4. The beginning of the Jewish rebellion

THE BEGINNING OF THE JEWISH REBELLION

In 167 BCE, Matitiyahu and his sons Eleazar, Yehuda, Shimon, Yochanan, and Yehonatan led a rebellion known as the Mered HaHashmonayim against the Seleucid Greek army of Antiochus Epiphanes, who had been executing those who practiced Judaism since 175BCE. The Jewish fighters, though courageous, were vastly outnumbered by the Greeks and lacked proper weapons and military training. Their strategy was to surprise smaller groups of Seleucid soldiers and then retreat to the mountains or desert, as a price had been placed on their heads.

FROM MATITIYAHU TO YEHUDA

After his father’s death, Yehuda, the third son of Matitiyahu, took command of the rebellion and began planning a more organized revolt to liberate Jerusalem and reclaim the Bet haMiqdash, the great Temple of Yerushalayim. Yehuda recruited as many Tora-faithful Jews as possible to join his army and primarily carried out attacks at night. In his first battle, Yehuda ambushed the Greek forces led by Apollonius, who had been sent by Antiochus with orders to suppress the rebellion and leave no survivors. However, Yehuda’s surprise attack proved successful, and the Greeks were easily defeated. It is said that Yehuda took Apollonius’s sword and used it for the rest of his life, much like King David did with the sword of Goliath.

THE BATTLE OF BET HORON

The Battle of Bet Horon began when Antiochus, learning of Apollonius’s defeat, sent General Seron and his significantly larger army to capture Yehudah and defeat the Jewish rebels. The men of Yehudah were initially frightened by the size of

the Seleucid army, but Yehudah encouraged them to have faith in God and fight with courage. He reminded them that they were fighting for their people and their Law, while the Seleucids were motivated only by greed and pride. Inspired by Yehudah's words, the Jewish soldiers fought with great bravery and defeated Seron, killing around 800 of his soldiers.

THE BATTLE OF EMAUS

The Battle of Emmaus took place after Seron's defeat, when Antiochus Epiphanes sent Lysias and his massive army, consisting of 40,000 soldiers and 7,000 horsemen, to destroy Judea. The Seleucid army included three top generals: Nicanor, Ptolemy, and Gorgias. Nicanor, showing his arrogance, brought along slave traders to capture and sell the women and children of the Jews once the men had been killed. The Seleucids camped at Emmaus while the Jews hid in Mitzpah, fasting, reading the Tora, blowing the Shofar, and praying. Yehudah received important information from his spies that Gorgias had left the camp with 5,000 soldiers and 1,000 horsemen to try to capture Yehudah and his men, leaving the camp with fewer soldiers. Yehudah saw this as the perfect opportunity to attack by surprise and gathered his 3,000 men, dividing them into four battalions. At dawn, they attacked the Seleucids from all four sides, catching them off guard and causing panic. The Jews were able to defeat around 9,000 soldiers, and the survivors fled to the cities. Gorgias returned to find his camp destroyed and on fire, escaping with his soldiers.

BEST SHABBAT EVER

After this victory, the Jews returned to their desert hideouts, where they celebrated the best Shabbat ever, filled with prayers and songs of thanks to God for their miraculous victory. Everyone present expressed their gratitude and begged God to help them achieve their next goal: to liberate Jerusalem and rededicate the Bet haMiqdash to Divine service.

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English Translation

“And God Almighty helped them, and they struck down more than nine thousand of the enemy… many of Nicanor’s soldiers were wounded and disabled, and they put them all to flight. Those who had come to buy them [as slaves]—they took their money from them. They chased the enemy for a long distance, but they had to return because time was pressing them. It was the eve of Shabbat, and they could not continue the pursuit.

They gathered the weapons and took the spoil from the enemies. They then welcomed the Shabbat, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, who had saved them that day and shown them the beginning of His kindness.

After Shabbat, they distributed part of the booty to the wounded, the widows, and the orphans, and the rest they divided among themselves and their children. After doing this, they prayed together and begged the God of mercy to grant comfort to His servants until the end.”
(**Maccabees II, 8:8–25**)