

WHO WAS JUDAH MACABEE ANYWAY?

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

Close your eyes and picture Arnold Schwarzenegger: His Uzi has just jammed, he's got one arm in a sling, he's about to take on 300 bad guys all at once - and he's wearing a yarmulka. That's who Judah Maccabee was!

Two thousand years ago, one family led by one man stood between the mighty Greek army and the conquest of the Jewish people. The family was the Hasmoneans, and the man was Judah Maccabee.

The Greeks were different from other empires. They didn't just want your land, your resources and your riches -- they wanted your national essence, your culture. They wanted you to think like them, live like them and even be entertained like them. The problem was most Jews weren't buying, and the Greeks didn't appreciate that. So the Greeks brought pressure to bear on the Jews.

Women who insisted that their sons be circumcised were killed along with their babies. Brides were forced to sleep with Greek officers before they could be with their husbands. Jews were required to eat pork and sacrifice pigs to the Greek gods. The teaching of Torah became a capital crime.

The sages and their students went into hiding in order to study and preserve the Torah. Secret weddings were held. Most Jews did anything and everything to remain Jewish. Many were tortured and murdered for their defiance. A period of darkness and suffering descended upon the Jews of Israel.

And then came the Hasmoneans.

The Hasmonean family was led by Mattisyahu and his five sons: Shimon, Yochanan, Yehudah (Judah), Elazar and Yonasan. Mattisyahu was a devout man who could not bear to see Judaism and the Jewish spirit crushed. It was his family that led the revolt against the vastly superior Greek forces. Mattisyahu understood that the battle was far less for national liberation than it was for spiritual and religious liberation. Though Mattisyahu's valor provided the initial spark for the revolt against the Greeks, he died shortly after the rebellion grew into a full-fledged war. The mantle of leadership passed from Mattisyahu to his son Judah, and with that the course of history was forever changed.

Judah Maccabee was a fearless leader, a brilliant battlefield tactician and a man capable of inspiring thousands to take up arms in the battle for the preservation of Judaism. It was Judah Maccabee who

conceived of ways for the Jewish forces to out-maneuver the larger, better equipped and seasoned Greek army. When at last the Jews captured Jerusalem, rededicated the Temple and witnessed the miracle of the oil, it was with Judah Maccabee as the leader of the Hasmonean family and at the head of the Jewish army of liberation. Arnold, step aside!

DEEPER INSIGHTS

If you are traveling somewhere in the world and you want to know if American culture has reached that place, don't look for an American flag, look instead for the "Golden Arches." If McDonalds has arrived, then Steven Spielberg can't be far behind.

Can you imagine that today there are places in the world where Levi jeans sell for hundreds and even thousands of dollars, that Croatia is starting to produce basketball players talented enough to be NBA All Stars, and that somewhere behind the Great Wall of China there are countless people who can't get enough pirated CDs of rap music?

The Greeks would have been awfully jealous because this is exactly what they were trying to do with their culture. They wanted their philosophy, form of worship, entertainment, arts, literature, theater and athletic games to become the defining elements for peoples national and daily lives everywhere.

At the time of the Greek conquest there were two kinds of Jews living in Israel. First, there were those who decided that Hellenism represented an attractive alternative to Judaism. For them, Hellenist culture was the way of the future, the way to gain acceptance into the larger Greek society and the way to prosperity. Some abandoned Judaism altogether and some relegated it to a secondary role in their lives, but all of them believed that they belonged more to the theater and the gymnasium than to the halls of Torah study and the Temple. These Jews were the Hellenists.

The second group, and the larger of the two, was the traditional Jews -- the "ardently orthodox" of their day. This group continued to lead a Jewish life despite the Greek persecution and despite great risk to their very lives. When the Hasmoneans launched their revolt, it was this camp that provided the men who would come to be known as the Maccabees.

The Jewish rebellion was a great event in Jewish history, but tragically, the war against the Greeks was also a civil war. Not all Jews sided with the Maccabees, who to some represented "the past." Many Hellenized Jews aligned themselves with "progress" and with the future. As a result, Jews battled with one another for the right to define the future of Jewish life and the Jewish nation.

In many ways the story of Chanukah is the story of how one man and one family can make all the difference in the world for an entire people. It was the inspiration of Mattisyahu, the leadership of Judah Maccabee and the stubborn tenacity of the dedicated Jews that literally saved the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life.

As a Jew, don't ever think that you can't make a difference.

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