



The Story Behind the Hanuka Story

By Rabbi Yamin Levy

While the traditional story of Hanuka presents Greeks as wicked tyrants bent on our destruction and Greek culture as the ultimate force of darkness, we know from world history, and Jewish history, that Greek culture was a source of much light in the ancient world. Much of western philosophy, medicine, mathematics and geometry is born out of Greek culture. HaRambam, Maimonides, regarded Aristotle in the highest esteem and even suggested he could be a prophet.

How does one make sense of this dual almost, contradictory relationship, with Greece? How can these two accounts coexist? The answer lies in understanding the story behind the Hanuka story. This is the story that helps explain our observance of the holiday and the fundamental lessons of the *Menorah* itself.

When Alexander the Great defeated the Persian empire and became the undisputed emperor of the region his attitude towards the Jews and Jewish religion was consistent with the Persian attitude. The Greeks like the Persians appreciated freedom of religion and religious expression. Like their Persian predecessors, the Greeks supported and even encouraged Jewish education and the Temple service.

So how is it that the policy towards the Jews deteriorated so dramatically around 187 BCE under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes IV – less than 150 years after Alexander?

A deeper look at the history of the period reveals the ugly face not of the Greeks but of the Jewish religious and political leadership of the time.

Josephus, the Jewish roman chronicler of history, describes the hoarding of power between Kohen Gadol, Onias and members of the Tobiad family in Jerusalem. Onias had a brother named Jason, who obtained the High priesthood by betraying his own blood and people. Jason bartered with the King money he procured from the coffers of the Bet HaMikdash for protection. Being that the Priesthood can be bought, Menaleus another Kohen outbid Jason for power and was installed as High Priest, the Kohen Gadol. When Onias, the presumably rightful High priest denounced Menelaus – Menelaus had him killed. Jason the former high Priest raised an army and began massacring fellow Jews who were loyal to Menelaus and a civil war broke out.

Antiochus, who was fighting a war with Egypt at the time, while being given an update on the empire, was informed about the events taking place in the holy city of Jerusalem. The entire empire is under control except Judea, he was told: “The Jews are having a civil war”. Infuriated and frustrated Antiochus stormed Jerusalem, authorized his troops to massacre anyone who resisted the placing of an idol in the Temple and forbade the practice of the Jewish religion. If Judaism will not make these people civil than Greek culture and Greek religion will! Pagan altars were built and Torah scrolls burnt. A fight for the priesthood would not be allowed to disrupt an otherwise placid empire, nor draw attention and resources from the expansion of that empire.

This lasted for about 10 years until the family of Matiyahu HaKohen, the priest, unified their brethren to overthrow the Greeks and restore Jewish autonomy. With his sons, and Yehuda Hamacabee at the

helm they defeated the Greek armies and restored the Jewish religious service in the Bet HaMikdash, the Temple.

The story of Hanuka is not so much about the external enemy who wants to destroy us but rather about the internal enemy who can create real havoc. When the Jewish people are divided, they are conquered first from within, then from without. When the Jewish people are united, even the mightiest army in the world will fall into their hands. The story of Hanuka is about the urgency of Shalom Bayit, peace in the “national” home.

Maimonides alludes to this theme while codifying the laws of Hanuka. “The Mitzva of Hanuka Lighting,” writes Maimonides “is fulfilled by each and every home lighting one candle” (Laws of Hanuka 4:1).

Intuitively, we would have assumed, like most other mitzvot, that the essential obligation is upon the individual but for practical consideration one member of the family fulfills the mitzvah for the entire household. This is not what Maimonides is saying. Rather the obligation is upon the home and not the individual. As if the home itself had a religious responsibility to gather up all its inhabitants under the auspices of creating one light. The candles cannot be used for any practical purpose other than religious function and beauty. The candles are a unifying force that brings rest and peace to the home.

Most revealing is the final Halakhot in Maimonide’s code of laws pertaining to Hanuka.

The commandment to light the Hanukkah lamp is an exceedingly precious one, and one should be particularly careful to fulfill it, in order to make known the miracle, and to offer additional praise and thanksgiving to God for the wonders which He has wrought for us. Even if one has no food to eat except what he receives from charity, **he should beg—or sell his garment to buy—oil and lamps, and light them.**

If one has no more than a single penny and needs wine for the sanctification benediction of the Sabbath and oil to light the Hanukkah lamp, **he should give preference to the purchase of oil for the Hanukkah lamp over the purchase of wine for the sanctification benediction.** Since both commandments are based on the authority of the scribes, it is best to give preference to the Hanukkah lamp, since it serves as a memorial of the miracle of Hanukkah.

Maimonides obviously wants us to appreciate the importance and significance of the Mitzvah of lighting the Hanuka Menorah. And Yet Maimonides continues:

If such a poor man needs oil for both a Sabbath lamp and a Hanukkah lamp... **the Sabbath lamp should have priority, for the sake of peace in the household, Shalom Bayit...** **Great indeed is peace, for as much as the purpose for which the whole of the Law was given is to bring peace upon the world,** as it is said, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Prov. 3:17).

Yes, lighting the Hanuka Menora is important but it cannot supersede the commandment to bring peace to the home, otherwise the entire exercise becomes counterproductive. The point of the Hanukah Menorah, Maimonides, tells us, is not just to remember the miracle of oil lasting eight days, or a small band of Jews throwing off a might army, it is to remind of us of why we needed those miracles in the first place.