8. The Miracle of Jewish Resilience

THE END OF YEHUDA MACABEE

General Lysias arrived in Antiochia, the capital of the Seleucid kingdom, defeated Philipus, and became the regent of the 9-year-old king Antiochus V. This situation was highly favorable for the Jews but only lasted for a couple of years. In 161 BCE, general Demetrius Soter killed Lysias and the young emperor Antiochus. Demetrius resumed the military campaigns against Judea, seeking to conquer Jerusalem and appoint his allies, the Hellenistic Jews, in a position of power. Demetrius sent his best general, Bakchides, with 20,000 men and 2,000 riders to kill Yehuda the Macabbee and end the Jewish rebellion. Bakchides did not arrive by sea, as Greek troops usually did, but reached by land from the Northwest, taking Yehuda by surprise. With a small local army of 800 men, Yehuda was defeated and killed. The consequences for the Jews were disastrous. Josephus Flavius writes that the new anti-Jewish decrees and persecutions of faithful Jews carried out by Demetrius were more intense and brutal than in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes. The Greeks wanted not only to reconquer Judea but also to take revenge on the Jewish fighters.

Bakchides enforced Greek laws in Jerusalem and nominated a corrupt priest, Alqimos, to manage the Temple. In his first official act as High Priest, Alqimos publicly executed 60 rabbis. Thousands of Jews were killed or taken as slaves under Bakchides’ rule. Without Yehuda Maccabee, without a Jewish army, without Jerusalem and the Bet haMiqdash, it seemed that the rebellion that had begun with Matitiyah seven years earlier had come to a tragic end.

BETRAYAL

Some miracles, like the oil that lasted for eight days, are a matter of exclusive Divine intervention. And there are other miracles where Divine intervention is combined with human courage, strength, and greatness.

The following is the sort of human miracle that happened with Yehuda's surviving brothers: Yochanan, Shimon and Yonatan.

Along with the few surviving Jewish fighters, they decided to not give up: they will keep fighting for their children. Yonatan took over the leadership of the military resistance and began to plan his subsequent attacks against the powerful Bakchides. Bakchides, on the other hand, mounted a search campaign seeking to kill the Jewish fighters. He offered a big reward for the heads of the Hasmoneans *and their families*.

To confront the Greeks, Yonatan decided to replicate the early tactics of Yehuda's fighters: avoid direct confrontation with the Greeks and instead attack them by surprise. Yonatan fled to the Judean desert near Tekoa, where his men could hide in caves. However, climbing the mountains and accessing the hidden caves was arduous and dangerous. Yonatan and his men could access the caves, but the fighters' families – women and children – could not.

Yonatan decided to rely on Yehuda's allies and enemies of the Seleucides: the Nabateans. The Nabateans were nomadic people who lived in the Arabian Peninsula and had forged a military alliance with Yehuda. They agreed to shelter Yonatan's fighters' families. Yonatan sent the women and children to the Nabateans with his brother Yochanan and a few soldiers. But the Nabateans, driven by the attractive reward offered by Bakchides, betrayed Yonatan, and tragically, they killed Yochanan, the women, and the children… Only one soldier escaped the massacre and brought the tragic news to the Jews hiding in Tekoa.

WHAT WAS THE WORST MOMENT IN JEWISH HISTORY?

For seven days, Yonatan and his men mourned and wept bitterly over the death of their wives and children. It is impossible to imagine the feelings of the Jewish warriors. The strongest motivation for men to risk their lives in battle is the knowledge that they are fighting for their families and that one day they will return home to their wives and children. But now that they were all killed, why and for whom should Yonatan's men fight?

Everything indicated that they would give up their fight. This may have been the most critical moment in the history of the people of Israel. Our people's future and our religion's survival were in the hands of a handful of men who lost hope because their families were murdered in cold blood. The Hellenists seemingly had won. Traditional Judaism would disappear and be replaced by a Greek/secular version of Judaism: a predecessor of Christianity.

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Miraculously, Yonatan vowed to keep fighting. He drew strength from his faith in the Creator and his love for the Tora. He rose from mourning, removed the ashes from his head, and decided that the rebellion against the Greek oppressors would continue while he was alive. First, he carried out a surprise attack against the Nabatean. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of Dina's brothers, Shimon and Levi, who punished the city of Shekhem. The enemy would now know that whoever betrayed Yonatan and the Jews would suffer the consequences and be reached by the long arm of their Jewish army. Then, Yonatan dedicated himself to recruiting more Jewish fighters from the village to start a war of attrition against Bakchides' army. For two years, from 161 BCE to 159 BCE, the improvised Jewish army did what Yehuda had done at the beginning of the resistance: they attacked by surprise small Greek troops and their supplies, mainly under cover of darkness.

THE WITHDRAWAL OF BAKCHIDES

In 159 BCE, general Bakchides got tired from fighting the Jews. He was frustrated at his inability to capture Yonatan and the constant attacks against his troops. He also realized that the war against the Jews – even if he were to win – would not result in any significant prestige for himself. In the eyes of the Greek Empire, he was in Judea to punish a handful of insurgents. Seen no glory for him in this endeavor, Bakchides left the land of Israel and set his eyes on fighting other battles easier to win, and that would advance his military career. Thus, Yonatan, Shimon, and the Jewish soldiers again achieved a great victory against the Greeks. Jerusalem –ruled by Hellenist Jews– was now within reach, and the Bet haMiqdash was ready for a second Hanukka. But surprisingly and seemingly against all logic, Yonatan did not rush to conquer Jerusalem, as Yehuda had done previously in 165 BCE. Instead, Yonatan settled in the city of Mikhmash for seven years.

Why? We will find out BH in our next chapter