

CHANNUKAH — ITS MESSAGE TO US

Of all the miracles which occurred at the time of the event of Channukah and which led up to Channukah being celebrated as a festival every year, there is one, perhaps the most important, which is often overlooked. That miracle is how the Jewish People found their way back from the brink of disappearing. Probably never before in our history had the Jewish People in Eretz Yisroel come so close to mass spiritual annihilation as in those times and then, through the miraculous events of those days, found their way back to the life of Torah-true Judaism.

To understand what brought about the events of Channukah we have to go back to about a hundred years *before* the uprising initiated and led by the aged Mattisyo'hu. Eretz Yisroel was at that time ruled by the Syrians, who had embraced the Greek way of life. That was when the rot had really started. Way back then, sad to say, some of the Jewish People — initially they were not many — were led astray to the lifestyle of the Hellenist Syrians. These rich, upper class Jews, eager to rub shoulders with the foreign invaders, started to copy the lifestyle of these Hellenist Syrians. Then slowly, gradually, the rest of the people were also ensnared when they saw that the Greek way of life was easy and even beautiful — forgetting the beauty and grandeur of their own Torah life.

History has a habit of repeating itself. Throughout the ages it has been the richer Jews first who abandoned the laws of the Torah and so it has been in recent centuries, right down to our own day. On the one hand, these Jews were aware that their wealth gave them the wherewithal to enjoy the material things in life but on the other hand, the Torah, they felt, restricted and constrained this enjoyment unfairly. They would have jettisoned the Torah that they felt encumbered their lives but generally they balked at being so treacherous as to drop their religion completely. Instead, they claimed to be “broadminded” and “accommodating” about other faiths — to the detriment of their own. In the past couple of centuries or so, they found a different solution to their dilemma — “Reform Judaism” came to their rescue! “Reform Judaism” allowed them to live like non-Jews but without appearing to be traitors to their heritage. A study of recent history will show that none of the variations of fraudulent Judaism — be they Reform Judaism, Liberal Judaism, Progressive Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Humanist Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, call it what you will — ever started with the poorer classes. In the past, after the wealthy Jews had left the fold, their poorer brethren, trying to be like them, tried to follow their example. Which all goes to show that wealth brings with it its own challenges!

In other times, in other cultures, perhaps it wasn't wealth as such that made people move away from the Torah but the winds of change, blowing-in from elsewhere, led to the rejection of the old order. These winds of change varied. But to the proponents of social revolution (which promised the improvement of the lot of the common man) or of

CHANNUKAH — ITS MESSAGE TO US

science (which promised to solve all the world's problems) or the new intellectualism (which promised that men could be free without any constraints imposed by a Higher Intelligence) to all of them, the Torah and Mitzvos (and, by wrong extension, all religion, too) were a hindrance and were therefore rejected. These heroes of the modern world were looked-up to and were soon copied by the rest of the people who likewise deserted the Torah (often without quite knowing what was supposed to be wrong with it except that it stopped them doing what they liked) and the trickle of deserters became a flood. So it was then, so it has always been — and so it is today. Some of our people choose not to see the wisdom and goodness in the Torah and Mitzvos that are their heritage and “the grass is always greener on the other side of the hill.”

Once the Jews had showed that they themselves (even if only some of them) willingly and unforced, were quite prepared to forsake their own Torah life and instead embrace Greek culture, Antiochus, the king of Syria, saw that his dream of unifying all of his realm in the Greek mould was indeed feasible. When he came to power, Antiochus took the additional name “Epiphanes,” meaning “blessed by the gods” but his nickname was “Epimanes,” meaning “made crazy by the gods” for he was madly insistent upon the spread of Greek culture and religion — to the exclusion of any others — throughout his realm. All the peoples who fell under the tyranny of this evil man were forced to conform to his command that they shall become Hellenists and live their lives like the Greeks of old. Now Antiochus was determined that not only those Jews who lived as Hellenists but all of that stubborn people of the small country of Judea should do the same. A great number of those Jews who had until then remained faithful to their heritage indeed succumbed to his enticements and threats and forsook the religion of their fathers. There were notable exceptions, most famous, perhaps, is the martyrdom of Channah and her seven sons. But the general trend was towards apostasy and assimilation. The few wayward Jews had become a vast majority.

So as to ensure the complete eradication of the Jewish way of life, Antiochus issued a decree forbidding the study of the Torah. He knew that the strong backbone of the Jewish Nation, and a fundamental part of the Jewish faith, is that wonderful and sacred weekly event, the Shabbos, so he forbade the observance of the Jewish Shabbos. He prohibited the physical sign of Jewishness, Bris Mi’loh. And so as to break the authority of the Beis Din, that august body which regulates and unifies the national life of the whole Jewish People by proclaiming when would be Rosh Chodesh and consequently when would be the main Festivals in the Jewish calendar, the institution of Rosh Chodesh was proscribed. (So it has been throughout the ages: whenever despots tried to get rid of the Jewish way of life they strictly forbade Torah-study; the observance of Shabbos was forbidden, Bris Mi’loh was not allowed and it became well-nigh impossible to obtain a Jewish calendar.) This maniac insisted that the Jews themselves openly declare that they “no longer have any portion in the G-d of Israel.” Unspeakable tortures and death awaited those brave men and women who dared to disobey the madman.

Little wonder, therefore, that as this period of persecution grew in intensity and cruelty, the vast majority of the Jewish people allowed themselves to be forced away from their precious Torah life. With threats of doom and destruction and promises of peace and prosperity, they were enticed away from their heritage.

CHANNUKAH — ITS MESSAGE TO US

Soon they were studying Greek culture, playing at the sports of the Greeks and their games, learning their philosophy, singing their poetry, and recounting the tales of their polytheistic and crude mythology. Everything noble and good that ages of Torah-learning and Torah-life had achieved — the greatness of the Jewish spirit — was ruined. And then it was only a short step to copy the Greeks in their depraved worship of marble figures.

For those few Jews who remained steadfast in their loyalty to the Torah, their troubles became worse — but from a different direction. For when the wrath of their Hellenist masters was kindled against those admirable Jews who would not be treacherous to HaShem and His Torah, it was the Hellenist Jews who poured scorn and hatred upon their own brethren. As happens so often in such situations, these turncoat Jews, in an attempt to salve their own conscience, were quick and eager to foul the nest from which they had come. The old Jewish traditions, they said, were barbaric, they were empty ceremonies and pointless rituals. They accused the loyal Jews of being religious fanatics who refused to move with the times. What harm could there be in such beautiful culture? It was the religious Jews who would be responsible for incurring the rage of the Syrians, *they* would be accountable for the doom of the Jewish Nation, and so on and so forth.

But then the rebellion of the noble Hasmoneans was raised. And the great miracle happened. These Jews, who had wandered so far away from their religion in so short a time, realized the falseness of their ways and ceased to blunder in spiritual darkness. They saw where their assimilation was leading them, and they flocked to the banner raised by Mattisyohu and his fighters. They threw behind them the vile blasphemies of the Greeks and they returned to the Torah of their fathers. The Jewish people had overcome their worst enemy — themselves. And when the Lights of the Mikdash, kindled in purity and rededication, shone forth miraculously, this helped — together with their *Teshuvah* — to dispel the gloom and darkness of their horrible mistake.

And what of today? Has not the Festival of the Menorah a message for us in our own times? Indeed it has! Today, we live in tolerant times and are blessed by HaShem that we enjoy religious freedom. We live in countries which are wealthy and we share the affluence of our fellow citizens. But because we do not know any different, it does not mean that we should be forgetful of these blessings. And we must ask ourselves: how do we use them? Can it be said truthfully that as a whole and individually we apply ourselves as diligently as we should to the study of our Torah, to the fulfilment of the Mitzvos — or do we have to admit that we are falling short in our task? On our private list of priorities, can we honestly say that we attach as much importance to our Torah-learning and doing Mitzvos as we do to our secular pursuits and our mundane activities? In the education of our children and in our own aspirations, is it not perhaps true that we are so busy training ourselves for a living that we forget to train ourselves for a life? How many of us have set as our life's goal to become, not so much a successful businessman or an accomplished professional, but a Talmid Chochom? How many?

The yearly commemoration of the episode of Channukah offers us an opportunity to adjust our sights a little, to make sure that our sense of perspective is not somewhat out

CHANNUKAH — ITS MESSAGE TO US

of line. We may enjoy the pleasures of entertainment and relaxation and we may pursue the study of subjects necessary so that we and our children do not grow up as helpless and burdensome members of a modern age. But surely we may not partake of those forms of relaxation or entertainment which are foreign to the Jewish spirit. And to train our youngsters for a career — fine! But surely we do not have to throw them or ourselves into the study and the pursuit of culture and ideas that are foreign to the Jewish heritage.

We must see that we do not make the same mistake as before, of learning to understand and then even to admire those things which are portrayed so powerfully and tastefully in the culture and literature of today's Hellenist world. We must bring ourselves to realize (as doubtless many secretly do) that the culture and ideologies of the peoples of the world are in so many instances the exact opposite of all the good, fine and noble thoughts and ideas that our Torah teaches us. So, why should we be so foolish that we stoop to study infinitely inferior and mind-damaging literature, the product of a sick society and sick, perverted minds, violent, filthy, ignoble, when we have such a wonderful and rich heritage of pure and holy ideals? Does a man who has a fortune in gold and silver cheapen himself to ask a beggar to give him a copper coin?

In the sphere of our children's education and our own career training, what we study and how we study it; in the sphere of pleasure and entertainment, what we play at and how we play at it; in our home life — *especially* in our home life — and in our various undertakings — all our activities must be in accordance with our holy Torah.

Let Channukah teach us to be firm in our Jewishness, unwavering in our loyalty to the Shulchan Oruch and all the lofty ideals of our holy Torah. And when the lights of the Menorah shine forth let them bring us to the radiant light of the true and genuine Judaism, as it did so wonderfully "in those days in this season."