

TIGHTENING THE HELLENISTIC SCREWS: A HISTORY OF CHANUKAH, PART I

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

In our long history, few individuals have threatened the spiritual survival of the Jewish people as did Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who ascended to the Seleucid (Syrian-Greek) throne in 175 BCE. In an effort to solidify his empire and fashion his own everlasting legacy, Antiochus IV worked diligently to hellenize all of the peoples living under his control. However, no nation felt the effects of this effort more than the Jews living in the small province of Judah.

Early on in his tenure, Antiochus, with the help of his personally appointed high priest Jason, had a gymnasium erected in Jerusalem, within direct sight of the Temple. This gymnasium would serve as a center of hellenistic education and athletics, where nudity and immoral behavior was the norm. Pagan statues and altars were present as well; sacrifices were offered to Greek gods prior to the commencement of sporting events.

These changes attracted many Jews, particularly Jewish youth. Many priests were also influenced by this new culture, neglecting their sacrificial duties in favor of these new centers of diversion.

(Jason) gladly built a gymnasium under the Temple itself, and brought the chief young men under his subjection...The priests had no more courage to serve at the altar, but scorning the Temple, and neglecting the sacrifices, rushed to partake of the unlawful behavior in the gymnasium. (II Maccabees 4:12-14)

Most of the Jewish population, however, was stunned by the introduction of immoral Greek culture into their holy city and refused to embrace it in any way.

At approximately the mid-point of his reign, Antiochus intensified his efforts at hellenization. He outlawed such core Jewish practices as sacrifices, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and the study of Torah, at the pain of death. Simultaneously, he introduced pagan activities and worship amongst the Jewish populace.

The king sent agents with written orders to Jerusalem and the towns of Judea, introducing ways and customs foreign to the country. Burnt-offerings, sacrifices, and libations in the Temple were forbidden; Sabbaths and feast-days were to be profaned. Altars, idols, and sacred precincts were

to be established. Swine and other unclean animals were to be offered as sacrifices. They must leave their sons uncircumcised; they must make themselves in every way abominable, unclean, and profane, and so forget the law and change all their statutes. The penalty for disobedience was death. (I Maccabees 1:44-50)

When his edicts were violated, Antiochus responded with intense cruelty. On one occasion, he had two mothers arrested after circumcisions were performed on their sons. They were paraded through the streets of Jerusalem, with their sons clinging to them. All four were then thrown down to their deaths from the city's walls.

The Seleucid-Greeks also took aim at defiling the purity of the Jewish home. The Greeks declared that all women must first be brought to the local governing officer, who would first violate her. The profanity of this decree caused some Jews to marry on a day of the week when the Greeks were less vigilant. Others who were unable to circumvent the meddling officers abstained from marriage altogether, or did so in secret.

Most significantly, the Temple in Jerusalem was polluted. On 15 Kislev, 168 BCE, an idol was erected in the Temple. Ten days later, exactly three years before the Chanuka miracle, swine was offered as a pagan sacrifice upon the altar. The House of G-d was sacrilegiously converted to a House of Zeus. What is most compelling here is the fact that paganism is has always been a tolerant, inclusive religious system. Polytheism by its very nature accepts that presence of other religious ideas and forces. Upon no other group did Antiochus impose such religious limitations. Clearly, he perceived that most Jews would continue to stubbornly resist any attempts at hellenization.

Jewish Martyrdom

And indeed many Jews complied with the king's commands, either voluntarily, or out of fear of the penalty that was announced. But the best and noblest men did not pay him attention... every day they underwent great miseries and bitter torments; for they were whipped with rods, and their bodies were torn to pieces, and were crucified.... They also strangled those women and their sons whom they had circumcised... And if there were any sacred book of the law found, it was destroyed, and those with whom they were found sorrowfully perished as well. (Josephus, Antiquities 12:255-6)

Throughout, the Jews responded with a tremendous resilience and strength of spirit, despite the threat of painful torture and death that hung over them. They resisted passively, preferring martyrdom to revolution.

Numerous instances of passive Jewish resistance are recorded. They include the story of Elazar, an elderly priest and leading sage, who refused to eat pork, despite the torturous death that awaited him. (Under normal conditions Jewish law permits, even demands, consuming non-kosher food when the alternative is death. However, these were far from normal conditions.)

They also include a Hellenistic Jew named Yoseph Meshisa, who was brutally murdered for refusing to enter the Temple at the behest of Greek soldiers.

Of course, no story better depicts the spirit of Jewish martyrdom than the account of Chana and her seven sons, which pits the demands of a maniacal tyrant against a noble, defenseless woman and her family.

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