

Jewish Liberation

By Dick Barnes

As Christians prepare to celebrate Christmas, Jews are also preparing to celebrate Chanukah—The Feast of Lights.

Chanukah means dedication. Chanukah emphasizes the rededication of the Temple, your own personal spiritual Temple within you. The reading for Chanukah's Sabbath says, "Not by might nor by power but by my spirit," says the Lord of Hosts." Chanukah emphasizes the power of the spirit, not the spirit of power.

Chanukah is the only Jewish festival that tells a story of epic bravery and military valor. Unlike other Jewish festivals Chanukah's origin is not just speculation but is rooted in fact. Chanukah celebrates the first fight in history for religious freedom.

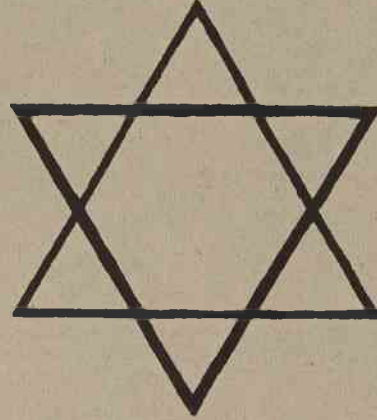
In the 4th century B.C. Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East which brought Palestine under Hellenistic influence.

The Jewish officials and even the wealthy families wanted to please their Greek Lords. Hebrew was neglected. Greek was spoken. Greek dress was adopted. Greek deities were worshipped. Jews even gave their children Hellenistic names.

Seeing other Jews selling out to the conqueror upset faithful Jews. Finally, after 150 years of toleration the pot of passion of the faithful had almost reached boiling.

In 175 B.C., Antiochus IV became ruler of Syria and also Palestine. He called himself Antiochus Epiphanes (God Incarnate), but Jews called him Antiochus Epimanes (Antiochus the Mad). Antiochus sold the office of High Priest, Judea's most influential religious office, to Jason, the Hellenist leader. A few years later Menelaus gave him a bigger bribe and became High Priest. The faithful became sick of Antiochus's treatment of that office. When rumor came that Antiochus was defeated in battle, war between Jew and Greek broke out.

The rumors were false. Antiochus invaded Jerusalem one Sabbath and flung his wrath on the opposition. The Temple of the Lord became a temple of Zeus. In 168 B.C. sacrifices were offered to him on God's altar, and orgies were held in his honor.



Finally in the small town of Modin, Mattathias and his five sons (including Judah who had great courage and military powers) raised the banner of revolt. Loyal Jews answered his rallying cry, "Whoever is for the Lord, follow me!"

Antiochus didn't take them seriously until it was too late. Though vastly outnumbered, the Jews won because they were on home ground. They also knew that Judaism—and monotheism—would be dead if they didn't win. They fought and won history's first war for religious freedom.

Three years later the Temple was rededicated to God. Sacrifices were offered and lights burned for eight days (therefore Chanukah is called The Feast of Lights). To remember the deliverance, it was decreed the eight-day festival be held annually starting the 25th of Kislev (the third month of the Jewish civil year).

The Jewish year begins in late September or early October with Rosh Hashanah. Chanukah occurs later three months later sometime around Christmas. It's a joyous festival. Eight candles are placed in a prominent place in the home. One is lit each night accompanied by songs and blessings. Special prayers of praise called hallel are said at services during Chanukah and thanksgiving hymns such as the Maoz Tzur ("Rock of Ages") are sung. Gifts are given and latkes (potato pancakes) are served. These probably originated with Judith who observed the traditional diet laws and also fought Israel's enemies.

Though Chanukah is mainly a home festival, community celebrations such as parties and concerts are also held. In recent years public Jewish institutions and synagogues in the United States have begun to display large menorahs in their lobbies or on their lawns. Chanukah menorahs are nine branched candlesticks.

Beginning December 22 this year, Chanukah has traditionally been considered a minor festival, but since it occurs near Christmas Jewish parents in recent years have tried to make Chanukah observances even more appealing and impressive. They want to satisfy their children's longing for pageantry, lights and gifts. "Moreover," says Rabbi Sidney Greenberg regarding Chanukah, "the modern Maccabees of reborn Israel, who themselves embody the valiant spirit of Judah and his brothers, drew heavily upon the Chanukah story for inspiration and courage to strike out for Jewish freedom in the modern world."