

# CHANUKAH: THE CHEIL AND THE SOREG

by Rabbi Yoav Elan

At the heart of the Chanukah story is the Holy Temple. It was here that the persecution of the Jews began under the rule of Antiochus who ordered that the Temple be desecrated and converted into a place of pagan worship. Mattisyahu, son of Yochanan the High Priest, fled to the countryside where he became the father of the Jewish resistance. His sons and followers, the Maccabees, fought bravely against all odds and were aided by Divine Providence to eventually return to Jerusalem and bring the Temple back to Jewish hands. It is their miraculous victories and efforts to restore the sacrificial service to its earlier glory which we commemorate on the holiday of Chanukah.

In these upcoming classes we will explore the connection between the physical structure of the Second Temple and some of the core elements of the Chanukah story.

 The Cheil and Soreg outside of the Women's Courtyard

Standing at a distance of 10 cubits outside the walls of the Courtyard on all four sides was a low wall, half a cubit high. This wall, as well as the area between it and the Courtyard walls, was referred to as the *Cheil*. A wooden latticework fence, 10 handbreadths high, was built atop this wall and was called the *Soreg*.

The purpose of both the wall and the fence was to mark the point beyond which no one contaminated with corpse- *tumah* , nor any non-Jew, could pass. Archaeologists have discovered one of the marker stones from the *Cheil* and the inscription (written in Greek) reads, "Any foreigner who passes beyond the wall and fence surrounding the Temple has only himself to blame for the fact that his death will follow."

When the Syrian-Greek kings occupied the Temple during the years leading up to the events of the Chanukah story they made thirteen breaches in the *Soreg* fence to demonstrate their disdain at having been barred from entering. After the Maccabees regained control of the Temple they repaired these breaches and the Sages instituted that anyone who passes by one of the repaired breaches must bow down to give thanks to God for destroying the foreign regime and abolishing their evil decrees.

 Marker stone from the Cheil

*Al Hanissim* ("For the Miracles") is a prayer of thanksgiving recited during the holiday which gives a brief synopsis of all of the historical events of the Chanukah story. One of the lines reads, "They breached the walls of my Tower," a reference to the enemies of the Jews breaching the *Soreg* fence which surrounded the Temple (i.e., "Tower"). While the heathen marauders were bent upon breaking down the dividing lines between all nations of the world, our Sages underscored the importance of preserving our Jewish identity by specifically choosing to include the breaching of the *Soreg* in our liturgy.

The Chassidic masters are quoted as saying that this incident served as the precedent for eating *latkehs* on Chanukah. To commemorate the repairs made to the breached *Soreg* the Jewish people contrived a dish - the potato pancake - which resembled a patch (as in a patch on a garment). This Chanukah staple was originally called a *latteh*, which is the Yiddish word for *patch*, and over time this became *latkeh*.

---

To submit questions or comments for the author, please visit the [blog post](#) of this class.

---