

Parashat Vayeshev - Chanukah 5783, 2022:

*The Enduring Victory of Hanukkah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechieel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many fascinating aphorisms in the holy *Zohar* is found in Parashat Naso, 134: “Everything depends upon *mazal*—even a *Sefer Torah* that is in the *Aron Kodesh*.” (Translation my own). If we apply this maxim to Hanukkah, it emerges as the luckiest of all *chagim* on the Jewish calendar, for it has been consistently observed by every religious and political sector of our people. This degree of Hanukkah’s popularity leads us to the Talmud’s classic question:

What is Hanukkah, and why are lights kindled on Hanukkah? The Gemara answers: [The Sages taught in Megillat Ta’anit:] On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. [What is the reason?] When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary by touching them. And when the Hasmonean monarchy overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, undisturbed by the Greeks. And there was sufficient oil there [to light the *Menorah*] for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the *Menorah*] from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of Hallel and special thanksgiving in prayer and blessings. (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b*, translation, *The Koren-William Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor)

In his *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah v’Hanukkah 3:1*, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) formulates his answer to the Talmud’s question in this manner:

In [the era of] the Second Temple, the Greek kingdom issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments. They extended their hands against their property and their daughters; they entered the Sanctuary, wrought havoc within, and made the sacraments impure. The Jews suffered great difficulties from them, for they oppressed them greatly until the G-d of our ancestors had mercy upon them, delivered them from their hand, and saved them. The sons of the Hasmoneans, the High

Priests, overcame [them], slew them, and saved the Jews from their hand... When the Jews overcame their enemies and destroyed them, they entered the Sanctuary; this was on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. They could not find any pure oil in the Sanctuary, with the exception of a single cruse. It contained enough oil to burn for merely one day. They lit the arrangement of candles from it for eight days until they could crush olives and produce pure oil.

These classic sources emphasize the instrumental role of the *Chashmonaim* in the salvation of our people, an idea that is given powerful voice by my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zatzal (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples:

... Hanukkah represent[s] man’s active involvement... God chose the Maccabees not as onlookers but as actors. He demanded from them sacrificial, heroic action. He told them to plan the strategy and execute it. Man is the fulfiller of G-d’s will. Hence, when triumph was achieved, G-d willed man to celebrate a day of love and sympathy, a day of sharing and togetherness. Hanukkah revolve[s] around the merger of the individual with the community, promoting an open, sympathetic existence. (This, and the following quotes of the Rav, are from *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler editors, pages 121-124, brackets my own)

In sum, the Maccabees were the active agents in the salvation of the Jewish people. They engaged in “sacrificial heroic action” based upon their personally conceived strategies and chosen modes of deployment. In this way, they fulfilled Hashem’s plan, and “... when triumph was achieved, God willed man to celebrate a day of love and sympathy, a day of sharing and togetherness.” Why were the *Chashmonaim* given such a prominent role and “top-billing” in the redemption of our nation from the domination of the Syrian-Greek armies? To this the Rav replies:

We learn from this that when the fight is spiritual, God invites the Jew to participate. When spiritual survival is at stake, man must take the initiative. Even though man is under the guidance of the Almighty, man takes the initiative, and therefore his role is recorded... Antiochus was interested in destroying the Jews spiritually. When the menace is of a spiritual nature, then the initiative belongs to man. Man engages in the struggle for spiritual survival. For this reason, the Hasmoneans took the initiative, and we remember their efforts when we commemorate their victory on Hanukkah.

The spiritual nature of the Hanukkah victory is seen, as well, in the following section from the *Al HaNissim tefilah* for Hanukkah:

You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands

of the diligent students of Your Torah...Thereafter Your children came into the shrine of Your house, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your sanctuary, kindled the lights in the courts of Your holiness...

As we have seen, the Rambam describes the primary goal of the Syrian-Greek overlords as having "...issued decrees against the Jewish people, [attempting to] nullify their faith and refusing to allow them to observe the Torah and its commandments." In short, their goals were to destroy our *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (active trust and dependency) in the Almighty and prevent us from observing the *mitzvot*. Sadly, many other nations have pursued this path, as our *Chachamim* taught us so long ago in the *Haggadah*: "*B'kol dor v'dor omdim aleinu l'kaloteinu*—in each and every generation there are those who rise against to destroy us." Yet, we must ever remember the remaining part of this statement: "*v'HaKadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu m'yadam*—and the Holy One blessed be He saves us from their hand." *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)