



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Chanukah 5773 By Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna

Chanukah means “dedication.” Almost 2200 years ago, Judah Maccabee and his followers liberated the ancient Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks and rededicated it to the God of Israel. As we American Jews prepare to gather around the light of our Chanukah candles, we can find inspiration in the history of the celebration of Chanukah in America and the lessons that history can teach us about dedicating ourselves to the causes that move us.

Many of us are familiar with the Chanukah narrative. Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid King of the Hellenistic Syrian Kingdom, promoted Hellenization, expecting Jews to abandon their own religion and culture for that of the Greeks. To this end, he established the cult of Zeus as the state religion, outlawed circumcision and the Sabbath, defiled and despoiled the Temple, and banned the practice of Judaism altogether.

Many Jews adopted the ways of the Greeks, but Mattathias, the father of Judah Maccabee, resisted. His words, recorded in the Book of Maccabees, echo through the ages as a testament to religious liberty and minority group rights, which many still struggle for today:

Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king’s words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left. . . .Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me! (I Maccabees 2:19-22, 27)

Mattathias’s declaration of independence fueled the revolt that defeated the Syrian Greeks. It resulted in renewed Jewish autonomy and the rededication of the Temple. More broadly, it kept the Jewish religion alive.

For all of its historical significance, though, Chanukah did not become a major Jewish holiday until recent times. Since it went unmentioned in the Bible and was scarcely discussed even in the Talmud, Chanukah had trouble gaining traction in the Jewish holiday cycle. It was dismissed as a “minor festival.”

In early America as well, Chanukah received hardly any notice at all. Jews exchanged gifts with one another on Purim, not on Chanukah. Some early American Jews undoubtedly lit Chanukah candles, but otherwise, the holiday attracted almost no notice. Its focus on anti-assimilation and the rededication of the Temple failed to resonate.

All of that changed in the late 19th century. Young Jews, concerned about the direction of American Jewish life, fearful of the rising popularity of Christmas in some Jewish circles, and eager to promote Jewish religious renewal, hit upon the Chanukah story as the perfect metaphor for what they themselves sought to accomplish—the rededication of Jews to Jewish life. In 1879, in New York’s Academy of Music, these young Jews staged what they called a “Grand Revival of the Jewish National Holiday of Chanucka,” complete with an historic reenactment, a chorus of “Hebrew melodies,” and a “grand ball.” It was a triumphant success. “Never before in the western hemisphere,” one Jewish

newspaper exclaimed, “has Chanuka been so beautifully and fittingly celebrated.” (*American Hebrew* 12-12-1879, p.40)

Those who helped to “revive” Chanukah were described in the press as “youthful,” “endowed with the courage of youth,” “persevering” and “determined.” To them, the revival of Chanukah was a first step on the road to a larger revitalization project. In the years that followed, they initiated a wide range of cultural and religious institutions, and involved themselves in an array of community projects. In the space of a few decades, they created, among other things, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Jewish Publication Society, and Gratz College. They also participated heavily in the publication of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

Today, we continue to benefit from the projects set in motion by the young Jewish “revivalists” of the late 19th century. Chanukah has become one of the most widely-observed Jewish holidays in the United States, and generations of young people have emulated their late 19th century forebears, by taking on new projects aimed at strengthening Jewish life in the United States.

With the approach of Chanukah, it is worth recalling the common denominator that links today’s projects, those of the late nineteenth century, and the heroic deeds of the Maccabees. It can be summarized in a single word—dedication.

As we celebrate the dedication—of the ancient Temple and of Jewish leaders past and present—let us commit to rededicating ourselves to the causes and issues that we value. For some of us, it may be the revitalization of our own Jewish communities. For others, inspired by the courage of Mattathias and Judah Maccabee, it is the protection of the freedom and rights of oppressed people around the world. Dedicated to the cause we choose, may we be inspired on Chanukah to commit ourselves to increasing the light in our communities and around the world.



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