

Samson Raphael Hirsch on Chanukah

The following selections are from Samson Raphael Hirsch's JUDAISM ETERNAL translated from the original German by Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld and published in 1959 by THE SONCINO PRESS.

ON THE EVE OF THE 25th of Kislev you kindle the first Chanukah light in your home, and for eight days with 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 his 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 the 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, 5. 1)

Is this 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 G-d and His Holy Law, to woo the favor 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 honoring 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 G-d and His holy word. Yet observe how this epoch of betrayal and revolt was left behind, and how it was succeeded by the centuries, millennia of faithfulness, of devotion and self-sacrifice for G-d 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's wild attack on Judaism; this revolt of the Jewish teachers of G-d'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 favor or with disfavor—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 dishonored the divine sanctuary by using it as a temple for Zeus. They had profaned all oil intended for the sacred lamp of G-d. 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."

One single pure spark, loyally treasured in but one single Jewish heart, is sufficient for G-d 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 G-d 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.

HELLENISM, JUDAISM AND ROME

KISLEV WITH ITS GAY FESTIVAL of lights, of the reconsecration of the Temple which the spirit of the Hasmoneans and the courage of the Maccabees had won; Tebeth with its first day of remembrance which marks the downfall of the Jewish Temple and state in all their glory; Kislev with its triumph over the Hellenic spirit, Tebeth with its defeat by Roman politics—this sequence of events is a challenge to serious reflection. It presents, for our consideration, the following thesis: It is not Hellas [Greece] that Judaism has to fear, but Rome. It is not the Hellenic spirit that caused the downfall of all that is sacred to Judah, but the Roman mind and Roman tendencies . . .

And, indeed, Israel can rejoice wherever the Hellenic spirit of civilization extends its realm among mankind. For this civilization in its pure essence is nothing but the flower of the highest development of human nature left to itself. From it Israel's mission to mankind has nothing to fear; on the contrary, it will thrive on it. The spirit of the religious Doctrine and the Law which mankind is destined to receive from the hands of Israel expects the mind and soul not to sink into a state of ignorance and dullness but to be enlightened and full of life. Only the enlightened mind is receptive to the light of the Jewish teaching; only the soul ennobled by freedom is receptive to the blissful life of the Law.

It is true, Israel also knows the trials and tribulations which the Hellenic spirit of civilization imposes on it, as it develops by its side. The times of Mattathias were not to remain the only ones in which that spirit—still developing, still immature, in its understandable overweening estimation of itself and pretentious vanity—believed in its own vocation to educate the house of Jacob which eluded its comprehension . . .

All that is sacred to Israel has nothing to fear from the spirit of human culture which originated in Hellas.

Israel has always welcomed the Hellenic spirit as a precursor and helpmeet of its own mission to enlighten and civilize mankind and likewise has wedded itself to the truth and humanity produced by that spirit. And although that spirit, with its immaturity and its excesses, occasionally, as in the days of Mattathias, has also caused confusion within Israel, the "Light of the Jewish Tents" has again and again triumphed anew and always led to a new Chanukah, to a new consecration of its old, undiminished, eternal Sanctuaries.

DIFFERENT IS ROME'S RELATIONSHIP TO Israel and all that it holds sacred—Rome, whose overwhelming onslaught spelt for Jerusalem the beginning of the catastrophe which is commemorated on the tenth day of Tebeth.

It was not Roman valour that triumphed over Jewish valour. The Jew can be proud of the catastrophe which meant his political annihilation. The valiant heroism of the men of Judea—striving so little for martial glory—the inexhaustible resourcefulness of their strategy, their cold-blooded defiance of death, their bravery, nay, their invincibility perplexed the Roman Emperors and their legions accustomed to conquest. It was not Rome's sword that triumphed over Judea.

It was the spirit of Roman politics which ever since Pompey had ensnared the all-too-willingly compliant heads of Judea's people; the Roman ideas and tendencies which had become more and more familiar especially among the political leadership of the Jewish state and had supplanted the Jewish spirit—it was all these that undermined the Jewish Sanctuary, that imposed Roman hirelings as kings on free Judea and that had made of Judea a "captive" of Rome long before the hand of the legionaries threw the fatal firebrand into the Jewish Capitol.

It is this Roman spirit which Israel has got to know if it wants to realize who is its most redoubtable enemy.

Whereas the Hellenes had safely enjoyed, from an early date, their own soil, sufficient for their peaceful development, where they could flourish under a serene sky and bring to fruition all that is noble in man, Rome's cradle, to speak in the tradition of our forefathers bears the inscription: על חרבך תחי, "Your sword is your soil."

The origin from which Rome was to grow into a giant was so insignificant, such an insecure foundation, that only the sword could make something of it; the sword which, once successfully brandished, would never willingly return to its scabbard. What the sword had conquered, only the sword could preserve, only the sword could enlarge. Whereas Hellas took recourse to the sword only in its prime and for its own defence, Rome's prime, even its mere existence, was the product of armed power, of cunning, rapacious force. Obadiah's words (1.2.3), "Behold, I have made thee small among the heathen: thou art greatly despised. The pride of thine heart has deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?" were applied to Rome by the poignant perspicacity of the Jewish sages—Rome which devoid of national roots of its own, בלא כתב ובלא לשון (Aboda Zara 10), had climbed the rocky heights of such political eminence only by means of violent presumptuousness.

THUS ROME'S ESSENTIAL CHARACTER, IN CONTRAST to Hellas's idealistic outlook, bears the stamp of blatant materialism. Its aim was the aggrandisement of material possessions; and glory and might themselves were only a means towards it. Usefulness was the measure of things and actions. Rome had neither time nor inclination for anything that might elevate the mind and lead the soul to a noble, freer development, for anything that might render man more human, and only insofar as these nobler things of the spirit appeared necessary, or, at least, useful for the preservation and furtherance of the base, material things, did those higher and nobler things become significant factors in the calculations of Roman wisdom . . .

IT WAS AT THIS TIME of greatest degradation that the state of Judah first came into conflict with the Roman autocrats. Two brothers of the House of the Hasmoneans who were disputing the throne, which moreover, had been usurped, called upon one of the Roman legates, advancing at the head of his legions, to act as arbitrator. A third claimant also appeared—the people accused both of them that they, or rather their House, by usurping royal honours alien to the

Jewish institutions, had violated the people's most cherished rights and had endangered all that it held sacred.

At the very moment when Pompey's legate, Scaurus, saw Jewish envoys before him, some 130 years before the fall of Jerusalem, Jerusalem was lost. From that moment Rome did not take her eyes off Judea. While, through their Governors and the hirelings raised by them to the rank of princes, they sucked the blood of Judea, they inoculated Judea's princes and grandees with the spirit of their system, plunged them all into the sink of sensual debauchery and taught them at the same time to misuse religion, temple, priesthood, the judiciary, fatherland and their status as princes, as mere tools and means of power and self-aggrandisement, and to degrade everything holy and pure, everything great and divine to the role of counters in egotistic petty jobbery.

The spirit of Rome had banished the soul from the Jewish temple, and because of this the Majesty of G-d delivered up the temple and priests, king and throne in anger to the Roman legions and, with the faithful people, went into exile.

Let, therefore, the days in the Jewish Calendar that commemorate the downfall be to us a warning against the Roman spirit.

Not Hellenic idealism, but Roman materialism, is what we have to fear . . .

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