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Chanukah: Consecration and Inspiration in Judaism

Chanukah! The very word brings to mind the dawn of morning and the glimmer of springtime! The very thought bespeaks the light of morning and the breath of spring! Chanukah! Boyhood and early youth are the one great Chanukah during which the buds of mind and spirit open, during which the innermost sanctuary of the soul is to be won for the Holiest of Holies and the boy, awakening to manhood, is to be "armed" and "consecrated" to activate the values that should accompany him through life in manhood and in old age.

Chanukah may be the exalted, uplifting moment when a man has accomplished a task that should signify for him not the end, but the beginning of a future filled with hope and with the joy of living.

"Chanukah?" thus speaks the narrow wisdom of mortals, "Chanukah, youth and consecration, come only once in a lifetime! If you have trifled away your youth, it is lost beyond recall. If you have lost your consecration, you have forfeited it forever! There are only certain periods in his life when man is capable of enthusiasm for great things, when he is receptive to consecration. The feelings of the child, the passion of youth, the romance of betrothal, the spirit of consecration—all these are poetic moments, bestowed by a merciful Father upon the hapless hearts of men to comfort them, to cover at least their beginnings with the rosy sheen of hope and to cheer the end with the sweet sorrow of nostalgic memories. Reality has none of the pearly dew that glistened in the morning sun. The seeds of fantasy must be crushed before reality can develop. A man who would wish to preserve childlike emotion and youthful passion in his heart is a poor fool. A woman who looks for the fulfillment of her bridal dreams amidst the cares of her household and family life will end with a broken heart. Home and synagogue alike become irrelevant to real life if the contents of the odes recited at their consecration should be taken as anything but mere poetry."

And yet Chanukah comes again and again in the calendar of our years, and this calendar is very much in earnest about having Chanukah bring—well, “Chanukah,” new consecration, new strength and a new, vigorous beginning to life, both in the synagogue and in the family, and in every age. The story of Chanukah itself gives the lie to the illusion that dismisses the poetry of life as vapid fiction. The zeal of Chanukah caught fire within the breast of an old man of eighty, and this flame was to inspire a whole nation to fight for the preservation of the truth, the consecration, the holiness and the sanctification of its life. This nation became capable of sufficient enthusiasm to risk its life with all its treasures for the greatest values its national survival could afford. Indeed, it was this enthusiasm that marked the beginning, the Chanukah, of the nation’s historic “maturity” and “old age.” And then you would consider the inspiration and the consecration of Chanukah a fiction and a lie, fit only to amuse children and to excite young men until both wake up to the sober realities of life?

Why do you equate inspiration and consecration with the flowers which you arrange to adorn your so-called “consecration ceremonies” but which do not live until the next day? Faded blossoms, like the wilted wreaths of yesterday’s temple services, confirmations or weddings, they preach their own message of *sic transit*, implying that all the sentiments and emotions, the high ideals and resolves which you praised as eternal at your “consecration ceremonies” are a thing of the past? Why indeed? Because your inspiration and your consecration have been a lie from the very beginning. You want to inspire, but you have no object to which to direct that inspiration. You want to consecrate, but somehow you have misplaced the life for which you should consecrate yourselves and others. You do not inspire the child to assume the duties of youth; you do not inspire the youth to assume the duties of mature men and women; you do not inspire the mature man and woman to assume the duties of old age; you do not inspire the old to prepare for eternal life in this world and in the world to come.

You do not comprehend the concept of חק לנער על פי דרכו (“train the child in his own individuality, in the way in which he should go”—Proverbs 22, 6). Your consecration is always a climax which can only be followed by a decline when, in fact, it should be a beginning, leading to a steady ascent, onward and upward. Your inspiration and your consecration lack a core of substance; they have no object except themselves. You regard inspiration and consecration as goals in them-

selves; that is why they fizzle out, leaving you behind in the darkness of night like a rocket that has run out of fuel. Your love for your bride was only flirtation, your love for your children exhausted itself in caresses, and your interest in your temples ended with the glitter and pomp of your consecration ceremonies. You never place truth at the beginning, and that is why you have lies and deception everywhere.

How different is Jewish inspiration and consecration, how different the Jewish Chanukah wherever and whenever it comes! חינוך,* the Jewish Chanukah, does not feed the child with fairy tales. It does not beguile childhood and youth with the notions of a world that does not exist; it does not seek to win their hearts and minds for a life which reality will never afford them. The Chanukah of Judaism guides the youth directly to the Law, to the same realities and truths that should be the guides and the goals of all his future life. (על פי דרכו—גם כי יקץ לא) . . . in the way in which he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it"). The Chanukah of Judaism inspires him for "God and duty," consecrating him for that ideal from the first dawning of his consciousness. If it has succeeded in thus inspiring him, if its consecration has been successful, "God and duty" will be his guiding stars on his path through the rest of his life. To keep on growing in the knowledge of God and of his own duty, in the service of God and in the fulfillment of his duty—that is what the child expects to do when he becomes a youth, what the youth expects to do when he becomes a grown man, what the grown man expects to do when he becomes old, and what the old man expects to do throughout his old age. By bequeathing to the next generation the treasures of knowledge and of life that have ripened for him, the old man will be able to reap the values to which he first awoke as a child and for which he lived throughout his life with ever-growing inspiration, as his harvest of perfection into the new beginning, the world to come.

See what the Jewish people is like as long as it remains truly Jewish! There is none like it in all the great wide world. We see the old man poring over the same sources of inspiration and consecration that nourished him when he was a child, a youth and in the prime of manhood. The same Book, the same Law, the same truths which first kindled the child's spirit and inspiration also nourish the passion of the youth, engage the earnest study of the mature man and illumine the

* חינוך has two meanings: "education" and "consecration" or "dedication." [Ed.]

eyes of the old man. Thus the man of seventy still pores assiduously over his folios and draws inspiration from the same words that he first learned to stammer with shining eyes when he was five and ten years old.

Look at the marriage of the Jew! It is not gallantry, flirtation and delusive romance that join the hearts and hands of Jewish husbands and wives. When man and wife unite, they do so in full awareness of the sober realities of their married lives, and for the purpose of living by these realities. Their love is based on their inspired eagerness to fulfill life's duties together, and on the desire of each to enhance the happiness of the other. That is why the longer they are married the more they will love each other, and the consecration of their lives grows only deeper as they go through life's vicissitudes together. Their wedding is not the pinnacle of their lives;* it is only the springtime when their love first begins to grow. Subsequent years only add links to the chain that binds their hearts and spirits together forever.

Look at the Jewish temples of the Jewish era! We have no accounts of חינוך accompanied by pomp and pageantry. there was no pealing of organs, no choral singing. There were neither wreaths nor consecration odes; for the most part there were not even any consecration sermons or guest preachers. The Scrolls of the Law were carried into the synagogue, and the briefest ברכה of thanksgiving, blessing Him הטוב המטיב "Who is good and beneficent," was recited, followed by the first daily מנחה service in the new synagogue. That ended the consecration ceremony, the Chanukah.

However, that simple consecration ceremony was followed by constant attendance at the synagogue. The synagogue became the community's place of refuge and the place where the congregation prepared itself for everyday life. It was the rallying point of the community's life before God and the center of learning where all of life was infused with God. Such were the desires and the resolves that motivated the building of synagogues in the olden days. The consecration of those synagogues did not end with the last "Amen" of a consecration sermon or with the final "Hallelujah" of a concluding hymn. The חינוך was the cradle, not the last will and testament, of the synagogue's consecration.

* In the original German: *Ihre Hochzeit ist nicht ihre hohe Zeit*. The literal meaning of *Hochzeit* (wedding) is "high time," or high point. [Ed.]

Of course, an un-Jewish era is characterized by more beautiful, more sumptuous consecration services. But the enthusiastic leaders who arrange these exercises are hardly ever seen at the synagogue except, perhaps, once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The rest of the year, on the weekdays of everyday life, the halls of the synagogue are closed. Or perhaps, like a sick and dying patient, the synagogue boasts a "minyan club" or a paid minyan appointed as deputies in an attempt to embody the inspired consecration hymns and sermons during the nine-tenths of the year when the elegant synagogue is a luxury because no one attends it.

Look at Jewish history! From the very beginning, this nation was shown its mission in world history, in all its glory but also in all its solemn import, and the heights to which it would have to ascend over centuries and millennia of error and sorrow. Israel's inspired "Yes!" at the foot of Mount Sinai was not demanded for the acceptance of some illusion but for the acceptance of real Jewish life and Jewish destiny with all its vicissitudes. The Jewish nation knew from the very onset that its mission would lead it through a rocky path, winding upward over cliffs and sudden, sharp drops. It knew that it would arrive at the summit of perfection implied by its unqualified "Yes!" only באחרית הימים in the far distant future, at the end of days. The Jewish nation is the only nation which has a true Chanukah, and for which Chanukah recurs in every phase of its history in an ever-growing, ever brighter, ever purer light that guides it toward ever-increasing dedication and constant progress toward its goal. Israel was not to start out, like the ancient Hellenes, as a nation filled with enthusiasm for "beauty and goodness," only to end pitifully and glorified only by the feeble halo of past splendor. Nor was it to ascend the stage of history like Rome, as a world-conquering nation nurtured by wolves' milk, living by the sword and devious politics, only to end in misery as a conglomerate of peoples enslaved by priestlings and foreigners. Israel's shame came at the beginning of its history; its everlasting glory still beckons to it from the high places of its future.

Initially, Israel itself, being עם קשה ערף ("a stiff-necked people"—Ex. 34, 9), stubbornly resisted the great mission to which it had been called. Prior to the very first Chanukah in the wilderness, Moses had to erect and dismantle the Tabernacle of his Sanctuary seven times before the first Chanukah was confirmed at last, on the eighth day, by the entrance of God's glory into the Tabernacle. Also, on that very

first Chanukah Nadab and Abihu, the sons of the first high priest, became casualties in the consecration of the Sanctuary because they regarded their service in the Sanctuary not as an ordained mission before them, but as a task that lay beneath and within themselves, one which therefore could be accomplished in full by anyone at any time of his own choosing (Levit. 10). This incident, together with the subsequent death of the entire generation that had witnessed the first Chanukah, was a most impressive warning to the nation from the very beginning, that the consecration of its Sanctuary did not yet mean that it had arrived at *הנחה ואל הנחה* ("the peaceful rest and the inheritance"—Deut. 12, 9); Israel had not yet come to a point where it could rest, let alone where it had reached its eternal goal. Israel still stood only at its beginning. The road towards the goal seemed long and there were periodic lapses and regressions. Israel's consecration would set it on a path of steady ascent and progress toward the accomplishment of its purpose.

The Sanctuary of the Law already has been erected and consecrated seven times in our history: first in the wilderness, then in Shiloh, in Nob and in Gibeah, and afterwards in Jerusalem, first by Solomon, next by Ezra and most recently by the Hasmoneans. And while the nation's visible political destinies were clearly in a decline, its inner, spiritual Chanukah, only grew all the more. The more Israel lost its political significance, the more did its Law become free from its alliance with an aristocracy that misused or betrayed that Law for the sake of its own interests. The more Israel's political fortunes waned, the more did the Law gain ground among the people who, before long, were to have nothing left except this Law, its study and its observance. This is what bears Israel upon the eagle's wings of its God, holding Israel aloft, bright, vital and triumphant, far above a world which had slipped into night and terror, and preserving Israel from all the satanic violence of hostile nations that sought to bring about its destruction.

When the Hasmoneans celebrated their last Chanukah they placed the lamp of consecration into the hands of every Jewish family man so that the consecration begun with the rededication of the Temple might be truly completed in the Jewish home and that this consecration might be repeated year after year with ever-renewed inspiration. And so, by consecrating its homes anew each year, every succeeding generation was to advance further and further in the consecration of the Sanctuary of God until that day when the House of God's Sanctuary

will be sustained by every household in Israel, by the entire "House of Jacob," a day when the ultimate, true Chanukah can begin, marking Israel's arrival at the height of its goal.

All the millennia of our history have demonstrated the triumph of the Chanukah spirit in Israel's midst. Israel is the one nation that knows not only the historic Chanukah but a constantly renewed Chanukah, a reconsecration celebrated over and over again, each time with greater inspiration and more intense devotion to the goal that was set for Israel from the beginning at a sevenfold height. Why, then, should we lose our courage now and celebrate our Chanukah only as frigid remembrances of olden days instead of as *חינוך על פי דרכו*, a preparation and consecration for our own future? Why, then, should we not kindle the lights of Chanukah in our homes, confident that ultimately we will be able to reach our goal in an ever brighter blaze of light? Israel began its Chanukah by kindling the lights of its homes from the light of the Temple, but the new, ultimate Chanukah will be attained when the light tended in Israel's homes will triumph so that they may ignite the light of the Temple to become a true, everlasting *נר תמיד*.

Do not all the signs of our times indicate that we are in need of a new, genuine Chanukah? And was such a Chanukah ever absent in Israel when it was needed? Do we not see the danger from the days of Antiochus once again threatening the temples and the homes of Israel, and does not the Sanctuary cry out for a new Hasmonean spirit to save it and its children from the taint of Hellenism that kills Jewish truth and Jewish life? Those who, as leaders and educators of the Jewish community, should be forming an iron phalanx around God's Sanctuary, have been duped by Hellenism, which bids man worship himself as a deity, deifies the humanist ideal with all its weaknesses and shortcomings and makes etiquette and social acceptance the sole yardstick for duty and morality. It is a way of life which, instead of elevating man toward the light of the Divine, has dragged the Divine down into the murky twilight of elegant human sensualism. This lifestyle, which robs man of his dignity and the Jew of his duty, has corrupted the very leaders who should be laboring to preserve the Sanctuary in its true character and to save the people, in its loyalty, from the onslaughts of un-Jewish evils. Have not the Jewish aristocracy and the Jewish priestly elite virtually defected from Jewish Law once again? Have they not, even as their predecessors *היה בזמן הזה כבימים ההם* ("in days of old, at this

season"), abused the sanctity of the synagogue and of the Torah, of the Jewish school and of the Jewish community that was entrusted to their care? Have they not misused their positions of privilege close to the seats of power and authority to replace the spirit of Torah within their own spirit of defection, using the synagogue and the Jewish school to alienate Jewish homes and families from the Sanctuary of Jewish Law? They have almost succeeded in their work of treason, so much so that even the most stalwart among the faithful have been shaken in their resolve. They have so blurred our awareness of our duty as Jews that the Torah-true hardly dare to speak up with their former candor in defense of our duty toward God. The Jewish nation must search in vain for individuals who would instruct it in its duties and champion its rights.

In the face of such a desperate situation, how could we afford to be still without the new Chanukah? The Jewish spirit must be determined to wage the fight to restore the rights of the nation and the purity and consecration of the Sanctuary, so that when future generations will kindle the Chanukah lights in their homes, they will be able to look back upon a very recent past in which God again demonstrated His wondrous nearness, a past in which their forefathers entered once again, as His children, into the Dwelling Place of His Word in His House, cleaned His Temple of all that is un-Jewish and restored the lights of consecration in their homes that stand as outer courts surrounding the Sanctuary of God:

ואחר כן באו בניך לדביר ביחך ופנו את היכלך
 ושהרו את מקדשך והדליקו גרות בחצרות קדשך וקבעו
 שמונת ימי חנוכה אלו להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול.