

# CHANUKAH'S UNLIKELY HEROES

*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 people 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 immoral conduct 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. 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. He outlawed such core Jewish practices as sacrifices, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and the study of Torah, all at the pain of death. Simultaneously, he introduced pagan activities and worship amongst the Jewish populace. (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.

Most significantly, the Temple was polluted. On 15 Kislev, 168 BCE, an idol was erected there. Ten days later, exactly three years before the Hanukkah miracle, swine was offered as a pagan sacrifice upon the altar. The House of God was sacrilegiously converted to a House of Zeus.

What is most compelling here is the fact that paganism has always been a tolerant, inclusive religious system. Polytheism by its very nature accepts the 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.

*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. They also include a Jew named Joseph, who was brutally murdered for refusing to pillage the Temple at the behest of Greek soldiers.

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

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

Persecution had forced Matthias 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, Matthias was called upon to perform the sacrifice (I Maccabees, 2:17-18). If the Greeks could win him over, the rest of the town would certainly follow.

Matthias 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 Matthias'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. He then faced the crowd. Echoing the words spoken by Moshe following the sin of the Golden Calf some 1,500 years

prior, Matthias challenged them, "*Mi L'Hashem, ai'li!*" - "All who are for Hashem should follow me!" (I Maccabees 2:27) Local inhabitants immediately pounced upon the Greek garrison, killing them. The war had officially begun.

Matthias 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, Matthias left instructions that his militarily gifted son Judah become his successor.

Judah 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.

Judah Maccabee is one of the great heroes in Jewish history. He is often viewed as a brave warrior and military genius, who led his men to victory against seemingly insurmountable odds. However, Judah'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)*

Judah'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. In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

*It was not the courage of the Hasmoneans, nor the sword of the Maccabees...for whom (Hanukkah) was decreed. Lights are its symbols, not signs of might and dominion. It was not Judah 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 Matthias 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, Judah and his followers were "saints of the most high, without whom the

Torah would have been forgotten from Israel" (Ramban, commentary to Bereishis 49:10). It was through such people that G-d would ultimately deliver His people.

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, ensured the future of the Jewish people.

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