

CHANUKAH, CHUTZPAH, AND COMING CLOSE TO G-D

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

In the song Maoz Tzur that we traditionally sing after the Chanukah candles are lit, we find the following stanza: "Greeks gathered against me then in the days of the Hashmoneans, they breached the walls of my towers and defiled all the oils." Where do we find a breaching of a wall that is of significance?

Rav Gedalia Schorr explains that we see in a Mishna (Midos 2:3) that in the Temple, there was a wall in the courtyard called the Soreg. The Mishna writes that the Greek kings breached the Soreg in 13 places, and when the Jews rebuilt it, the Sages decreed that the nation should bow across from these 13 locations. Rav YomTov Heller, in his explanation of the Mishna, explains the function of the Soreg and why this was a specific target of the Greeks. The Soreg delineated the area into which non-Jews were permitted entry into the Temple. Non-Jews were allowed to come to the Temple to pray to G-d and to bring sacrifices, but they could not continue past the Soreg. Only those of the Jewish nation were permitted further, as they carried with them a different level of spirituality, "Kedusha." The Greeks were not against the existence of the Holy Temple. However, they were against any distinction made between them or any other nation and the Jewish people. They therefore breached the barrier placed in the Temple specifically for that purpose.

Why were 13 prostrations established by the Sages? Rav Schorr explains that they represent G-d's 13 Attributes of Mercy mentioned in the Torah (Shemos 34:6-7) The Talmud tells us that each one of us should try and emulate G-d. Just as G-d is compassionate and gracious (two of the 13 attributes) so too must we be compassionate and gracious. Each individual has the capacity to cling to G-d, to emulate His ways to the extent that we are like one with Him. Bowing is a sign of submission. The Sages established the prostrations to show that we submit ourselves to G-d, that we try to be like Him, that we try to emulate His 13 attributes. It was this submission that the Greeks tried to uproot. By breaching the wall, they tried to eradicate this special relationship and put all on equal footing. The Sages therefore established that for each breach, each demonstration by the Greeks that there was no submission to G-d, the Jewish people should bow and display that our special relationship with G-d does indeed exist.

Rav Schorr continues to state that the Greeks epitomized the trait of boldness (azus). Those who are bold, he writes, are not willing to submit to anyone or anything. They will not express thanks nor gratitude, nor feel indebtedness to anyone. It is this character trait that the Greeks tried to instill in the Jews. By breaching the wall, they tried to assure that the Jews would not feel any special

connection with G-d. The submission that the Jews exemplified was diametrically opposed to the boldness of the Greeks. The Greeks tried to break up the relationship between the Jews and G-d. They did not succeed.

However, it is interesting that the very trait which led to the Hashmonean's victory against the Greeks was that of boldness. The Mishna (Avos 5:23) writes: One should be as bold as a leopard . . . in order to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven." The Chidushei HaRim explains that in truth, the leopard has no special degree of strength. Rather, its boldness allows it to enter situations that others of the same strength might cower away from. So, too, must we act in our service of G-d. We may think that we do not have the strength to stand up to others, to our evil inclination. The Mishna tells us that we must allow the boldness within us to come out and meet the challenges which we think are beyond us head on. If we take the initiative in our service of G-d, G-d will be there to supply the strength we need to succeed.

The Hashmoneans saw the boldness of the Greeks. It was demonstrated to them vividly when the Greeks breached the Soreg in the Temple. The Hashmoneans knew that they were clearly not strong enough to wage a victorious battle against the Greeks. What they had to do was fight fire with fire. They gathered together their boldness, and motivated themselves to believe that they did not have to be subjugated to the Greeks. They did not have to answer to the Greeks. They had to fight so that they could continue the service of G-d and maintain their close relationship with Him. They did fight, and because they mustered the courage to do so, G-d helped them and they were victorious.

Chanukah is a time when we can reflect on the relationship we have with G-d. Some time has passed since the High Holidays. Have we stuck to our resolutions for the new year? Have we become better people? Have we fallen back into the same rut we were in before Rosh HaShana? If we find that we have not come closer to G-d and that our emulation of G-d leaves much to be desired, we need not become despondent. Even if we feel that the goals which have set for ourselves are beyond our reach, the memory of the Hashmonean's victory is there. If we channel our boldness properly, if we attempt to overcome unsurmountable hurdles, G-d will be there to supply the strength we need. "Chutzpah," can be very Jewish, and can be very Greek. On Chanukah, we should make sure that we remember the fortitude of the Hasmonians, and strengthen our relationship with G-d the same way they did.

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