

Hannukah: Struggle and Peace

BY RABBI DR. SHMUEL HIMELSTEIN

What is Hannukah? A simple question, no? Any grade school child knows the answer. Actually, though, it's not my question: it's a question posed by the Talmud in the tractate named Shabbat (21b). There we are told:

Our sages stated: On the 25th day of Kislev there are eight days of Hannukah, in which one may not offer eulogies or fast. When the idol worshippers entered the Temple they defiled all the oils in it. And when the Hasmoneans (the Maccabees) vanquished them, they searched and found but a single jar of oil with the seal of the High Priest on it and it contained only enough oil for a single day. A miracle happened, and the oil lasted eight days. The following year they proclaimed this a holiday, with praise and thanks.

That's it -- the sum total of the story of why we celebrate Hannukah. There was oil enough for one day; it lasted for eight days and there you have Hannukah?

But just a second! What happened to the glorious battles of the Maccabees? The military victories? The few against the many? In its entire 5400 pages the Talmud doesn't mention anything of this, except for the incidental comment we see above: "and when the Hasmoneans vanquished them." It is as if that aspect was unimportant -- which leads us to an interesting question to consider at this time of Hannukah: how does Jewish tradition relate to the subject of war in general? Below we will try to go briefly into this question.

An early source for our investigation is the Bible, where we all remember how King David, the sweet singer of Israel and author of the greatest poetic masterpiece of all, the Psalms, was told that he could not build the Temple to

the Almighty: "You have shed blood abundantly and made great wars; you shall not build a house to my name."

We are also told that when the great Altar was to be built no metal was permitted to be used in hewing the great stones. The Altar, the sages said was meant to prolong life, and metal cuts it short.

Does this mean that Judaism is anti-war? One might have imagined so, except for the fact that we are told very clearly that "if anyone is set to kill you, take the initiative and kill him first." Or, as the great medieval scholar Nahmanides puts it the Torah shows us clearly that what is forbidden is only an aggressive war.

In short, we Jews are not against war, but we do not believe that it ennobles one or that it must be glorified. As Judah L. Magnes, the first president of the Hebrew University put it we cannot refer to a war as a just one. The most we can say is that under certain circumstances it may be a necessary war when we see no other way to remove evil from the earth.

Basically then as the modern history of Israel shows us so clearly we do not shrink from going out to battle when it is necessary, but we do not seek war for its own sake. Thus, when the sages of the Talmud downplayed the military victory of the Hasmoneans, they did it deliberately. They understood the value of the victory, but were not interested in furthering the cult of militarism and the history of our own times has taught us where that cult can lead.

And this, then, may be the final lesson of Hannukah for us: that "it is not with armed forces, and not with power, but with my spirit, says the Lord."

Israel must maintain a strong deterrent force, and must be eternally vigilant. If attacked we must crush our enemies. However, let us hope that the peace which took us 30 years to achieve will spread to the entire region and put an end to Israel's wars, so that our people will be able to pursue the paths of peace. As Rabban Simeon B. Gamaliel says in the Talmud (Avot 1:18). "By three things the world is preserved, by truth, by judgment and by peace."

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- The Jewish Agency will give preferential treatment to new immigrants who settle in the Galilee, according to an agreement reached between representatives of the Agency and the Council of Galilee Settlements. It was agreed among other things, that representatives of local settlements will go overseas to convince Jews to make Aliya and settle in the Galilee. Some 300 immigrant families have settled in the region since the beginning of the year.

SYNAGOGUES DESECRATED IN N.J.

FAIR LAWN, N. J. (WNS) -- Swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans spraypainted on Shomrei Torah and Temple Beth Sholom synagogues here have triggered an increase of police patrols at all six synagogues in this middle class community, it was reported.

In addition, vandals also daubed anti-Semitic epithets and swastikas on the Fair Lawn Jewish Center the community's water tower and the door of an auto shop at the high school. Police suspect the acts of vandalism were committed by

teenagers and not related to the discovery last June that a six member cell of the Ku Klux Klan had apparently been meeting secretly in an apartment complex here.

The acts were the first major outbreak of anti-Semitism reported in northern New Jersey since a new state law took effect in September that provides for a five-year jail term for anyone convicted of attempting to incite fear by burning crosses, painting swastikas or defacing buildings with threatening symbols.

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