



CHANUKAH AND THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN REFORM JUDAISM

A reflection by Rabbi Howard A. Berman

The Festival of Chanukah has always had a special significance for American Jews. The story of the Maccabees, recounting of the victory of a small but principled community struggling against tyranny, echoed the struggle for Independence of the United States. The holiday's ideal of religious freedom and liberty is so deeply reflected in the fundamental values of our American democratic traditions. In Colonial America, the festival was celebrated in homes and synagogues with the kindling of menorahs of hand-beaten brass, tin or pewter, in the tradition of Dutch Jewry. In 1763, the first day of Chanukah was chosen for the dedication ceremonies for the new Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, recalling the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem following the Maccabean revolt. In 1790, this sanctuary was visited by George Washington, who later wrote his famous letter to the congregation, pledging that the new nation would "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

In another communication with the first President in 1790, the members of Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, many of whose members had fought in the Revolution, expressed their support for Washington, with the words "We and our posterity will not cease to chronicle and commemorate you...with Judah Maccabee and other holy men of old, who were raised up by God for the deliverance of His people from oppression." Beth Elohim would later become the cradle of Reform Judaism in the United States, in the 1840's.



Judah and the Maccabean struggle continued to be regarded as an historical inspiration in American history. When the great Cadet's Chapel at The United States Military Academy at West Point was built in 1910, one of the magnificent stained glass windows over the altar depicted Judah as a model soldier, embodying the Academy's motto, "Duty, Honor and Country."

A contemporary dimension to this link is reflected in the tradition of celebrating the Festival of Lights in the White House, with the kindling of the Presidential Menorah. This national recognition of the place of Chanukah within the broader holiday season was begun under Bill Clinton, and has been continued in each successive administration, with an

official gathering of Jewish leaders and Washington DC area schoolchildren. Under Barack Obama, historic Chanukiah lamps donated by individual families were used to add another dimension with the telling the personal stories of American Jews.

The ancient and stirring Chanukah Hymn, Ma-oz Tzur, has been beloved by generations of American Reform Jews in its English version, Rock of Ages. This poetic paraphrase was composed by Gustav Gottheil, rabbi of New York's famed Temple Emanu-El, in the late 19th century. The hymn proclaims those spiritual and moral dimensions of the festival that so clearly reflect the intersection of Jewish and American ideals...

Rock of Ages

Rock of Ages, let our song
Praise Your saving power;
You amidst the raging foes,
Were our sheltering tower!
Furious, they assailed us,
But Your arm availed us.
And Your word, broke their sword
When our own strength failed us!

Children of the Maccabees,
Whether free or fettered,
Wake the echoes of the songs,
Where you may be scattered!
Yours the message cheering,
That the time is nearing,
Which will see, each one free,
Tyrants disappearing!

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