3. How do You Provoke a Jewish Rebellion?

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“Write on the ox horn that we have no part in the God of Israel.” (Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 2: 2).

HORNS AND BABY BOTTLES

Antiochus, the Greek (Seleucid) Monarch obsessed with Jews practicing Judaism, issued a decree: Jews must “write on the horns of their oxen ‘We have no part in (that is,” we no longer belong to”) the God of Israel.'” I confess that for years I did not understand the logic of this decree: Why was it essential to the Greeks that the Jews wrote that statement specifically on the horns of their animals? A couple of years ago, I found an excellent explanation attributed to Rabbi Yechezkel Abramski (z”l), that clarified the nature of this cruel decree. In ancient times, horns were used as baby bottles! The hollow horn was filled with milk and used to feed the babies who drank through the small hole at the narrow end of the horn, covered with leather to make it more comfortable for the baby to drink. Horns were used for this purpose at least until the end of the Middle Ages. Now we can better appreciate the nature of this edict. The Greeks demanded that the Jews “decorate” their baby’s bottles with the explicit declaration that they rejected the God of Israel and affirmed their “exclusive” loyalty to Antiochus.

BRAINWASHING BABIES?

In this utterly brutal way, the Greeks expected Jews to be re-educated from the cradle to leave the Tora and adopt the Hellenic culture and religion. Why was Antiochus so obsessed with the Jews and God? Because Jewish monotheism was an impediment for the Jews to recognize Antiochus as the supreme

authority and a god. Antiochus called himself “Epiphanes”, a deity, a man in whom Divinity is manifested. That helps explain why Antiochus obsessively insisted that Jews renounce their God from their infancy, under threat of death. For a long time, the Jews passively resisted Antiochus. They tried to observe the Tora in secret and discreetly, and many escaped to the desert and other unpopulated areas where they could serve God in hiding. Thousands chose death instead of worshiping idols, like Hanna, a widow tortured and executed with her seven children because she refused to abandon the God of Israel and His Tora. Jews believed that rebelling against the mighty Greeks was useless and that all they could do was to pray and wait for the death of Antiochus because in those times when the Monarch died, all his decrees were canceled.

THE END OF PASSIVE RESISTANCE

But Antiochus remained alive for many years, and the Jewish people’s history might have ended in the middle of the 2nd century BCE. But B”H the unthinkable happened: the Jews rebelled “militarily” against the Greeks.

This is how it all began: In 167 BCE, a delegation of gentile officers and Hellenistic Jews arrived at Modi’in and ordered Matitiyahu, the city’s leader, to show loyalty to Antiochus by offering a sacrifice to a pagan idol. These officers knew that once the Jewish leader obeyed these orders, all the other inhabitants of the city would follow his example. And if the Jewish leader refused to carry out these commands, they would kill him and appoint another leader who was more flexible to their demands. The Greek officers had already done this, city by city and village after village. And the result so far was that numberless Jews chose death (□□□ □□□□□ □□) before worshiping idols. But in Modi’in, something different happened. Instead of giving up his life, Matitiyahu decided to fight. He took up arms and killed the Seleucid delegation and his five sons. This radical and heroic act, spontaneously led by Matitiyahu and his children, inspired the armed rebellion

of the Jews against the mighty Greek Empire.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Matitiyahu and his children called on their Jewish brothers to fight. But the Jews were not warriors like other peoples. They were peasants, farmers, or scholars with no experience in battle. And at that time, the army of Antiochus and his allies was the largest and most powerful in the world. From a rational point of view, the Jewish armed resistance against the Greeks was nonsense—a desperate and suicidal effort. No one thought that a small group of Jewish rebels without weapons or experience in battle had any chance of surviving when facing Antiochus' army. *Matitiyahu's courage to fight and his unbreakable will to face enemies far more numerous and powerful than him eventually culminated in the miraculous Jewish victory we remember and celebrate on Hanukka.*

It was the first time in history that people fought not to preserve their lives but to keep their values alive.