2. A War Against God

HELLENIZATION and ANTIOCHUS

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the Greek empire set out to impose its Hellenic culture peacefully and persuasively, not by force. They succeeded and caused most religions of antiquity to disappear, and this universal acculturation process became known as Hellenization. The spread of Greek cultural and religious ideas also affected the Jews. For example, those who lived outside Israel, in Alexandria, were the fastest to assimilate. It reached the point that some historians described it as "Hellenic Judaism," a sort of syncretism between Jewish ideas and Hellenic culture practiced by many Jews of the diaspora. The Jews of Israel, however, still maintained their traditions and religion. However the rule of a new Hellenistic king, Antiochus Epiphanes, in 215 BCE worsened the situation for the Jews living in Israel. Antiochus was much more aggressive than his predecessors in his attempts to Hellenize all his subjects. Submitting to Antiochus' pressure, some Jews completely assimilated into Hellenism and abandoned their parents' religion. Others, especially those who lived in the big cities alongside non-Jews, began to practice Hellenized Judaism, one shaped in light of Greek values.

As it happened many times, the desire of these assimilated Jews was to be entirely accepted by the Gentiles, whom they looked up to with admiration. For example, the strict religious dietary rules observed by the Jews (Kashrut), created many obstacles to integrating assimilated Jews with Greek citizens. If a Jew could not share the table with his Gentile neighbors, the Gentiles would never accept Jews as their peers. The practice of Kashrut had to be eliminated because, in this new Hellenic world, barriers to integration with the hegemonic Greek culture were intolerable. Shabbat and circumcision were considered outdated and seen as rites that caused division between Jews and non-Jews. In addition to

these rationales, many Hellenistic Jews justified their abandonment of Judaism by claiming that to survive, Judaism had to modernize itself. While all this was happening in the cities, many of the poorest Jews, peasants who lived in small villages isolated from Hellenized influence, remained faithful to the Tora.

THE REFORMS OF HASON AND MENELAO

King Antiochus Epiphanes knew that some Jews were still reluctant to abandon their old practices, and he set out to Hellenize them at any price. Why? Because although they were relatively few, the Jews who still observed the Tora were practically the only citizens of the empire who openly rejected Hellenism. Antiochus sought allies among the Jews to fight Jewish resistance to Hellenization, finding them among those who had Hellenized voluntarily. He was appointed High Priest for the Temple in Jerusalem, an assimilated and easily corruptible Jew, Hason (175 BCE). Hason was later on replaced with another fake High Priest, who turned out even worse for the Jews, Menelao (171 BCE). These “High Priests” in charge of the Jerusalem Temple led the reform to Hellenize Judaism and openly confronted the Jews who resisted it. Hason, for example, headed a delegation of assimilated Jews who, on Shabbat, went to the Olympic stadium to watch and participate in the games. These false priests overturned Jewish practices and religious principles and beliefs, such as Jewish monotheism. The doctrine of believing in one God was adapted to become more open: Hellenistic Jews recognized the Greek gods and accepted that the Greeks worshiped their gods in the Bet haMiqdash. Otherwise, the corrupt priests argued, the monotheistic “fanaticism” of the ancient Jews would offend the sensitivity of the Greeks. The Jews also had to be more “tolerant” and worship the Jewish God in a Greek fashion. This led to Menelaus desecrating the Jewish Altar in 170 BCE by offering a pig as a sacrifice in the Bet haMiqdash.

PROVOKING THE REBELLION

Although many Jews remained loyal to their faith, more and more Jews followed the path of the Greeks. But in 169 BCE, a providential event changed the course of history. Antiochus Epiphanes lost his patience with the few Jews who rejected assimilation and decided to cease attempting to Hellenize them gently. Instead, Antiochus officially forbade Jewish practice and imposed the death penalty for those who disobeyed him. Antiochus' decrees had an effect contrary to what he wanted to achieve. The cruel rulings awakened the Jewish pride of even those slowly inclined towards assimilation. Jews across the country became shocked and angered. Unwittingly, Antiochus provoked what became known as the armed rebellion of the Hasmoneans, who fought against the Greeks and the Hellenized Jews. If Antiochus Epiphanes had not lost his patience, the assimilation of the Jews would have continued without resistance. Without this impetus, the Jewish people could have disappeared forever, integrating within the other nations of the Greek empire, as happened with most other civilizations of antiquity.

The impatience of Antiochus was providential and should be considered one of the miracles of Hanukka, which produced a wake-up call to the Jewish soul.