

Shabbat Hanukkah 2023:  
The Miracle of Oil Continues in the Land of the Modern  
Maccabees

It is Shabbat Hanukkah. Ask any Jew how to observe Hanukkah and most will be able to tell you that for 8 days we kindle the Hanukkah Menorah, each night in ascending order. We eat either Latkes or Sufganiyot (according to your taste) and play dreidel. But ask the same group why we kindle the Hanukkiah for 8 days and it becomes less clear, or, as the great and revered Rabbi Seinfeld would say, “It’s complicated.”

In the common telling of the story, when the Maccabees liberated the Temple area, they found that it had been made impure by the Hellenists who offered sacrifices to their gods. The Maccabees cleansed and purified the holy place and turned their attention to the lighting of the Menorah in the Temple. The problem was that they had only enough purified oil for 1 day, and it would take time to receive the properly prepared oil. They chose to kindle the Menorah anyway and, miraculously, it burned for 8 days and then the pure olive oil arrived. Hence, we use a Hanukkiah to celebrate the miracle of the oil, and with it, the triumph of the Jewish spirit.

Like all things Jewish, there is another opinion as to why we celebrate the holiday for 8 days. It is offered in the Book of Maccabees, which focuses its attention on the war fought between the Judeans and the Assyrians, between the Jews and the Hellenists. The writer, who appears to be an eyewitness, goes into significant detail about the battles. At one point it is noted that the fighting took place over the period of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Sh’mini Atzeret. Because of the fighting, the observance of those holy days was impossible. After their victory, the Maccabees purified the Temple and chose to observe the holiday of Sukkot that they had missed a few months earlier

including *Shimini Atzeret*, which makes it an 8-day Festival. Why Sukkot, and not Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?

The answer was that Solomon dedicated the first Temple on Sukkot, and the victorious Maccabees wanted to associate their rededication of that space in the same way. There is no mention of the cruse of oil in the book of Maccabees, just the courage of the fighting men and their God who they believed helped them to become victorious.

Whether you focus on the miracle of oil or on the military victory of the Maccabees will likely depend on whether you are living in America (in the Diaspora) or in the land of Israel. Jews living outside the land of Israel naturally shied away from talk of a military victory as they were powerless in the Diaspora and chose instead to focus on faith and the miracle of a cruse of oil which burned far longer than it should have. This approach emphasizes the spirit and not the sword. The end of our Hafatarah this morning speaks to the reality of a people who had no way to defend themselves militarily.

לֹא בְחַיִל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ כִּי אִם־בְּרוּחֵי אֵמֶר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:

Not by might and not by power, but by spirit alone says the Lord of Hosts.

But the story from the Book of Maccabees has traditionally been told in the modern State of Israel. Well before the State was established, people, like Theodore Herzl, saw the builders of the Jewish homeland as modern Maccabees. Jews who were willing and able to fight for their homeland. The story of the single cruse of oil was de-emphasized in order to focus on the military victory. We may not have rededicated the Temple in our time, but we most certainly have returned and re-established Israel as the Jewish homeland.

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the Festival period, *Shimini Atzeret*, was being observed. Israel was attacked. The land was defiled by

grotesque acts of terrorism. More than 1200 men, women, and children were slaughtered in unimaginable ways. Houses were burnt and more than 130 hostages remain in Gaza. Today, Israel is at war with the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity, Hamas, a terrorist organization dedicated to the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people.

This past week, I had the opportunity to visit the land of Israel with a JUF leadership group. Traveling to Israel in the days leading to Hanukkah, I fully expected the focus of the country preparing to tell the story from the military lens. What I discovered was that, while the country was certainly focused on the war - after all everyone has a relative or friend serving in the IDF, there is another miraculous story being told. A story of light. Israelis across the country are engaged in kindling the light of caring for one another. The illumination of the Jewish spirit pervades the country. Just as the priests of old did not wait until all the cruses of oil were in place before kindling the flame of the Menorah, Israelis are not waiting until the government gets around to addressing the needs of a nation which has been traumatized. Presently, 250,000 Israelis are displaced from their homes. The manner in which Israelis are caring for them is the miracle of this Hanukkah. In a country whose symbol is the Menorah, the action of our people and the resilience of Israelis, is sustaining its light.

Consider the work of Pitchon Lev, an organization that is dedicated to addressing the needs of those who have fallen below the poverty line in Israel. Their stated mission is to break the cycle of poverty in Israel. They not only supply people with food and clothing, but with education, counseling, and legal support. When the war broke out, they used their skills and resources to help soldiers in the field, military families and those who were displaced. They put out the word for what was needed and Israelis responded. At first it was proper helmets, ceramic vests, and

mattresses for soldiers. They did not wait for the IDF, which had been caught off guard, they simply acted using their sophisticated network to put out the call. Then it was food, clothing, and toiletries for people who are out of their homes. We visited a warehouse stocked to the ceiling with everything imaginable. Food, clothing, baby wipes, formula, all donated not only by Israelis, but by Jews in America as well. They have such a sophisticated delivery system that clothing is delivered by size. Now the thing about this warehouse is that it (along with others) didn't exist before October 7<sup>th</sup>. It works with the government but is run by a civilian organization through private donations. That is a miracle. There is light emanating from Pitchon Lev on this Hanukkah.

Kfar Maccabiah, the Maccabean village, is located outside of Tel Aviv. Every 4 years the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest international sporting event takes place there: the Maccabiah. It is a beautiful facility with hotels, and living spaces for the athletes, meeting halls, board rooms and world class sports facilities. Since October 7<sup>th</sup> Kfar Maccabiah has been dedicated solely to settling people displaced from the attack in the South. Where there were once meeting rooms there are now classrooms, where the children go to school. The athlete dormitories serve as housing for people who can no longer stay in their homes for fear of attack (or maybe their houses were burned), and the hotels are the places that families of hostages stay awaiting reunion with their loved ones. There are professionals doing trauma counseling. On one of the large fields, you will find a village of tents. Each tent is set up to hold 3 people who come for 3-day therapy immersion. These tents are being used to help the survivors of the Nova Music festival. They help traumatized individuals learn breathing techniques, yoga and engage in specialized therapy to address the trauma that they lived through. People have come from around the country to tend to these young people. Most of the people living in Kfar Maccabiah came only with the shirts on their backs, so everything

they wear was donated. The tour leader mentioned that here you have 90 seconds to get to a bomb shelter when the siren goes off. Those who came from the North or South had only 15 seconds, so they are the ones running when the sirens go off. Kfar Maccabiah is supported through private donations and not connected to the government in any way. The light of the work being done there is also part of this year's Hanukkah miracle.

We met with the leaders of Natal, an organization devoted to treating people with post-traumatic stress disorder. I serve on that Board. Since October 7<sup>th</sup> they went from receiving 100 calls a day to 5,000 calls a day. They receive calls from children whose mothers cannot get out of bed because of PTSD, from soldiers and their families from other wars, and from people who are overwhelmed by the constant sirens and the stress that they are undergoing. The specially trained operators on the phone stay on the phone to help people gather themselves and find the strength to function. Natal is not a government agency and its light forms part of the Hanukkah miracle this year.

We visited Kiryat Gat in the South, Chicago's sister city in Israel. There are a series of new high rise apartment buildings that are just being completed. Instead of making them available to the public, where such apartments are in high demand, the owner is going to allow the survivors of Kibbutz Nir Oz to settle there until their Kibbutz is rebuilt. This is a private individual, whose light of caring is part of the Hanukkah miracle this year.

One last example. We met with Rachel Goldberg who grew up here at Anshe Emet, whose injured son Hirsh was taken captive at the Nova Music Festival. Rachel has become the face of the hostage families, demanding that the government do more for them and that the world not forget them. She has traveled to meet with the Pope and spoken at the United Nations. She is not a governmental official. Rachel is a mother who is fighting for her

son. She has assembled a small army of people to help with the press, and social media. “*I don’t need hugs, I need help and advice,*” she said. Rachel told us that when she and her husband Jon traveled to New York they were afraid that Hirsh might be released while they were away. As she boarded the plane Rachel asked the pilot what he would do if they learned that he was amongst the hostages freed. Without hesitating the El Al pilot said, “We would turn the plane around.”

Her spirit and that of the pilot, are emblematic of the Israeli people. Part of the miracle of light this Hanukkah.

I need not mention that all of the organization that I spoke about (and many that I have not) have one thing in common. They are all generously supported by our JUF’s Emergency Fund. Every person that we spoke with felt such gratitude about how quickly and generously our Chicago Federation responded. All of us should be proud of the work that the Jews of Chicago are doing.

As I boarded the plane to return home, I reflected on a trip where I thought that I was bringing *Hizuk*, strength, to Israelis. Everyone I encountered was so grateful that we were there. The truth was, that I had received *Hizuk*, from the Israelis that we met. They are so hurt, depleted, and disoriented by the failures of the IDF and the Government on October 7<sup>th</sup>. There is so much anger. But as they say, those issues will be dealt with after the war. There will be a reckoning for those who so failed this country. For now, they are focused on the war, and this I heard again and again, “When it comes to Hamas, it’s us or them!” What I take back is the uniqueness of Israeli society: a country united in its resolve and its resiliency.

Where does this ability come from, I wondered.

In a new book entitled: *The Genius of Israel*, Dan Signor and Saul Singer set out to answer that question. They write of an Israeli

attachment to something bigger than themselves. Something higher. Micah Goodman, someone this congregation is familiar with, is quoted as saying that Israel “is a small country with a big story... Big enough to give you meaning and small enough for you to have influence in it.” The United States, Goodman elaborated, is a big country with a big story, but relatively few Americans will ever have opportunities to shape that story in significant ways.

Every Israeli believes that they have a role in the story of Israel. That they are making a difference, whether it is their sons and daughters on the front lines, or providing food, clothing, housing, or counseling to those who are displaced.

For Israelis the Rabbinic phrase Kol Yisrael Arayvim Ze La Ze is not a slogan in Israel but a call to action.

In a nearly empty airport, I stopped and purchased an Israeli dreidel on the way home. Unlike American dreidels which have the letter Nun, Gimmel, Hey, and Shin: which stand for *a great miracle happened-Sham, there*, Israeli dreidels exchange the Shin for Peh. *A great miracle happened-PO, here!* Holding that dreidel in my hand I thought, *and so the miracle continues*. The light of the spirit of Israelis is being kindled across the country for a people who see themselves as modern Maccabees. The resiliency of this people is truly something to behold. The story of Hanukkah continues in our age, and they are writing for us.

I am here to tell you that despite it all, the darkness of this moment, that the light of the Menorah continues to burn brightly in our ancient homeland, and it is pointing the way to a better future for us all and for all those in that area of the world, as well.

Nes Gadol Haya Po – a great miracle is happening in Israel.