7. Was this the greatest miracle of Hanukka?

ELEPHANTS JOIN THE BATTLE

The miracle of the oil that lasted for eight days was not the last Providential act of Hanukka. Although they were already expelled from Jerusalem, the Hellenistic Jews and the non-Jews living in Israel did not give up in their fight to reform Judaism and asked the Seleucids for support to regain control over Jerusalem and the Temple. General Lysias, who was now closer to Antiochus and far more powerful than before, decided to put an end to "the Jewish problem" once and for all. According to the historian Josephus Flavius, Lysias' orders to his soldiers were precisely these: "Conquer Judea, destroy Jerusalem, enslave the survivors and eliminate the Jewish nation from the face of the earth." In an unprecedented action, Lysias sent 100,000 soldiers and 20,000 horse riders –an astonishingly large army even in terms of today– to finish off Yehuda Maccabi and his rebels.

Additionally, for the first time in the Land of Israel, the Greek armies arrived with African elephants: 32 animals specially trained for battle. Each elephant carried several soldiers armed with bows, arrows, and spears. And the elephants were protected by dozens of foot soldiers. Lysias came from the South and was getting ready to surround Jerusalem when Yehuda heard of his arrival. The Jews realized that it would be impossible to defeat this mighty army.

THE DEATH OF ELAZAR

The only chance left to the Jews was to eliminate Lysias and thus sow confusion and chaos in the ranks of the Greek army. Yehuda entrusted this delicate "suicide mission" to his brother Elazar, who did not hesitate to accept it. Elazar had

to identify the elephant that was best protected and assume that Lysias would be there. With great bravery, Elazar and his men overcame the barrier of soldiers who guarded one of the elephants and pierced the animal with a spear. The elephant, tragically, collapsed on Elazar and killed him (today, in the area where this battle took place – Bet Zekharia, in Gush Etzion – there is a small settlement called Elazar in his honor). Yehuda realized that he had exhausted all his resources. He could not face the army of Lysias, who emerged unscathed from the frustrated attack attempt in which Elazar lost his life. Yehuda had no choice but to entrench himself in Yerushalayim, resist and die fighting to the end. It was the month of Shebat, the year 164 BCE. Lysias began the siege of Jerusalem with his 120,000 soldiers. Yehuda had only between 2,000 to 3,000 soldiers with him. After conquering Jerusalem, he declared victory over the Seleucids, ended the war, and sent thousands of his fighters back home.

WAS THIS THE GREATEST MIRACLE OF HANUKKA?

Lysias began his attack on Jerusalem. The Jews tried to resist, but the Jewish forces grew weaker and weaker little by little. The end was imminent. I imagine the brave Yehuda and his soldiers debating whether they should fight to the death, surrender and be sold as slaves, or perhaps take their own lives. There was nothing more for them to do. The end or the surrender of Yehuda and his men also meant the end of Judaism as we know it.

But on the 22nd of Shebat, 164 B.C.E., something extraordinary and miraculous happened. Lysias and his colossal army suddenly disappeared. No one understood what was happening until they heard the news: Antiochus died in Antiochia (Turkey). His son, Antiochus V, who was at the time nine years old, was going to be the next emperor. And his deceased father assigned Lysias to be his son’s regent (guardian), which would make him de facto the new emperor until the child came of age. Now, while Lysias and his army were in Judea, Philippus, a prominent

general in Antiochus' army, declared himself the regent of little Antiochus V and took control of the capital city. Lysias, therefore, had to leave Jerusalem immediately without any delay. In this surprising and miraculous way, right before Lysias took Jerusalem, the Jews were saved from a massacre.

AND THEN MORE

But that was not all. Right before leaving Jerusalem, Lysias left a letter to Yehuda. First, he told the Jewish leader that he canceled all the anti-Jewish decrees established by Antiochus. Why? Because in antiquity, the norm was that any laws and ordinances set by a King expired with his death unless the new monarch wished to renew them. Lysias assured Yehuda that the Jews would be left alone, but in return, Lysias asked Yehuda for a small favor: to send him some of his brave combatants and enlist them in his army to help him defeat Filippo in Antioquia. Yehuda accepted. In this miraculous way, Yerushalayim and the people of Israel were saved again by the invisible hand of God.

PS: *It is worth clarifying that the 22nd of Shebat was celebrated as a holiday for about 230 years until the destruction of the Bet HaMiqdash in the year 68 of the common era. After the destruction of the Temple, Judea lost its independence and became a Roman province, and it was impossible then to celebrate a military, national victory. .*