

# Hannukah - The Feast of Lights

BY DVORA WAYSMAN

Although it is not even mentioned in the Bible, Hannukah is an important Jewish festival. The word itself means "Dedication," and it takes place each year on 25th Kislev, often coinciding with the gentile festival of Christmas. In a way, it's a happy coincidence because Diaspora Jewish children have no need to envy their neighbors - they have their own festival of light, no less significant and enjoyable as that of their Christian friends.

For its origin, we must go back to the Jerusalem of 2,000 years ago - 165 B.C.E., when Palestine became part of the Hellenist Syrian empire. The northern part was ruled by the ambitious Antiochus Epiphanes, who wanted to build an empire that would hold its own against Rome. So, in 175 B.C.E., he tried to subdue Palestine by wiping out the Jewish religion and substituting the Greek language, gods and customs. Giant amphitheaters were built for sport and the people indoctrinated with the hedonist philosophy that religion lay in beauty, as opposed to the Jewish faith which saw beauty in their Jewish Divine law.

Many Jews, known as Hellenizers or "mity-avnim" (today we would call them 'assimilationists') began to speak Greek instead of Hebrew and spent their days in the gymnasium, neglecting the Sabbath and their own festivals. Greek civilization seemed to be a flood threatening to destroy the whole Jewish heritage.

The final blow came when the temple was defiled and a giant statue of the Greek god Zeus installed, with the Jews ordered to worship it. Some - like Hannah and her seven sons - resisted bravely but passively, choosing death rather than idol worship. Hundreds hid in caves and suffocated to death, but this bravery accomplished nothing until the Hasmonean family of Mattathias and his five sons at Mod'in raised a banner: "Whoever is for the Lord, follow me!"

An army, small but well-trained, sprang up, led by Judah Maccabee and his brothers. Antiochus sent three large armies to suppress

the revolt, but courage and clever military tactics resulted in a Jewish victory, with Judah's first priority the purification of the Temple. The big problem was that all the cruses of oil had been defiled except one and it would last for just one day. The miracle we celebrate at Hannukah is that it burnt for 8 days until more oil could be acquired.

Today Hannukah has a poignant relevance to contemporary Jewish history. We remember not only the heroism of the Hasmoneans, but heroic acts that have since paralleled it. Over and over again, we in Israel have seen the victory of a small nation against a larger and stronger one; the few against the many; the weak against the strong; spirit over matter.

In 1948, despite overwhelming odds, the young Israel Defense Forces defeated massive Arab armies to usher in the independent State of Israel. Before this, in World War II, there was widespread Jewish resistance to the brutal policies of Hitler and Jews fought heroically in the ghettos and joined partisan units in forests outside Polish and Russian cities conquered by the Nazis. Israel's operation into Entebbe to rescue the hostages in Uganda is another example of modern heroism and our history abounds with examples.

The revolt of the Hasmoneans is the symbol of the spirit expressed today by Zionism. Today, in Western society, no tyrant is forcing us to abandon our faith and worship strange gods, but the Jews are still in great danger of losing their identity in the Diaspora. Hellenism, in a different but insidious form, is alive and well today.

To prevent our doing to ourselves what tyrants failed to impose on us, we must cling to our own heritage, customs and faith. It is in Israel that this is best achieved - here there is nothing to compete with our own national and religious holidays and traditions, although we respect those of the Moslem and Christian communities, who have their own heritage.

Hannukah has broad human significance as a festival of liberty and religious freedom - not just for us but for all people. It is a humanistic festival par excellence. The symbol of Hannukah is light and the real miracle is that, despite millenia of persecution and dispersion, the light of our people has never been extinguished.

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