

# CHANUKAH

תשע"ט

I received an article in my e-mail written by an assimilated Jew talking about his dilemma about Chanukah. His son was hankering for a tree and wanted to fit into mainstream American life. This father knew they didn't subscribe to that religion; they had Chanukah! But what was Chanukah exactly? How was he going to sell Chanukah to his son? He confessed, he didn't know. Growing up, it was all about getting chocolate coins and potato latkes, lighting colored candles—a purely cultural experience with no actual message. So before he spoke with his son, he decided to do some research about the historical background of Chanukah. He bumped into some disquieting, uncomfortable information.

The books he read told that the Jewish community in those times was sharply divided between the majority of the population who were cosmopolitan, living in cities, and deeply Hellenized on the one hand, and the minority living in rural areas who were backward, culturally illiterate, religious fanatics on the other. Turns out, the religious fanatics won the culture war against Hellenism and that is what Chanukah is all about! That wasn't the people he wanted to identify with!

He got totally confused and decided not to tell his son the story!

There are many aspects of the conflict between the Greeks and the Jews. Previously, the conflicts Jews had with the outside world centered on religion and beliefs. Here, for the first time, Jews were being confronted not by a foreign religion but by a foreign culture—a very sophisticated culture—complete with art, theater, literature, philosophy, and sports. The Jews were not prepared for this kind of confrontation and they were intrigued by all these aspects of human expression. It was sweeping the world and made a major impact on Klal Yisroel.

Antiochus was bent on having all Jews be on board with Hellenism and the Midrash says he made various decrees against Torah and Mitzvos.

One of them was a decree against bris miloh. What does miloh represent to us and to the Greeks that made it such a target?

When Eisov and Yaakov were in Rivka's womb, she received a nevuah that these two children would have very divergent goals and ambitions. Two nations, two cultures, two ideals. The human being is comprised of body and soul. Eisov decided to live by the sword and become a man of the field—emphasizing the physical aspect of a human being—hunting, trapping, overpowering the weak. We choose to identify with the neshomo and use the human body as a means to facilitate the neshomo's expression in the world. We elevate the human body by using it in the right way and not letting it control us. Our values are spiritual values and we use the physical to subordinate it to the neshomo.

The perennial question is: which component is dominant and which is subordinate?

To us, the human body is holy—it can be the vehicle to express kedushoh and refinement of the soul. Part of it has to be cut away in order to carry a bris with Hashem. It must be put into service of the

neshomo and not take the center stage. To the Greeks, the human body is an object of beauty, it is perfect as is—with no need to mutilate it or to cover it. It should be displayed in public and adored for its beauty. The Greeks glorified the physical aspect of the human being, put it in the forefront of life and built an entire culture celebrating it.

We live in a very strange world today. Religion is a by-gone concept. Christianity is disappearing from the public sphere and to a large degree, spiritual values are dying with it. In the absence of spiritual values, worship of the body emerges and takes over everything to fill the vacuum of emptiness.

We say the neshomo is superior to the body. The purpose of a human being is to emphasize his neshomo. The miracle of Chanuka was the culmination of a struggle between a small group of weak, untrained spiritual giants against a well-trained, physically powerful and numerous army.

Today, this clear struggle between those who emphasized the spiritual over those who emphasized the physical is completely blurred and distorted. The early Zionists couldn't just suddenly replace Judaism with secular Zionism, so they needed to co-opt many religious themes and symbols into their secular Zionist "Jewish" culture. One of those attempts was the Maccabiah games—which is the Israeli equivalent of the Olympic games. They call it the Maccabiah as a play on the word "Maccabi" to imply that those who won the war against the Greeks were strong, well-trained, athletic Jews! This year the prime minister of Israel lit the Chanukah menorah at Kfar Maccabiah as a symbol to begin Chanukah.

They model Jewish athletes after the Maccabis. The songs composed after the establishment of the State of Israel sang the praises of the strong Jewish heroes who save Klal Yisroel from their enemies. The glorification of physical power and the military prowess of the Israeli military has unfortunately seeped into our consciousness, without realizing that the celebration of Chanukah represents the exact opposite. We say in Al Hanissim that the Maccabim were weak, few, learning Torah, pure and holy. We emphasize this to make sure we understand that when people are motivated to an ideal and deeply committed to that ideal, to the point of mesiras nefesh, nothing will stand in your way. Despite all your physical disadvantages, if you are inspired by and dedicated to spiritual values and the ideals of the Torah, Hashem will give special power to you to succeed.

The pendulum swings back and forth throughout history between good and evil—spiritual and physical. The nevuah of Yitzchok to Eisov says this explicitly: When Yaakov is dedicated to Torah and mitzvos, the neshomo will triumph in the world and Eisov and his physical power will remain subordinate. But when Klal Yisroel start to think they can also be strong and powerful and bask in all the glory of the physical body, then they start to lose their idealism and dedication to Torah. Eisov will start to ascend.

Chanuka teaches us that when you are deeply committed to spiritual ideals, you will win—despite all the odds.