

THE HASMONEANS TAKE A STAND: A HISTORY OF CHANUKAH, PART II

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

In 166 BCE, the struggle finally boiled over. Igniting the smoldering spark of Jewish resistance against the Seleucids was the elderly Mattisyahu, from the priestly Hasmonean family. He, together with his five sons, would permanently change the face of Jewish history.

Persecution had forced Mattisyahu to Modi'in, a small, inconspicuous hamlet situated to the northwest of Jerusalem. There, he and his family hoped to be spared the brunt of the hellenistic efforts that were previously concentrated in Jerusalem. However, their hopes would soon be dashed.

Before long, Greek troops arrived at Modi'in. They instructed the Jews to meet in the town square where the pagan ritual, which included the sacrifice of a pig to Zeus, would take place. As the town elder and a priest, Mattisyahu was called upon to perform the sacrifice. If the Greeks could win him over, the rest of the town would certainly follow.

You are a ruler, and an honorable and great man in this city, and firmly supported by your sons and brothers. Come first and fulfill the king's commandment, as the leading men in Judah, and those left in Jerusalem. Do this and you and your household will be counted amongst the king's friends. You and your children will be honored with silver and gold, and many rewards. (I Maccabees, 2:17-18)

Mattisyahu glanced at the swine, the animal of abhorrence to the Jews. It was then, amongst the fearful anticipation of the local villagers, and under the watchful glare of the Greek soldiers, that he uttered his firm refusal.

G-d forbid that we should forsake the law and the ordinances! We will not hearken to the king's words, to go from our religion, either on the right hand, or the left. (I Maccabees, 2:21-22)

Defying Mattisyahu's heroic stance, a hellenized Jew came forward to sacrifice the pig. At that moment, the elderly priest stabbed him and killed the Greek commander as well. After tearing down the altar, he faced the crowd. Echoing the words spoken by Moshe following the sin of the Golden Calf some 1,500 years prior, he challenged them, *עַם מִי לֹא הָשֵׁם, אִי לֵיָּהּ עַם* All who are for G-d

should follow me! (I Maccabees 2:27) Local inhabitants immediately pounced upon the Greek garrison, killing them. The war had officially begun.

Mattisyahu would not live long enough to see the full consequences of his actions. Within a year of launching the revolt, he died. Before his passing in 165 BCE, Mattisyahu left instructions that his militarily gifted son Yehudah become his successor. Yehuda was the practical leader and military strategist behind the eventual success of the Jewish revolt. He inspired thousands to take up arms in the battle for the preservation of Judaism, and devised strategies for the Jewish forces to outmaneuver and defeat the larger, more sophisticated Greek army.

This revolt and subsequent war were the earliest of their kind. For the first time in human history, a struggle of this magnitude was waged over ideological and religious differences, rather than territorial considerations. In the ancient world, pagans did not die for the sake of religion. Only the Jews were prepared to do so.

A Different Type of Hero

Yehuda Maccabee (an acronym for **יְהוּדָה מִי קָמוּחָא בְּאֵילֵימ הַשֵּׁמִי** **יְהוָה** Who is like You among the powers, O G-d **יְהוָה** Exodus 15:11) is one of the great heroes in Jewish history. He is typically viewed as a brave warrior and military genius, who led his men to victory against seemingly insurmountable odds. However, Yehuda's true greatness stemmed from the fact that he never lost sight of the real Source of his successes.

It is easy for many to be defeated by few, for in the sight of Heaven there is no difference between saving by many or by few. It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from Heaven. They come against us in great disrespect and lawlessness to destroy us and our wives and our children, and to despoil us, but we fight for our lives and our laws. He himself will crush them before us. (I Maccabees, 3:18-22)

Yehuda's heroism was rooted in the purest of all sources, a zealous love of his religion. He fought not for his own selfish end, nor from a passion for victory on the battlefield. Rather, a spirit of self-sacrifice guided him. He understood that G-d was calling to him. He could not decline his historic mission.

The reign of Antiochus marks a turning point in Jewish and world history. Unlike the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians, whose persecution of the Jewish people was aimed primarily at our political strength, Antiochus took aim at the Jewish religion.

Had Antiochus been successful in his attempts at hellenizing the Jews of Judah, all of Jewish and world history would have been permanently altered. Only the brave resistance of the Hasmoneans and their followers, who risked their lives for the sake of preserving their religion, would ensure the

future of the Jewish people.

In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

It was not the courage of the Hasmoneans, nor the sword of the Maccabees[†] for whom (Chanuka) was decreed. Lights are its symbols, not signs of might and dominion. It was not Yehuda Maccabee who defeated Antiochus of Syria; it was the Jewish light which gained the victory over the dazzling luster of Hellenic splendor. The spirit which Mattisyahu had harbored in his priestly breast and had nurtured in his children, was the rock upon which the Hellenic evil was smashed. This spirit[‡] maintained the law amongst the people. (Collected Writings, Volume II, Feldheim, New York, p. 210)

More than anything else, Yehuda and his followers were **ע** saints of the most high, without whom the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel[¶] (Ramban, commentary to Genesis 49:10). It was through such people that G-d would ultimately deliver His people.