

The Story of Hanukkah (Chanukah)

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Under Syrian Rule

More than 2000 years ago there was a time when the land of Israel was part of the Syrian-Greek Empire, dominated by Syrian rulers of the dynasty of the Seleucids.

In order to relate the story that led up to Hanukkah, we shall start with Antiochus III, the King of Syria, who reigned from 358 to 337 (222-186 B.C.E.). He had waged war with King Ptolemy of Egypt over the possession of the Land of Israel. Antiochus III was victorious and the Land of Israel was annexed to his empire. At the beginning of his reign he was favorably disposed toward the Jews and accorded them some privileges.

Later on, however, when he was beaten by the Romans and compelled to pay heavy taxes, the burden fell upon the various peoples of his empire who were forced to furnish the heavy gold that was required of him by the Romans. When Antiochus died, his son Seleucus IV took over, and further oppressed the Jews.

Added to the troubles from the outside were the grave perils that threatened Judaism from within. The influence of the Hellenists (people who accepted idol-worship and the Syrian way of life) was increasing. Yochanan, the High Priest, foresaw the danger to Judaism from the penetration of Syrian-Greek influence into the Holy Land. For, in contrast to the ideal of outward beauty held by the Greeks and Syrians, Judaism emphasizes truth and moral purity, as commanded by G-d in the holy Torah. The Jewish people could never give up their faith in G-d and accept the idol-worship of the Syrians.

Yochanan was therefore opposed to any attempt on the part of the Jewish Hellenists to introduce Greek and Syrian customs into the land. The Hellenists hated him. One of them told the King's commissioner that in the treasury of the Temple there was a great deal of wealth.

The wealth in the treasury consisted of the contributions of "half a shekel" made by all adult Jews annually. That was given for the purpose of the sacrifices on the altar, as well as for fixing and improving the Temple building. Another part of the treasury consisted of orphans' funds which were deposited for them until they became of age. Seleucus needed money in order to pay the Romans. He sent his minister Helyodros to take the money from the treasury of the Temple. In vain did Yochanan, the High Priest, beg him not to do it.



Helyodros did not listen and entered the gate of the Temple. But suddenly, he became pale with fright. The next moment he fainted and fell to the ground. After Helyodros came to, he did not dare enter again.

The Madman: Antiochus

A short time later, Seleucus was killed and his brother Antiochus IV began to reign over Syria (in 3586 - 174 B.C.E.). He was a tyrant of a rash and impetuous nature, contemptuous of religion and of the feelings of others. He was called "Epiphanes," meaning "the gods' beloved." Several of the Syrian rulers received similar titles. But a historian of his time, Polebius, gave him the epithet Epimanes ("madman"), a title more suitable to the character of this harsh and cruel king.

Desiring to unify his kingdom through the medium of a common religion and culture, Antiochus tried to root out the individualism of the Jews by suppressing all the Jewish Laws. He removed the righteous High Priest, Yochanan, from the Temple in Jerusalem, and in his place installed Yochanan's brother Joshua, who loved to call himself by the Greek name of Jason. For he was a member of the Hellenist party, and he used his high office to spread more and more of the Greek customs among the priesthood.

Joshua or Jason was later replaced by another man, Menelaus, who had promised the king that he would bring in more money than Jason did. When Yochanan, the former High Priest, protested against the spread of the Hellenists' influence in the Holy Temple, the ruling High Priest hired murderers to assassinate him.

Antiochus was at that time engaged in a successful war against Egypt. But messengers from Rome arrived and commanded him to stop the war, and he had to yield. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, a rumor spread that a serious accident had befallen Antiochus. Thinking that he was dead, the people rebelled against Menelaus. The treacherous High Priest fled together with his friends.

The Martyrs

Antiochus returned from Egypt enraged by Roman interference with his ambitions. When he heard what had taken place in Jerusalem, he ordered his army to fall upon the Jews. Thousands of Jews were killed. Antiochus then enacted a series of harsh decrees against the Jews. Jewish worship was forbidden; the scrolls of the Law were confiscated and burned. Sabbath rest, circumcision and the dietary laws were prohibited under penalty of death. Even one of the respected elders of that generation, Rabbi Eliezer, a man of 90, was ordered by the servants of Antiochus to eat pork so that others would do the same. When he refused they suggested to him that he pick up the meat to his lips to appear to be eating. But Rabbi Eliezer refused to do even that and was put to death.

There were thousands of others who likewise sacrificed their lives. The famous story of Hannah and her seven children happened at that time.

Antiochus's men went from town to town and from village to village to force the inhabitants to worship pagan gods. Only one refuge area remained and that was the hills of Judea with their caves. But even there did the Syrians pursue the faithful Jews, and many a Jew died a martyr's death.

Mattityahu

One day the henchmen of Antiochus arrived in the village of Modiin where Mattityahu, the old priest, lived. The Syrian officer built an altar in the marketplace of the village and demanded that Mattityahu offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. Mattityahu replied, "I, my sons and my brothers are determined to remain loyal to the covenant which our G-d made with our ancestors!"

Thereupon, a Hellenistic Jew approached the altar to offer a sacrifice. Mattityahu grabbed his sword and killed him, and his sons and friends fell upon the Syrian officers and men. They killed many of them and chased the rest away. They then destroyed the altar.

Mattityahu knew that Antiochus would be enraged when he heard what had happened. He would certainly send an expedition to punish him and his followers. Mattityahu, therefore, left the village of Modiin and fled together with his sons and friends to the hills of Judea.

All loyal and courageous Jews joined them. They formed legions and from time to time they left their hiding places to fall upon enemy detachments and outposts, and to destroy the pagan altars that were built by order of Antiochus.

The Maccabees

Before his death, Mattityahu called his sons together and urged them to continue to fight in defense of G d's Torah. He asked them to follow the counsel of their brother Shimon the Wise. In waging warfare, he said, their leader should be Judah the Strong. Judah was called "Maccabee," a word composed of the initial letters of the four Hebrew words Mi Kamocho Ba'eilim Hashem, "Who is like You, O G-d."

Antiochus sent his General Apolonius to wipe out Judah and his followers, the Maccabees. Though greater in number and equipment than their adversaries, the Syrians were defeated by the Maccabees. Antiochus sent out another expedition which also was defeated. He realized that only by sending a powerful army could he hope to defeat Judah and his brave fighting men.

An army consisting of more than 40,000 men swept the land under the leadership of two commanders, Nicanor and Gorgiash. When Judah and his brothers heard of that, they exclaimed: "Let us fight unto death in defense of our souls and our Temple!" The people assembled in Mitzpah, where Samuel, the prophet of old, had offered prayers to G-d. After a series of battles the war was won.

The Dedication

Now the Maccabees returned to Jerusalem to liberate it. They entered the Temple and cleared it of the idols placed there by the Syrian vandals. Judah and his followers built a new altar, which he dedicated on the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev, in the year 3622 (139 B.C.E.).

Since the golden Menorah had been stolen by the Syrians, the Maccabees now made one of cheaper metal. When they wanted to light it, they found only a small cruse of pure olive oil bearing the seal of the High Priest Yochanan. It was sufficient to light only for one day.

By a miracle of G-d, it continued to burn for eight days, till new oil was made available. That miracle proved that G-d had again taken His people under His protection. In memory of this, our sages appointed these eight days for annual thanksgiving and for lighting candles.

After Hanukkah

The brightness of the first Hanukkah light had dwindled down. But the holy fires on the altar burnt again in the Beit Hamikdash, from morning to morning, as prescribed by the Law. The priests were again busily officiating in the old customary ways, and day in, day out they prepared the offerings. Order and peace seemed established.

The Jewish farmer longed to return to his land after two years of hardship, privation and danger in the victorious Jewish army. It was high time to break the ground and to till the soil, if the barley was to grow and ripen in time for "Omer-offering" on Passover. The Jewish farmers had left their ploughs to rally about the heroic Chashmonaim. The first victories had drawn even the hesitant into the ranks of the enthusiastic Jewish rebels, led by the sons of Mattityahu. Farmers had forsaken their land, merchants and tradesmen their stores and shops. Even Torah students had emerged from the four walls of the Bet Hamidrash to join the fight against the oppressors.

But the songs of victory, which had filled the reclaimed Holy Temple with praise and gratitude for the merciful G-d, had ceased. The goal of the battle seemed reached, and Torah again was supreme law in Israel.

One man, though, realized that the time for a return to normal living had not yet come. Israel could not yet afford to relax; it would have to stand ready and prepare to carry on the fight against the overwhelming odds of the enemy. This man was Judah Maccabi. His name was upon everyone's lips and in every Jewish heart. He was admired as a hero, as a man with the heart of a lion and the simple piety of a child; as the one whose mighty armies fought and conquered, yet who never failed to pray to G-d, the Master of all battles, before he entered the fray.

It was not the spirited warrior's joy that made Judah Maccabi stay in camp. His heart, too, longed to return to his former peaceful life, to Modiin, the quiet town of priests, which held the grave of his adored father. Bloodshed and battle meant a hard and unwanted profession for the men of Judea, who preferred peace to strife. Yet this was no time for relenting. Not only had he to stay, but with all the persuasion of his magnetic personality he had to hold back his comrades-at-arms. His own reasoning and his two wise brothers, Shimon and Yonatan, told him that only the first phase of this war of liberation had passed. Hard and desperate times were yet to come. Clever enemies merely needed an extended lull to prepare new assaults with more troops and better equipment. And there were enemies all about Judea, besides the defeated Syrians. The neighboring countries begrudged the dazzling victories of the small Jewish armies. They would much rather have seen the people of Judea oppressed and humiliated, than armed and spirited, a threat to their own lands. Whence had come the sudden source of strength, courage and fortitude? What was there in this nation that made history in proud seclusion and isolation from other nations? Old hatred was revived. The descendants of Edom (the Idumeans), the Ammonites, the Philistines and Phoenicians, they all revived their ancient jealousies.

Messengers arrived from Gilead. The pagan people joined forces to destroy Judea. From Galilee came the bad news of similar evil intentions and active preparations in Ptolemais, Tyre and Zidon. The messengers found Judah Maccabi already at work. Fortifications had to be thrown up around Zion. Towers, walls, battlements and moat had to be constructed opposite the fort still held by their worst enemies, the Hellenistic Jews, under the leadership of the false priest Menelaus. These hated everything Jewish, and lived in the hope of the return of the Syrian masters. Judah Maccabi prepared Jerusalem against them and against imminent assault by the troops of Antiochus. Under his supervision the Jewish people worked feverishly to refill their arsenals and turn the whole country into a stronghold.

Once this most important task was accomplished, Judah Maccabi led his freshly trained troops to the aid of the regions and villages harassed by the spiteful neighbors of Judea. He drove the Idumeans from Hebron, which they had annexed, and he punished the people who had acted with hostility towards the Jewish settlers. Then he led his army across the Jordan River against the Ammonites. Their capital fell before the furious onslaught of the Jewish troops, and so did their fortress, Yaeser. Judah's brother Shimon led an army north to aid the plagued Jews of Galilee. He defeated the enemy and cleared the Jewish land. At his urging, a great many of the Jewish settlers who had fled to Jerusalem, returned to rebuild in safety what had been destroyed during the years of weakness. Judah Maccabi and Yonatan joined forces and marched against Gilead, where they were met with the toughest resistance. By Shavuot, this campaign was successfully concluded.

Judea was again free, and all parts captured by the neighboring nation had been recovered. Celebrations and festivity transformed Jerusalem and the Holy Temple, hardly half a year after the victories over the Syrian armies. The Jewish people expressed their joy and gratitude to G-d in the form of psalms and offerings. For He had restored glory and liberty to the Jewish land.