer living in Atlanta, Georgia. She recently wrote a thought-provoking article on Aish.com that begins with the following words:

I didn't grow up religious. Like many other American Jewish children, I had a bat mitzvah at age 13. Enjoyed Seders and matzah crackers at Passover. Lit the menorah and got presents during the eight nights of Hanukkah. But I was fully immersed in secular life – attending public schools where I was the only Jewish kid in the class. Sharing occasional church services and Easter egg hunts with friends. Serving shrimp cocktails at my wedding. Enjoying Saturdays at the mall. I didn't know any better. Neither did my parents. But I do now. (<http://www.aish.com/jw/s/Reversing-Pew.html>)

Ms. Rubenstein's story is unfortunately the norm for many American Jews: "The results of a [recent study](#) by the Pew Research Center, called Portrait of Jewish Americans, revealed that 60 percent of Jews intermarry, and one in five Jews consider themselves to

have no religion. Most, according to the report, say Judaism is “only about culture and ancestry.” As a rabbi who has served the Jewish people in small American Jewish population centers, I can anecdotally attest to the accuracy of the Pew report. By way of illustration: I can easily remember the woman who drove to shul on Yom Kippur with her child in tow, after taking both she and her friends to McDonalds for lunch. Then, too, I remember performing a beautiful wedding in a prestigious hall in a major city wherein there was a very large bride and groom entourage. Of the 30 couples in the wedding party, there was but one wherein both of the young people were Jewish – the couple that I was about to marry. Unfortunately, these stories, and so many that are similar in kind, can be repeated almost endlessly. In a word: American Jewry is in trouble.

What should be our response? I believe we need to emulate our Maccabee ancestors, and teach the lost and assimilated Jews of our world the truths and beauty of Torah and *mitzvot*. We need to bring them closer to Hashem. On the entire planet, there are less than two million Jews who observe kashrut, mikvah, and Shabbat. We cannot ignore the other 12.5 million, or view them as being insignificant or unimportant because “they’re not like us.” We must each do our part in guaranteeing the total Jewish future. This, perhaps, is the greatest legacy of the Maccabees. As Rabbi Soloveitchik so clearly stated: “G-d demands from man heroic action.” Let us hope and pray that Hashem will grant us the wisdom to understand what we must do, and may each of us have the courage to answer history’s call, for it is time, once again, to be Maccabees.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukah Sameach!*

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

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 rdbe718@gmail.com.

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

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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