

Parashat Vayeshev - Chanukah 5772, 2011:

What is Chanukah?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

“Every Chanukah a Jew should discover something new, which he didn’t know. It should increase our capabilities and our sensitivities. I should ‘dig’ and make an effort.” – Public lecture, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), December 30, 1978

With Rabbi Soloveitchik’s statement as our guide, let us ask a deceptively simple question: “What is the true nature of Chanukah?” You see, given its popularity, Chanukah has been interpreted and reinterpreted to become all things to all facets of the Jewish people. While it is true that Chanukah belongs to all Jews, its essence and being represents the primacy of Torah for the Jewish people.

There are a number of Torah sources that are illustrative of my thesis. The most complete proof text, however, is found in the words of the great Rav and *posek* (halachic decisor), Rabbi Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Halevi Epstein (1829-1908), popularly known as the “Aruch Hashulchan,” after the title of his halachic *magnum opus*. He begins his presentation of the Laws of Chanukah with an historical synopsis of the causal factors behind the Maccabean revolt of 168 BCE. Fascinatingly, he is the only *posek* who explicitly mentions Antiochus IV Epiphanes by name. It seems that he wants to underscore the historical nature of Chanukah and the personal responsibility of Antiochus. This was accomplished by providing us with the name of the actual tyrant that oppressed us.

In general, Rav Epstein closely follows the Rambam's (1135-1204) opening presentation in *Hilchot Chanukah* 3:1-3. Thus, he speaks of how "the evil ones enacted laws against the Jewish people," and attempted "to nullify their holy religion." He joins the Rambam, as well, when he states, "they did not allow them to be involved in the Torah and Mitzvot and they stole their money and forcibly took their daughters." Moreover, as is well known, "they entered the Temple and performed horrendous actions and rendered ritually impure the pure." Then, too, "they made the Jews miserable and oppressed them with great oppression." Let us briefly examine each of these points.

"The evil ones enacted laws against the Jewish people" unfortunately depicts a situation that was an all too commonplace experience for our people. After all, we had survived the servitude and inhuman conditions of Egypt. In addition, at the time of Purim, we had been subject to Haman's decree to completely destroy our people, simply because we were Jews and recognizable as such. Therefore, laws against our people were a necessary, but insufficient cause, for the Maccabees' revolt.

The next phrase, however, "to nullify their holy religion" was something unprecedented. For the first time in known history, one nation persecuted another nation simply on the basis of their religious beliefs and the consequent manner in which they lived their lives. This was patently intolerable. This was more than the Maccabees and their small band of followers could bear. How could they live when the evil oppressors "did not allow them to be involved in Torah and Mitzvot?" They understood that Antiochus and his hordes

sought to destroy the fundamental nature of Judaism, namely, the potential to bring *kedushah* (holiness) into the world via the observance of the Commandments.

“They stole their money and forcibly took their daughters,” is composed of two separate and distinct ideas. Once again, if Antiochus had simply stolen our property, as pernicious as this would have been, it would not have caused the revolt. They, however, “forcibly took their daughters,” and thus committed the unspeakable crime of *gilui arayot* (illicit physical relations). In sum, the Syrian-Greeks ripped asunder the fabric and sanctity of our families when they forced Jewish women, and in particular new brides, to be party to their licentious acts. This was detestable to all who held the Torah sacrosanct. Indeed, this act, in and of itself, would have been sufficient cause for revolt.

“They entered the Temple and performed horrendous actions and rendered ritually impure the pure,” is alluded to in the passage known as “*Mai Chanukah*” (“What is Chanukah?,” *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b*), and is found explicitly in the *Al Hanissim* (Concerning the Miracles) prayer in the *Siddur*, and in the Rambam’s *Hilchot Chanukah*. It is a continuation of the theme of Syrian-Greek anti-Jewish religious persecution. Antiochus and his Syrian-Greek marauders thought that they could destroy Judaism by destroying the *kedushah* of our holy Temple. This strategy had been an abject failure approximately four hundred years earlier under the Assyrian king Sennacherib. His annihilation of the First Temple (586 BCE) was a devastating blow. Yet, it destroyed neither our will nor our essential belief-structure. In fact, the Babylonian Exile led eventually to the creation of a thriving Jewish civilization in Babylon, the greatest fruit of which was the Babylonian Talmud. The Syrian-Greeks, however, with their unmitigated

hubris, thought that they could accomplish what the Assyrians had failed to do. Thus, they challenged G-d and sought to dethrone Him from His celestial glory by attacking the spiritual foundations of His holy Temple. Instead, this abomination only served to galvanize Matityahu, Yehudah, and the rest of the Maccabees in their holy tasks of driving out the Syrian-Greek invaders and re-dedicating the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple).

Finally, the dawn of our deliverance arose and the Maccabees revolted. Hashem, as Rav Epstein states: “had mercy upon them [i.e. the Jewish people] and saved them from their hands and rescued them through the agency of the Chashmonayim” – the holy and pure *Kohanim Gedolim*, namely, Matityahu and his sons. They fought against Antiochus, and soundly defeated him. Their victory was beyond the normal laws of nature (*shelo b’derech hateva*) [i.e. it was miraculous].” Once again, following the path blazed by the Rambam, Rav Epstein stresses the astounding nature of this victory. The Maccabees encountered an overwhelming foe equipped with the most up-to-date military technology, including “many elephants and chariots.” The facts on the ground were totally against Matityahu and his sons. They had no legitimate chance of victory. Based upon all standard military calculations, they were doomed to fail. Yet, against incalculable odds, they won the war and continue to inspire us until today.

The victory itself, as Rav Epstein states, was multi-dimensional:

Hashem, the One who desires [the future] of His people Israel, handed over the powerful into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the evil ones into the hands of the righteous, and those Jews who repudiated G-d’s dominion [and repudiated the Torah] and had joined Antiochus’ [“cultural revolution”] were also killed and handed over to those who followed the Torah way of life (*oskei hatorah*).

This eventuated in Hashem's name being "magnified and sanctified in the world, as well as the light of the Torah being spread, with its inherent purity [throughout the world], and with the name of the Jewish people becoming great among the nations of the world." This passage is remarkable on several levels. In broad terms, it is as if Rav Epstein has composed a "Haggadah" for Chanukah where none had existed before. More specifically, he explicitly depicts the crushing defeat of the assimilationists, the *mityavnim*, in no uncertain terms: "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"] – they were also killed and handed over to those who followed the Torah way of life (*oskei hatorah*)." This formulation of Rav Epstein's is an extrapolation and explication of the phrase found in the *Al Hanissim*, wherein it states: "and the rebellious ones into the hands of those who followed the Torah way of life."

In summary, the Aruch Hashulchan leaves us with 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 a word, the holiness and primacy of the Torah was upheld against overwhelming external and internal forces – and this is why we are here today.

May Hashem give us the strength, wisdom, and courage to fight for the primacy and authenticity of Torah in our lives so that we, too, can be the Matityahus and Yehudahs of

our own historical moment, and thereby be “*metakane haolom b’malchut Shakkai*” (“improve the world under the hegemony of Hashem’s Kingship”). *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukah Sameach!*

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