

The Maccabean Connection

By Rabbi Ezra Boyarsky

The Festival of Chanukah which celebrates the miraculous victory of the Maccabees over the despotic Antiochus and his Syrian legions in the year 165 B.C.E., marks the first instance in history for a nation to go to war to maintain its religious freedom. So epoch-making was this military victory that it salvaged not only the religious component of Judaism -- Torah observance -- but it also restored Jewish national independence that continued for a period of over two centuries.

But the Maccabean resistance activities were not solely confined to the external foes -- the Greco-Syrian invading aggressors. Concurrently they were also engaged in a bitter and unyielding ideological battle with an emerging internal enemy -- The Hellenists -- the assimilationist element who lured by the delusive glitter of the vacuous Grecian life-style posed an imminent threat to traditional Judaism.

Throughout their relentless conflict with the foreign intruders, the Maccabees fought with an unrelentless zeal and resolution to excise this

carcinogenic element from the Jewish body-politic; they regarded the assimilationists' opting for Hellenistic culture of equal, if not greater threat to authentic Judaism and survival of the Jewish people than the harsh anti Judaic edicts imposed on them.

Although Chanukah occupies a minor position in the hierarchy of Jewish holidays, yet is yielded a major influence on succeeding generations. In a manner of speaking, it was the Festival of Lights that fuelled the flames of restiveness for two thousand years that sustained the undying, collective Jewish hope for Shivat Tziyon, the return to their ancestral homeland.

And it was indeed due to this restiveness that led to the founding of the World Zionist Organization by Theodor Herzl and later to the issuance of the Balfour Declaration by the British Foreign Ministry. Ironically, it was the indomitable Haganah forces and the underground resistance operations of the Irgun against the flagrant anti-Jewish policies of the British mandate over Palestine that ultimately gave birth to the State of Israel in 1948. This moment in history may be appropriately designated as the Maccabean


Connection for the role model it played in restoring Jewish sovereignty in our time. However, the analogy drawn between these two critical periods in Jewish history does not end here. A rerun of the ancient Hellenization scenario is now being re-enacted with American Jewas as the "dramatis personae."

The galloping tempo of assimilation of American Jews in the last two decades has now reached alarming proportions. There is hardly a community across the country that is not being drained by the continuously rising incidence of intermarriage and a constellation of other forms of alienation. Gradually the largest and freest Jewish community in the Lands of Dispersion is heading straightway to a spiritual poorhouse and to a calamitous reduction in its ranks.

Is this process irreversible? Not if American Jews take a cue from the Maccabees and face up to this plaguing problem head on, and a clear vision of the objective. In the contemporary American Jewish context that means a re-ordering of priorities, placing Jewish education at the top of the list and a thorough reassessment of a whole cluster of misguided socio-religious values which American Jews are hung up on...

When kindling the Menorah lights it would be well to ponder over the fact that Chanukah (dedication) and chinuch (education) are intimately associated in that they both have a common Hebrew root.

Happy Chanukah



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