5. Recovering Jerusalem and Rededicating the Temple

AN INVINCIBLE ARMY?

When the Seleucid general Lysias learned of the defeat of his generals by the Jewish rebels led by Yehudah Macabi (see here), he assembled a huge army –60,000 soldiers and 5,000 horseback riders– to defeat the Jewish insurgency. Yehudah managed to recruit 10,000 soldiers with a lot of effort, but when they heard that this sizeable Greek army was coming, they were terrified. Yehudah Maccabi encouraged them by reminding them of how HaShem delivered Goliath, a powerful man of immense stature, into the hands of King David. He also told them how the Almighty gave the victory in the battle of Michmash to Yonatan, the son of King Shaul, who, despite being outnumbered and having practically no weapons, defeated the numerous Philistine armies. Inspired by his faith in the Almighty, Yehudah and his soldiers launched a surprise attack that left 5,000 Greek soldiers dead and the enemy army demoralized. At this point, general Lysias understood that the fight against Yehudah's army would not be easy. Also, at the same time, he received a message requesting that he travel to Antioch, where Emperor Antiochus, who had fallen ill, needed military reinforcements. The next day, the Jewish soldiers watched with surprise, and immense joy as Lysias's great army retreated.

THE GOAL: JERUSALEM:

Yehudah gathered his men, and they prayed to God in gratitude for the miraculous victory. Yehudah said: "We have seen how God delivered our enemies into our hands. It is time to embark on our main mission: reconquering Jerusalem." When the corrupt high priest (Cohen Gadol) Menelaus and his accomplices heard that Yehudah was approaching Jerusalem and that his allies, the Greeks, had withdrawn, they fled to a Greek fortress.

Yehudah reached the Holy City without meeting any resistance. The Jews entered the Bet haMiqdash and were horrified by the terrible desecrations that had taken place there. Those corrupted Jews, who had become activists for the enemy, built a pantheon of pagan idols in the Bet HaMiqdash and erected a statue of Zeus next to the Holy Altar (mizbeach), which meant that sacrifices were offered to these idols pagans. On that very altar, they discovered the corrupt priests had lit a great fire in which they burned all the Torah Scrolls that were stored in the Temple.

FROM TEARS TO CELEBRATION

Seeing the horrible desecration of the Holy Sanctuary, Yehudah and his men tore their clothes in mourning and began to cry bitterly. Yehudah turned to his warriors and told them: “This is not the time to cry, but to build and celebrate.” And so the Jews began the task of purifying the Temple. They rebuilt the altar and prepared the vessels and artifacts of the Sanctuary for its reopening. However, despite searching every corner of the Temple, they could not find ritually pure oil that could be used to light the Menorah, the golden lamp that was permanently lit in the Temple, indicating that the Temple was functioning and at the service of the God of Israel. This particular olive oil could only be obtained in the north, in the area of the Asher tribe. Producing and transporting the new oil would take more than a week. And if the Menora was not going to be lit, did it make sense to inaugurate the Temple now?

THE OIL THAT LASTED LONGER

Providentially, the Yehudim found a small container with pure oil, but the amount was only enough to keep the Menorah burning for one day. They inaugurated the Temple anyways and lit the Menorah, if only for the first day of the inauguration. The Bet haMiqdash was reopened in the service of God on the 25th day of Kislev in the year 165 B.C.E. Every day that passed, the priests checked the Menorah, sure that they

would have to clean it and remove the extinguished wicks and leave the Bet HaMiqdash without light. But to everyone’s surprise, the candles stayed lit for eight days, precisely the time it took for the new oil to arrive. Thus, the Jews continued the celebration of the Bet HaMiqdash’s dedication, just as they did at the Tabernacle (Mishkan) inauguration, which the Jews built in the desert after leaving Egypt.

FOR POSTERITY

What happened to the oil of the Menorah is the best-known miracle of the time of the Hashmonayim and is why we light candles for eight days. The Jews saw the miracle of the oil as a sign of Divine Intervention in their fights against a superior enemy and as a confirmation that the Almighty accompanied them in all their actions. The Sages of Israel established that, from then on, every year, on Kislev 25, Jewish families would remember the miracle of Hanukka. Since those times, we light the Hanukka candles for eight days to remember the great miracles we experienced in the days of the Hashmonayim. The Sages also established the recitation of Hallel, to praise the Creator for our miraculous salvation. They also incorporated the prayer “al hanisim” in the Amida, to thank God for His intervention in the military triumph of the Jews against their enemies.