

Chanukah

On the eve of the 25th of Kislev you kindle the Chanukah light in your home, and for eight days with the greeting of the ever-increasing light, the memory of an old story, of ancient times crosses the threshold of your mind.

Is it still the same old story? Do, then, the Jewish dead never die? Does the Jewish past never fade away?

No, the Jewish dead do not die. One who has died for Jewry, nay one who has lived for the cause of Jewry, can never die; in eternal gratitude a people which knows how to value its past heroes cherishes their memory and past history; Jewish history in all its grandeur accosts every coming generation, ever fresh and ever new, to remind, to warn, to comfort and to elevate.

And now just *this* story—oh, that it were indeed old, if with its sorrow and its glory it would after 2,000 years be so old to us that its sorrow might seem incomprehensible to us, and its glory commonplace!

“But Joshua preferred to be called Jason, just as his younger brother (they succeeded one another as High Priest) preferred to be called Menelaus instead of Chonyah. Now, when Menelaus together with the sons of Tobias had (in the dispute with his brother over the office of High Priest) to yield to this violence, they approached the King Antiochus, and offered to throw off immediately their Jewish laws and customs, and to conduct themselves in accordance with the statutes and customs of the king and the Greeks. They, therefore, asked permission to erect a Greek college in the city of Jerusalem, and

when it was granted they let their foreskins grow, so that even when naked they might appear quite similar to the Greeks; and thus abandoning all the customs of their forefathers they adopted the habits of foreign people." (Josephus, Ant. Bk. 12, Ch. 5, 1)

Is this a story of the past?

"In those days rebels against the law came forward and tried to persuade the people thus: 'Let us go and make a covenant with the people around us, for since we have separated ourselves from them many misfortunes have befallen us.' These words found favour in the eyes of the multitude and several of the people declared themselves ready and set out to go to the king. The king granted them permission to introduce among themselves the customs of the heathens. They then erected a gymnasium in Jerusalem after the Greek manner—they let their foreskins grow; and withdrawing from the sacred covenant, they united with the nations, they abandoned themselves completely to the practice of what was evil." (1 Maccabees Ch. 1.)

Is this a story of the past?

"Jason, the brother of Onias, succeeding to the office of High Priest, arose, and went to the king, and promised him 360 talents of silver and in addition 80 talents from other revenues. Over and above this, he promised him another 150 talents, if he should be authorised to exercise supreme power and to erect a college and an institution for physical exercises, and to grant the inhabitants of Jerusalem citizenship of Antioch. When the king conceded this and Jason had received this authority, he immediately set about to lead his countrymen astray, persuading them to adopt Hellenic customs; he abolished those very commendable practices which the former king had instituted for the Jews; he discarded the customs that were in accordance with the law, and substituted for them unlawful usages. He even had the audacity to erect beneath the very temple mount a building intended for gymnastic sports, and to constrain the finest youths to participate in the exercises held there. Through this scandalous and criminal behavior of the godless and by no means high-priestly Jason, the movement towards Hellenism and the impulse to adopt foreign practices became so strong that even the priests no longer concerned themselves with the service of the altar; instead they became contemptuous of the temple, neglected the sacrifices, and ran out to participate in the illicit performances on the palaestra at the proclamation announcing the throwing of the

discus. Their ancestral dignities they slighted, and Hellenic applause seemed to them the highest attainment. But it was just those people for whose sake they faced the greatest difficulties, whose way of life they strove so eagerly to imitate, and to whom they wanted to become assimilated, it was precisely they who were their enemies, the avengers of their backsliding; for to sin against divine laws is no small matter, a fact which only the ensuing epoch reveals." (2 Maccabees Ch. 4.)

Is this, then, a story of the past?

If religious decadence in the Jewish sphere fills you with grief and sorrow, if you are nigh to despair of our future, if in fear you exclaim "Has there ever been so gruesome a situation in Israel," then consider this story: see how once before 2,000 years ago, High Priests, men entrusted with what is most sacred in Jewry, with the highest religious office, were themselves the first to betray God and His holy Law, to woo the favour of kings by religious treachery, seducing the Jewish nation and its youth. They vied with the well-to-do and the educated of their people in contempt of the Divine laws and of Jewish morals, in honouring and adopting un-Jewish ways and un-Jewish culture—see how already thousands of years ago, the alluring light of culture and political advantage, in the shape of civic rights, has been employed by Israel's seducers to tempt them to revolt against God and His holy word. Yet observe how this epoch of betrayal and revolt was left behind, and how it was succeeded by the centuries and millenia of faithfulness, of devotion and self-sacrifice for God and Judaism; and learn from this to look to the future with confidence.

For you must note that this revolt of which voices of the past have just given an account, this revolt was not one provoked from without, it was not the consequence of Antiochus' wild attack on Judaism; this revolt of the Jewish teachers of God's Law, and of the upper classes of society in Judea, was voluntary, it preceded the frenzy of the king, it was, strictly speaking, the actual cause, the real origin of the subsequent fanatical anti-Jewish outbreak. Not in his wildest dreams would it have occurred to Antiochus to convert Jews from Judaism to Greek culture, had not Jews and priests of Jewry disclosed to him that Judaism no longer held a first place in their heart, that they were only waiting for the royal command to place Zeus on the altar of the Eternal, and that at the same time the common people, the lower classes, could be easily lured into the other camp—or made to suffer

martyrdom if they refused. Similarly, even in the darkest centuries of persecution, it has never entered the mind of any despot to "reform" Jews and Jewry.

Jewry was persecuted, but everyone believed that Judaism was everlasting. It required nineteenth-century priests and disciples to set the spectacle of disloyal Jews before the eyes of princes and people, before any statesman conceived the idea of reforming Jewry by means of decrees and legal measures. It is only natural; respect yourself, respect your past, respect your own sanctuary, and you will see that whatever opinion is held of you, whether you are regarded with favour or with disfavour—respect will not be denied you. But if you do not respect yourself, if you look contemptuously on the tombs of your ancestors, if you no longer consider your sanctuary worthy of respect, even of recognition—how can you demand that a stranger shall respect you, or respect your fathers? You may find many things in the world, but for respect you will beg in vain.

What was the mistake made by these "men of progress," "men of culture," "priests of reform," the political traffickers in religion, of the time of Antiochus in Judea? Listen to the illuminating tale of the Chanukah lights:

"The renegade sons of Judea had gone to such lengths, that the Greeks themselves finally dishonoured the divine sanctuary by using it as a temple for Zeus. They had profaned all the oil intended for the sacred lamp of God. The victorious Hasmoneans found but one small crucible undesecrated; and it was enough for only one day. But in this one crucible was revealed the miraculous salvation of Divine power. For eight days the lamp was tended with it, until fresh pure oil could be prepared."

Though they rage against Jewry with fanatical frenzy, though right and left thousands and hundreds of thousands fall away in betrayal of Jewry; nevertheless so long as they have not trampled out of existence the last spark of Judaism in the heart of the last Jew in the last Jewish village, we short-sighted mortals may quiver and tremble; but יושב ישוב "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision." (Psalms 2, 4.)

One single pure spark, loyally treasured in but one single Jewish heart, is sufficient for God to set aflame once more the whole spirit of Judaism. And if all the oil, if all the forces that were to have preserved the light of God in Israel, were to be misused for the light of

paganism—even then, one little crucible of oil, one heart which in a forgotten hidden corner, imprinted with the High Priest's seal, has faithfully remained untouched and undefiled, this one crucible is sufficient to become the salvation of the entire sanctuary when the right time and hour has come. "And even though all countries were bowed in obedience to Antiochus, if every man forsook the land of his fathers and assented to the king's command, even then, I and my sons and brothers will not forsake the laws of our fathers"—thus spoke the loyal Hasmonean heart of one single hero advanced in years—and Israel's sanctuary was saved.

Therefore, go and kindle your light at the festival of the Maccabees. To kindle it in your synagogue, in your temple, is not enough: *נר איש וביתו* is the precept of Chanukah. In your own home there shall be a light for you and for your house. Of what avail is it to us if we sing praises in our houses of worship, if in the temples we call ourselves Jews in a momentary access of devotion, while our homes are un-Jewish and we do not harbour in our homes the light of the Jewish spirit? Our salvation has not issued from temples in the past, nor will it now—the deliverance will come from the home. How good are the sermons of your preachers, how well your cantors sing—this makes no difference. *מפי עוללים ויונקים*, the important thing is how your children and babies prattle, whether the Jewish spirit shines in them, whether Jewish sap flows in their veins, whether the Jewish way of life is their education—on this depend victory and deliverance.

The light of the temple? It was the very High Priests of Judaism themselves who betrayed it. The light of Mattathias in his village became the salvation; do you therefore kindle your light in your own home!

Do not regard your home with unconcern. And if you, yourself, were the only one who still preserved the spirit of the Maccabees in his home, remember that one single Jew, one single Jewish house is ultimately in itself sufficient to serve as foundation for the re-erection of the entire Jewish sanctuary. Nay more, the fewer comrades you have, the more the spirit of the Hasmoneans has faded around you, the more faithfully must you guard it, the more fervently must you yourself prepare for this spirit a place of refuge in your own home.

But do not forget *איש וביתו*: that is the injunction—you *and* your house. If you desire to live for Judaism, you must not remain content to saturate only yourself with the Jewish spirit; only when you have

established the Jewish spirit as a heritage in your home will you have lived for Judaism; and if like the *מהדרין*, you appreciate your task correctly, you will not remain satisfied to let the light of Judaism shine in your house in a general way; you will kindle *אחד אחד ואחד* you will give your full attention to each child, to each individual member of your house, in order to win him to Judaism, that the light of Judaism may continue to shine forth in him. Mattathias could die in peace; he knew that whichever of his sons would survive him, Jochanan, Simeon, Judah, Eleazar or Jonathan, in each one the flame of the Divine light of Judaism would continue to live.

Nor will you ever halt in your holy endeavours, you will never be satisfied with yesterday's achievements, you will strive ever forward, the light in your house must grow ever brighter, for you are well aware that *progress*, not retreat—*מעלין בקדש ואין מורדין*—is the watchword of holy endeavour, and if anywhere, then here we see that he who does not advance retreats.

And your tranquil work and activity in your own home will radiate beyond the threshold of your home, and the friendly, joyous light of God that reigns in your home will stimulate your neighbour to seek the same radiant Jewish home life; you will not be ashamed of being a Jew, you will be proud of the fact that in your home one can recognize the Jew in you and your household. *נר חנכה מצוה להגיתו על פתח ביתו מבהרן*, you will not shrink from letting your light of Judaism shine across the street, and only *בשעת סכנה* in times of danger *על שלחנו היו*, will you content yourself with preserving at least your own home for Judaism, and with dedicating as an altar for the divine sanctuary the table that serves your domestic life.

Do you then kindle this light, and may the path followed by you and yours be the path of the righteous, may it become bright as a radiant light and ever brighter *היום עד נכון היום* (Proverbs 4, 18) until the full brightness of the eternal day.