

Shalom Chaverim,

A question was recently posed to me: What is your favorite holiday, and why?

This is a particularly difficult question to answer, because all the holidays are distinct and are beautiful in their own way. I met my wife on *Purim*, so I have an emotional attachment to *Purim*. I love the outdoors, so I enjoy long meals in the *Sukkah* on a crisp autumn day. And who does not experience a sense of pride and relief when we finally sit down at a beautiful *Seder* and retell the story of how G-d actually stepped into history to save us?

That being said, I am going to have to go with *Chanukah*. Yes, the latkes and the jelly donuts are great. And illuminating the darkness of winter cheers everyone up; but what is truly inspiring is the symbolism of the lights. In our hour of darkness, a small but courageous group of Jews fought against overwhelming odds to save Judaism, and succeeded with G-d's help. The reason why I chose *Chanukah* is because we should **not** just view it as an ancient eight-day festival commemorating events that took place thousands of years ago.

The strong were given into the hands of the weak; the many were given into the hands of the few, as G-d took up the grievance of his people and avenged their wrongs. If this sounds familiar, it should. These are the words of the *Al Hanisim* prayer we read on *Chanukah*. *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is a modern-day *Chanukah*! In both cases, small groups of brave Jews rose up out of the darkness and, with the help of G-d, revitalized Judaism and reestablished Jewish sovereignty. It is not surprising that the early Zionists loved the Hasmoneans (Maccabees), at least the original ones. The later ones gave Rome a foothold in Judea, which brought Jewish sovereignty to an end.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that the Hasmoneans and the modern Zionists understood that the Jewish people did not need additional saints; they needed heroes. As Yoram Hazony puts it, "Both are religious men. Yet the saint makes a token effort towards power and leaves the rest to G-d, while the hero leaves nothing to G-d until he reaches exhaustion." In fact, the *Talmud* cautions that, though we believe in miracles, we should not rely on them. The Hasmoneans and religious Zionists understood that national redemption would not occur simply by divine fiat; rather G-d was waiting for his people to initiate the redemptive process. According to Buber, "We can only be redeemed to the extent we see ourselves." G-d wants us to see the possibility of redemption and work towards it.

The Hasmoneans were aware of a precedent of taking action to precipitate redemption. Remember, though Avraham was initially promised the land, he and his descendants had to endeavor mightily to bring G-d's promise to fruition. Avraham himself was twice forced to leave Canaan due to famine, and he had to pay an outrageously large sum to obtain a burial plot for his wife in a land that had already been promised to him. Yet, Avraham and his offspring did not desist, and several hundred years later the first Israelite state was born. Of course, what applied during the time of Avraham, of the

Hasmoneans, and of the early modern Zionists applies to us. We are charged with taking action that will preserve the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

We can learn one final thing from the Hasmoneans: Judaism does not ask us to reject modernity. The Hasmoneans did not reject all things Greek; rather they rejected those parts of Hellenistic culture that interfered with the observance of Judaism. We learn from them that we should embrace the outside world, while fiercely protecting our Jewish identity.

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