

A CELEBRATION OF SPIRITUAL VICTORY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

This week's class is dedicated to the speedy healing of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.

The holiday of Chanukah is often misunderstood. First of all, great as it is, Chanukah is a minor, Rabbinic holiday on the Jewish calendar. An excessive emphasis upon this holiday, accompanied by a near-total neglect of major festivals like Shavuot and Sukkot, sends our children the message that we're just trying to keep up with the non-Jewish world, and Jewish holidays are but a pale facsimile of what they have. Chalila! [Heaven forbid!]

But there is more to say.

Chanukah celebrates a redemption from destruction. Although there was a military conflict, it did not become a holiday simply because we won a physical war -- in fact, the war wasn't even over when the miracle of Chanukah occurred. The true victory, and celebration, is spiritual.

Under the rule of Antiochus, the Greeks did not want to kill the Jewish people. Rather, they wanted us to share their ideology. Our Sages explain that they focused upon three mitzvos, commanding the Jews not to perform them:

The first of these was the mitzvah of Shabbos, the Sabbath. The Greeks believed that the earth and the universe had existed for all eternity. They believed that there was no moment of Creation, no big bang. Yet the Sabbath "is an eternal sign between Me and the Nation of Israel, that in six days G-d made the Heaven and the Earth, and on the seventh day, He rested." The Sabbath delivers the message that G-d Created the world -- so the Greeks tried to kill the messenger.

The second was Milah, circumcision, which is the sign of the unique covenant between G-d and the Jewish People, made with our forefather Avraham. The Greeks wanted the Jews to be like them, rather than clinging to antiquated notions of a special mission, purpose, and relationship. So the Greeks needed to remove this sign as well.

And the third of these was Rosh Chodesh, the Sanctification of the New Moon. The Sanhedrin, the Supreme Jewish Court in Jerusalem, would accept testimony each month if people spotted the crescent of the new moon appearing 30 days after the beginning of the previous month -- if this happened, the new month would begin on that day, while if it did not, then the month would begin on the morrow. This, too, signified a unique relationship which the Greeks could not conscience --

because it indicated the belief that we can control and change what happens in Spiritual realms.

The Greeks also believed in a spiritual world; most of us have learned small bits of Greek mythology. But they believed that what humans did had no direct impact upon the spiritual plane.

The fact that human beings decide when the month begins means that human beings control when the holidays arrive. Judaism regards the holidays not merely as commemorations of past events, but as times when unique "spiritual energies" return to the world each year. So this, too, contradicted the fundamentals of Greek beliefs, and once again, the Greeks needed to stop performance of this Mitzvah.

But finally, and above all, the Greeks also commanded us to stop studying Torah. For as Rav Shlomo Brevda points out in his work on Chanukah, "L'hodos U'l'hallel," the Greeks recognized that the Jewish religion was fundamentally different than all the others, which were built upon certain actions which were required or prohibited. Although the Torah contains hundreds of different mitzvos, the very fundamental of Jewish life is Torah study itself. Therefore the Greeks felt the need to issue a unique decree, independent of their prohibition against the three particular mitzvos mentioned above, to cut off Jewish life at its very root.

This is what we were fighting, this is the war which we won. And, of course, it is so similar to the battle we are fighting today. People have joked that the 614th Commandment is the one against assimilation, phrased as "Thou Shalt Not Give Hitler (ysv"z, may his name and memory be blotted out) a posthumous victory." Yet the truth is that the victory would not go to him, but to Antiochus -- thousands of years after his own credo disappeared into the dustbin of history.

The Code of Jewish Law notes that the Sages did not decree special meals on Chanukah or anything of that nature -- for unlike Purim, which is celebrated with food and drink, Chanukah is celebrated with special praises and thanks to G-d. We respond to a threat of physical destruction with a physical celebration; we respond to a threat of spiritual destruction with a spiritual celebration.

Let us permit not only the image of the candles, but the message of Chanukah, to burn its way into our hearts -- let us revitalize ourselves and renew our study of Torah, for it is indeed the fundamental of all we have. This is something we can and should do, right now -- for this is the energy which Chanukah brings to us every year.

Good Shabbos, and a Happy Chanukah,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Text Copyright © 2003 Torah.org.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis - Torah.org.

