

CHANUKAH AND OLIVE OIL: LESSONS IN DEVOTION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

One of the main rituals associated with Chanukah, which begins at sunset on December 5 1996, is the lighting of the Menorah. The Menorah, an eight branched candelabra, is lit to commemorate the great miracle which occurred at the time of the Maccabees: a flask of oil which could only last for one day miraculously lasted for eight days. (See vol. I: 57-62 for further information.) The Aruch HaShulchan (Orech Chayim 673:1) writes that it is preferable to use olive oil when lighting the Menorah because it is easily drawn into the wick, its light burns clearly, and the miracle of Chanukah happened with olive oil.

There is another aspect to olive oil that makes it an appropriate choice for use on Chanukah. The Medrash Rabba (Vayikra 31:10), when discussing the use of olive oil for the Menorah in the Mishkan (Tabernacle), mentions a parable. "Rav Avin said 'It is comparable to a king whose legions rebelled against him. However, one of his legions remained faithful and did not rebel. The king said that this legion that did not rebel, from them I will take for my rulers and governors.' So did Hashem say - This olive brought light to the world in the time of Noach, as we see 'the dove came...and it had an olive branch in its mouth.'"

The Rada"l explains when exactly the olive did not "rebel" against G-d, thus earning it a special place in history. In the time of Noach, the entire world was corrupt. The Talmud Yerushalmi explains that not only did mankind engage in immoral, base, and corrupt behavior; the animal and plant world did as well. One specie of animal tried to breed with a different one, and one type of plant attempted to "graft" itself to other forms of vegetation. The only plant that withstood the corruption that permeated the entire world at that time was the olive tree. It remained pure. It withstood the pressures to engage in the perverse behavior that was in vogue at the time. The olive remained faithful to the world order as G-d created it, and for that reason, it is considered the "legion that did not rebel." Because it remained faithful to G-d, the olive was chosen to be the sign of rebirth and renewal after the flood. It was chosen to be the source for light in the holiest place in the world. It was chosen to be the source of light for generations to come.

Chanukah is a holiday on which we celebrate our freedom from religious oppression. The Syrian-Greeks' oppression of the Jews was not physical. They did not want to annihilate the Jews. They did, however, want to annihilate Judaism. They applied what ever pressure they could to "convince" the Jews to abandon the ways of their fathers. Many Jews indeed succumbed to this pressure. Hellenism made inroads in to the Jewish communities. At times, the pressure to give in to popular

culture was overwhelming. Ultimately, the Jews withstood this pressure and fought with all their might against it. The Jews were victorious. Today, all that we know of the Syrian-Greeks is from history books, while Judaism lives on. When we look at the olive oil burning bright on Chanukah, we should be reminded that the olive is a symbol of the fortitude our forefathers had. The olive withstood the pressure to deviate from the word of G-d. Our forefathers at the time of Chanukah withstood the pressure to deviate from the word of G-d. We should allow the light of the olive oil to inspire us to stand steadfast against the pressure, what ever it may be, to deviate from the word of G-d.

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