

Shabbat Chanukah 5775, 2014:

*Understanding Chanukah*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

“Every Chanukah a Jew should discover something new, which he didn’t know. It should increase our capabilities and our sensitivities. I should ‘dig’ and make an effort.” – Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), December 30, 1978

With Rabbi Soloveitchik’s quote as our guide, let us ask a deceptively simple question: “What is the true nature of Chanukah?” You see, given its popularity, Chanukah has been interpreted and reinterpreted to become all things to all Jews. While it is true that Chanukah belongs to our entire nation, it is equally true that its authentic essence and being represents something that the totality of our people certainly does not embrace, namely, the primacy of Torah in our lives. Please allow me to explain.

There are a number of Rabbinic and post-Rabbinic texts that are illustrative of my thesis. The most complete proof text, however, is found in the words of the great rav and *posek* (halachic decisor), Rabbi Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Halevi Epstein (1829-1908), popularly known as the “Aruch HaShulchan,” after the title of his halachic *magnum opus*. He begins his presentation of the Laws of Chanukah with an historical synopsis of the causal factors behind the Maccabean revolt of 168 BCE. Fascinatingly, he is the only

*posek*, whose work I examined, that explicitly mentions Antiochus IV Epiphanes by name. It seems that Rav Epstein wanted to underscore the historical nature of Chanukah and the personal responsibility of Antiochus. He wanted his readers to be very clear regarding exactly what the historical record revealed. This was partially accomplished by providing us with the name of the actual tyrant that oppressed us, rather than leaving us with the impression of a rag-tag and *ad hoc* group of Syrian-Greeks.

In general, Rav Epstein closely follows the Rambam's (1135-1204) opening presentation in *Hilchot Chanukah* 3:1-3. Thus, he speaks of how "the evil ones enacted laws against the Jewish people," and attempted "to nullify their holy religion." He joins the Rambam, as well, when he states, "they did not allow them to be involved in the Torah and Mitzvot and they stole their money and forcibly took their daughters." Moreover, as is well known, "they entered the Temple and performed horrendous actions and rendered ritually impure the pure." Then, too, "they made the Jews miserable and oppressed them with great oppression." Let us briefly examine each of these points.

"The evil ones enacted laws against the Jewish people," unfortunately was not a unique experience for our people. After all, we had survived the servitude and inhuman conditions of Egypt. In addition, at the time of Purim, we were subject to Haman's decree to completely destroy our people – simply because we were Jews and recognizable as such. Therefore, laws against our people were a necessary, but insufficient, cause for the Maccabees' revolt.

The next phrase, however, “to nullify their holy religion” was something unprecedented and horrible. For the first time in known history, one nation persecuted another nation simply on the basis of their religious beliefs and the consequent manner in which they lived their lives. This was patently intolerable. This was more than the Maccabees and their small band of Chasidim could bear. How could they live when the evil oppressors sought to prevent them from being “involved in Torah and Mitzvot?” In truth, Antiochus and his hordes sought to destroy the very substance of Judaism, namely, the potential to bring *kedushah* (holiness) into the world.

“They stole their money and forcibly took their daughters,” is composed of two separate acts of malfeasance. Once again, if Antiochus had simply stolen our property, as pernicious as this would have been, it would not have caused the revolt. They, however, “forcibly took their daughters,” and thus committed the unspeakable crime of *gilui arayot* (illicit physical relations). In short, the Syrian-Greeks ripped asunder the fabric of Jewish society when they forced Jewish women, and in particular new brides, to be party to their depraved and licentious acts. This was abominable to all who held the Torah and its future dear. Indeed, this act, in and of itself, would have been sufficient cause for the revolt.

“They entered the Temple and performed horrendous actions and rendered ritually impure the pure,” is alluded to in the *baraita* known as “*Mai Chanukah?*” (“What is Chanukah?,” *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b*), found explicitly in the *Al Hanissim* (Concerning the Miracles) prayer in the *Siddur*, and in the Rambam’s *Hilchot Chanukah*. It is a continuation of the theme of Syrian-Greek anti-Jewish religious persecution.

Antiochus and his Syrian-Greek marauders thought that they could destroy Judaism by destroying the *kedushah* of our holy Temple. This strategy had been an abject failure under Sennacherib. His annihilation of the First Temple (586) was a devastating blow. Yet, it destroyed neither our will nor our essential belief structure. In fact, the Babylonian Exile led eventually to the creation of a thriving Jewish civilization in Babylon, the greatest fruit of which was the Babylonian Talmud. The Syrian-Greeks, however, with their unmitigated hubris, thought that they could accomplish what the Assyrians had failed to do. Thus, they challenged G-d and sought to dethrone Him from His celestial glory by attacking the spiritual foundations of His holy Temple. They, too, due to Hashem's "behind-the-scenes help" (*hester panim*), failed miserably in their ill-fated attempt. Instead, this abomination only served to galvanize Matityahu, Yehudah and the rest of the Maccabees, in their holy mission to drive off the Syrian-Greek invaders and re-purify the *Beit Hamikdash*.

Finally, the dawn of our deliverance arose and the Maccabees revolted. Hashem, the G-d of their Fathers, as Rav Epstein states: "had mercy upon them and saved them [the Jews] from their hands [the Syrian-Greeks] and rescued them through the agency of the Chashmonayim – the holy and pure *Kohanim Gedolim*, namely; Matityahu and his sons. They fought with Antiochus, and bested him. Their victory was beyond the normal laws of nature (*shelo b'derech hateva*) [i.e. it was miraculous]." Once again, following the path forged by the Rambam, the Aruch HaShulchan stresses the astounding nature of this victory. The Maccabees encountered an overwhelming foe equipped with the most up-to-date military technology, including "many elephants and chariots." The facts on the ground were totally against them. Based upon all standard military calculations, they

were doomed to fail. Yet, against incalculable odds, they won and continue to inspire us until today.

The victory itself, as Rav Epstein states, was multifaceted and multidimensional:

Hashem, the One who desires [the future] of His people Israel, handed over the powerful into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the evil ones into the hands of the righteous, and those Jews who repudiated G-d's dominion [and repudiated the Torah] and had joined Antiochus' ["cultural revolution"] were also killed and handed over to those who followed the Torah way of life (*oskei haTorah*).

This eventuated in Hashem's name being "magnified and sanctified in the world, as well as the light of the Torah being spread, with its inherent purity [throughout the world], and with the name of the Jewish people becoming great among the nations of the world." This passage is remarkable on several levels. In broad terms, it is as if the Aruch HaShulchan had composed a "Haggadah" for Chanukah where none had existed before. More specifically, he explicitly depicts the crushing defeat of the assimilationists, the *mityavnim*, in no uncertain terms: "Hashem, the One who desires [the future] of His people Israel, handed over... those Jews who rejected G-d's dominion [and repudiated the Torah] and had joined Antiochus' ["cultural revolution"] were also killed and handed over to those who followed the Torah way of life (*oskei haTorah*)." This formulation of Rav Epstein's is an extrapolation and explication of the phrase found in the *Al Hanissim* wherein it states: "... and the rebellious ones into the hands of those who followed the Torah way of life."

The Aruch HaShulchan leaves us with little doubt as to the everlasting contribution of Chanukah to the spiritual history of our people. In his view, we are Jews today because of

the sacrifices made by the Maccabees, and Hashem's guiding hand in ensuring their victory. In a word, the sacrosanct nature and primacy of the Torah was upheld against overwhelming military and cultural odds. This is why we are here today. This, moreover, is the quintessence and *raison d'être* of our being.

May Hashem give us, as well, the strength, wisdom, and fortitude to continuously fight for and pursue the preeminence of Torah in our lives. In this sense, may we, too, be modern Maccabees. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukah Sameach!*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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