

Chanukah: The Real Light

- Nisson Shulman.

Based on an idea in Sefer "Moadim" by Rav Yitzchok Nissenbaum) The Greeks were the first to attack our religion, the first to invent the blood accusation, the first to accuse us of living for money. We were forced to respond to force with force. But the Maccabees were kohanim. Imagine their thoughts as they stepped across corpses on the battlefield, since David was prevented to build the Temple because DAM LAROV SHAFACHTA. Their dedication with one cruse of oil, they thought, would leave them in darkness thereafter. But the miracle - lo behayil velo bekoach ki im...

HANUKAH: THE REAL LIGHT OF HANUKAH

When the Jewish people returned from the Babylonian exile with Ezra, the theme of their life style was "Not by might nor by power, but with my spirit, saith the Lord God" (Zechariah 4:6). The first thing they did was to rebuild the Holy Temple. They rededicated themselves to Torah, and especially to a life of Torah. And so they continued for centuries, each man under his date and fig tree, living a quiet and pious life, while empires around them were in turmoil. Persia gave way to Greece; Israel came under rule of Macedon, Egypt, Syria. But all that power was external and superficial. Our people's power was in the spirit.

Then came tragedy. In the Torah portion we read how Jacob who had escaped from Laban and then Esav, suffered tragedy from his children through their sale of Joseph which finally brought them all down to Egypt and ultimately caused the slavery to begin.

So too the tragedy during the age of Hanukah, came especially from our own Jewish people. The Hellenistic spirit, worship of form, symmetry, shape, beauty, physical prowess, invaded the Jewish world.

If it were merely a clash of ideologies between two people, Greek and Jewish, the danger would have been minimal, for in the end, through the course of time, we would have won, just as through all the centuries from then till today we have managed to resist pressures of other faiths and movements.

But the Jewish Hellenists used force. They called upon the might of the Greeks to crush their own faith. Therefore the decrees of the Syrian Greeks and King Antiochus attacked our faith rather than our people. We would have been respected citizens and lived on in their culture, if we would have only given up our religion; given up Sabbath, Circumcision, and all the other mitzvot these represent.

And so the Jewish people were forced to respond to force with force, just as we had to do in later times as well, and in our times too: beating pruning hooks into spears and ploughshares into swords. Farmers became warriors. Priests became generals. A new motto pervaded Jewish life, LAADOSHEM HAYESHUA, "The Battle is the Lords". And so they won.

Think of the sadness and the self-doubt of those priests as they walked through the battlefield, acres of corpses, stepping over the carnage towards the Holy Temple to purify the House of God. Think of the terrible self-doubt the Macabees must have felt, who knew so well that God had prevented King David from building the Holy Temple because "his hands were full of the blood of war" DAM LAROV SHAFACHTA, LO TIVNE BAYIT LISHMI (Chronicles I, 22:8). Can one come from the sword and shield to purify the House of God where no iron was permitted since iron was an instrument of war? Can one go to the House of Peace directly from the fields of war? Can one joy in a victory costing so much blood, and turn immediately to the world of spirit, with clean hands, but hands so recently stained with blood?

They entered the sanctuary, cleaned it, set up the iron menorah because the golden one had been looted, and found only one small cruse of oil, enough for one of the lights, for one night. They poured it into all the lights. They lit it. Let the light burn even if only for a few hours, at least a remembrance. Afterwards the House of God will be in darkness again. And then – the miracle. The sign from heaven that they were right and their deeds accepted, so that the days of Hanukah really turned into a holiday of thanksgiving to the Almighty.

The Talmud tells us that were all the offerings in the Holy Temple to be suspended, the Menorah would nevertheless continue to burn (RH 19). How so? We today have neither Temple nor Menorah?

Yet, the Menorah does burn, because it is the light of the Jewish spirit. We aren't celebrating the military victory, but the inner light of the Jewish spirit.

After all, that was the first attack in history on the Jewish spirit! Every nation that attacked before had done so only because they coveted our land. Antiochus was the first who attacked our faith; the first in fact to invent the terrible blood accusation, with his claim that we slaughtered Greeks to perform human sacrifice in the Holy Temple; the first in fact to accuse the Jews of caring for nothing more than money, with his claim that in the Temple we worshipped a donkey, which at that time was the symbol of commerce.

That is why the martyrdom of Chana and her seven sons who refused to worship idols, even refused to pick up a coin because it was in front of the god-king before whom they would not bow down in worship, is so important to the story of Hanukah. It is the answer to the vile accusations of Antiochus.

The Midrash says the "The lights of Hanukah will burn forever (Midrash Bamidbar Rabba, 15:5). Of course the Midrash is referring to the Jewish spirit, victorious over assimilation and anti-Semitism. Those enemies will never triumph. The light of Hanukah will burn forever.

The heroism of Hanukah today must be repeated on two battlefields: on the battlefields of Israel and wherever Jews live outside of Israel, the battle against assimilation.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman

