

The Chanukah Story

THE SYRIAN OCCUPATION

More than 2000 years ago, the death of Alexander the Great splintered the Greek Empire into three. The Seleucid King Antiochus III ruled Syria, taking the Land of Israel from King Ptolemy of Egypt.

At first, he ruled the Jews kindly and gave them privileges; but when the Romans defeated him, Antiochus forced the peoples of his empire to provide the gold needed to pay the Roman taxes. His son and successor, Seleucus IV, continued the oppression.

But the worst conflict caused by Syrian occupation of Israel came from within, with the growth in power of the "Hellenist" Jews who adopted idolatrous Greek culture. For the Greeks, outward beauty was the ideal; in contrast, Judaism emphasizes the Divine truth and moral purity of the Torah as it comes down from Mount Sinai. The Hellenists forcefully promoted Greek culture, looking to uproot the holy path that had sustained the Jews for centuries.

The High Priest, Yochanan, foresaw the danger of this influence. His opposition infuriated the Hellenists, who schemed to foment conflict between King Seleucus and Yochanan, the High Priest.

"MADMAN"!

Soon, Seleucus was killed and his brother Antiochus IV became king. A rash tyrant, Antiochus scorned religious freedom. He was called "Epiphanes" ("the gods' beloved") but a contemporary historian, Polebius, called this harsh and cruel king "Epimanes" ("madman").

Hoping to impose a common religion and culture, Antiochus denied the Jews' uniqueness by suppressing Torah Law. He installed Yochanan's brother in his place -- the Hellenist "Jason", as he called himself -- who now spread Greek customs in the priesthood. When Yochanan protested the Greek influence in the Holy Temple, murderers were hired to assassinate him.

Antiochus, meanwhile, waged a successful war against Egypt. Rome demanded that he stop, and he yielded. In Jerusalem, however, false rumors spread of Antiochus' accidental death, and the people rebelled against Menelaus, who fled.



MARTYRS

Antiochus heard of the rebellion in Jerusalem; already furious over his thwarted ambitions in Egypt, he sent his army to attack the Jews, killing thousands. He then enacted harsh decrees forbidding Jewish worship, confiscating and burning Torah scrolls. Anyone caught observing Sabbath rest, circumcision or the Kosher dietary laws



could be put to death. Holding fast to their faith, thousands of Jews sacrificed their lives.

Antiochus' legions forced pagan worship in every town. "Refuseniks" found refuge only in the caves of the Judean hills. But there was no safe haven – the Syrians pursued the faithful Jews, and martyred many.



MATTITYAHU...

Eventually, Antiochus' troops arrived in the village of Modi'in. They built an altar in the marketplace and demanded that Mattityahu, a senior priest and community leader, offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. He refused, professing his people's loyalty to G-d's covenant with Israel.

When a Hellenistic Jew approached to offer a sacrifice, Mattityahu grabbed his sword and killed him. His sons and followers killed many of the invaders and chased the rest away, then destroyed the altar.

Mattityahu knew that Antiochus would certainly send troops; so he and a small band of followers fled for the Judean hills. Many loyal, courageous Jews gathered around them, descending from the caves to attack enemy camps and destroy Antiochus' pagan altars.

...AND SONS

Nearing death, Mattityahu called his sons to continue their fight in Torah's defense. One brother, Shimon "the Wise," would guide them; another would lead in war, Yehudah "the Strong" – called "Maccabee," an acronym of the Hebrew, "Mi Kamocha Ba'ei-lim Hashem" - "Who is like unto You, O G-d."

Antiochus sent Apolonus to wipe out the Maccabees. Though larger and better equipped, Apolonus' army fell to the Maccabees, who now defeated one Syrian troop after another. Antiochus decided to show his military power to overwhelm the Jews' brave little band.

More than 40,000 Syrian soldiers swept through the land. Committed to the defense of their souls and the Holy Temple, Yehudah and his brothers assembled the Jews in Mitzpah, where the Prophet Shmuel had prayed to G-d. After a series of battles, the Maccabees won!

ONE LITTLE CRUSE



Now, the Maccabees moved to liberate Jerusalem. They cleared the Temple of the idols placed by the Syrians. They built a new altar, dedicated on 25 Kislev 3622 (138 B.C.E.).

The Syrians had stolen the Temple's golden Menorah, so the Maccabees immediately made a new one of cheaper metal. Even though impure oil could be used to light the Temple's lamp if necessary, they insisted on using only the one cruse of oil with the seal of the last righteous High Priest, Yochanan. That one little cruse – with only one day's oil – lasted a full eight days, as we commemorate each year: The eight days of Chanukah.