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My Glorious Brothers, 1948.



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MY GLORIOUS BROTHERS

WRHS



Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, Dec. 26, 1948



The theme of Chanukah and the many brave personalities connected with this festival have inspired many artists to recreate in word or paint, in stone or in music the meaning of that great struggle which had a decisive influence not alone upon the course of Jewish history, but upon the course of the history of mankind. And so we find the story of the Maccabean struggle reflected in painting and sculpture, in plays and in musical compositions, not to speak, of course, in history - historical writings. It would have been very surprising if this epical conflict between two ways of life had not found its echo in art and in literature.

In music you have the great Oratorio of Handel, Judah Maccabee, written nearly 200 years ago. Anton Rubinstein wrote an operetta on "The Maccabees". Our own great American poet, Longfellow, wrote a very impressive drama called "Judah Maccabee", and the literature of the world of all peoples in all lands has something - either a novel, story, drama or a musical composition or a painting connected with this tremendous epic.

The basic literary sources of the story of Chanukah are, of course, the Books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha, the first book of the Maccabees and the second book of the Maccabees. The first book was written probably within the first centuries of the Maccabean struggle in Hebrew and is an exquisite piece of reliable writing, and Josephus, in telling the story of the Maccabees, leans heavily upon this source. The second book of the Maccabees, written shortly thereafter in Greek, recounts the same story, but that is embellished considerably with legend which contains the martyrdom of Eliezer and of Hannah and her seven sons. There are scattered references in the Talmud although there is no special tract devoted to Chanukah. The seventh century of the common era gave us a very interesting story of Antiochus which contains a few references not otherwise recorded, but throughout the ages people wrote on this theme be-



cause they were fascinated by the struggle and by the tremendous appeal of this extraordinary family of Mattathias and his five sons who raised the standard of  
against what was then one of the greatest empires of the world. It is not surprising therefore that this year another book appeared here in the United States called "My Glorious Brothers" written by Howard Fast. It is a timely production because there has been increased interest in the story of the Maccabees in the last few generations as our people entered its great historic effort to rebuild the Jewish state and to regain freedom and independence for the Jewish people.

The story of Chanukah, the struggle for religious freedom and national independence, has come to symbolize for the Jewish people the eternal struggle of Judah Maccabee's two great objectives. And the year 1948, being a year of victory for the people of Israel, the culmination of the hope of Israel, is certainly an appropriate year in which to retell the story of the Maccabees - among the first great fighters of the cause of Israel's freedom and independence. And so this year the story of Chanukah appears very modern & more applicable to the events taking place all around us, and the battles which have been waged in Israel against invading armies are a startling counterpart of those titanic struggles of the Maccabees 2100 years ago.

And the author, Mr. Fast, in writing his book certainly had all this in mind. But he also saw the eternal issues, the enduring conflict which binds the generations of Jews into one great unique community in the world. And the author also clearly delineates what to him appear to be the essential qualities in the spirit and tradition and the character of the Jewish people which have remained practically unchanged throughout these centuries. Much has changed in 2100 years but much has remained unchanged, and that which is unchanged has defied civilizations and conquered them. The story of "My Glorious Brothers" is the well-



known story of Chanukah, and it is simply and forcibly retold by the author. It is embellished here and there, of course, in order to heighten the artistic effect. The author uses an author's license to depict the characters and the drama of Chanukah sharply. He introduces a bit of romance, he creates many other characters in order to point up the conflicts between classes among the Jews in those days. The character of Mattathias and the five brothers are drawn in sharp outlines, and so are the characters of the generals sent to destroy the Jews - Polonius, Lysias, and others.

All the actors in this story are alive, and the narrative moves dramatically - here and there to most impressive climaxes. There are unforgettable scenes of battle, descriptions of carnage and the tragedy and sacrifices of the people are exalted in the story by one flaming passion - a passion for freedom.

This is the great clarion theme of this story as it is of the story of Chanukah. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ "As long as two men walk free on Judean soil, the fight goes on." "No man ever dies uselessly in the struggle for the freedom of man." That's the theme. That is the theme of Chanukah and that, according to the author and according to the authentic record of Jewish experiences throughout the ages - that is the theme of Jewish life and thought through the ages.

"My Glorious Brothers" is the simple story of a simple folk asking for nothing but to be let alone, to observe the customs and the traditions of their ancient people. It is a story of this simple folk living in Gallilee, devoted to husbandry, tilling their soil, not greatly concerned by what goes on in the outside world, content with their mode of life. And this simple folk is suddenly thrust into bitter rebellion and resistance by the overlord of the empire of which Palestine is a part. Antiochus, who resolved henceforth to exercise religious and political domination over that people, who demanded of this



simple folk living on that soil to surrender their faith and the customs and traditions of their people and accept the heathen gods. Antiochus the Fourth, called Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus the mad man, forbade the Jews, under penalty of death, to observe the Sabbath, to study the Torah, to raise their children into the faith of their fathers. It was Antiochus Epiphanes who sent the wardens into the Temple in Jerusalem, and upon the altar of that Temple he erected an image of Olympian Zeus and had swine sacrificed in his honor. And there were Jews in those days who were content to submit to this spiritual and political tyranny, who wanted to be more Greek than the Greeks - new Jews, assimilated Jews who preferred to copy the ways of the Greeks and to adopt their superficially attractive culture and civilization in which the heart was morally corrupt with evil. And even the High Priests in the Temple belonged to this party of the Hellenists.

But the people as a whole which always retains the  
the people as a whole, in its fierce loyalties to God and to Torah, rebelled against this tyranny, and when people rebels it knows how to put forward leaders in that rebellion just as the here in this country at the critical moment produced adequate leaders to challenge tyranny. And the author describes this group of leaders - a father and five sons, the representatives of the race of the stiff-necked, hard, stern, unrelenting in their exclusive loyalty to the one God and to the moral laws of that one God; the man who would not bend his knee and taught his sons not to bend their knee to anyone. And the five sons: Eleazar, as the author describes him, built like a great bull; Johathan, small, wiry, graceful and brilliant; John, gentle, loving, a man who hated war; Simon who tells the story in this book, slow of movement, plodding, stolid, but Simon who won the ultimate victory; and Judah himself, called Judah, the Maccabee - Judah the hammer, hardest of them all, the beloved of the people. It was this



amazing family that began a revolt against the Greek-Syrian empire which lasted for 30 years and which finally culminated in the complete victory and independence of the people of Israel. They carried on a war of three decades against this war machine of the great empire and poured them into the little country of Judea - all these fanatical zealots who were fighting for a principle and an unseen God. And here with the Jews with no army, confronting this vast empire as they did and they fought a new kind of war, a guerilla kind of war. They could not fight in the valleys against them so they fought among the hills and led the enemy into traps and made it impossible for them to travel the roads of the country and built up an army of these minute men who fought not with the weapons of the heathen, but with knives and arrows and bows and spears, but fighting not for loot and conquest, but unto death, and they fought with valor. And from the wilderness of Ephraim these rebels would make raids upon the forces of the Greeks and as their struggle increased, they became more competent militarily to attack the enemy, and they scored one amazing victory after another until in the year 165 they were able to re-enter the city of Jerusalem and return to the Temple, cleanse it of its pollution, throw out the pagan idols, dedicate the new altar to the service of God. And they kindled lights in the Temple and in honor of this great re-dedication of the altar, the festival of Chanukah which means dedication was instituted among our people and has continued to be observed with joy among our people to this day.

But that was not the final struggle or the final victory. Thereafter four successful invasions took place against Judah and his people, and in one of them the Jews were defeated for the General Lysias brought into Judea 200 heavily-armored elephants which had not been seen before in Judea, and these elephants discomfited the army of Judah, and they were defeated, and being defeated, the



Assembly of the elders immediately decided to sue for peace and peace was made with Lysias and his empire, and the Jews were, of course, compelled to bear

and to agree to other terms unacceptable to a free people. Judah Maccabee resists that peace, but he was helpless and returned to his home. But not long after that Lysias was killed and a new king came to rule, who imposed new terms, far harsher, and one of these was that Judah, the Maccabee, should be handed over to the Greeks, and the Assembly of the elders accepted these terms, but Judah, the Maccabee, and his followers fled again into the wilderness and planned a new rebellion for freedom, summoning the Jews to rise again. And many streamed to his banner and he rebuilt a new army and went into battle against Nicanor, and in this battle he slew Nicanor and scored a tremendous victory, but a very costly victory. But the army having been defeated, they soon sent another army of mercenaries and in this new battle Judah, the Maccabee was slain. And then the story shifts to 20 years later.

Simon is now the ruler of the land. During these 20 years under the inspiration of Judah, the people carried on their revolt and 12 major battles took place until the Syrian forces were driven out of the country and full independence was established. Twenty years later Rome sent an emissary to Simon, the Maccabee, to learn whether Simon was ready to enter a treaty of peace with Rome. And this Legate writes a letter in which he gives his impressions of Simon and of the country, and more especially of the characteristics of the people which he has carefully studied. And in this letter the Legate makes some amazingly interesting comments for he has come to hate the Jews and he warns the Roman empire to be on guard against this small people who has in its soul something which will ultimately shatter the Roman empire. Perhaps I shall read you a line or two from the book itself.



Difference is enshrined with them, and what we consider holy, they consider profane, and what we consider fine, they consider despicable. All things desirable to us are considered hateful to them, and all the tolerance we have toward the customs and the Gods of others is turned by them into a fierce intolerance. Even as they decray our pleasures, so do they blaspheme against our Gods and against the Gods of all people. Without a morality, they are also without a God, for they worship nonexistence, and their synagogues and their holy Temple in Jerusalem have no images or presence within them. Their God - if it is a God that they worship - is nowhere, and even its name, which is written, is forbidden to be spoken by any inhabitant of the land. This name is "Yahvah", but never is it even whispered; instead they address this mysterious personage as "Adonai" which means "my lord", or as "Melech Haolom", which means "king of all lands" or in any one of a dozen similar fashions.

At the root of this is a thing they call the "b'rit" which may be freely translated as a covenant or agreement between themselves and their Yahvah. In a fashion, it is more this covenant they worship than the God himself, and to implement it they have a code of 77 rules which they call "the Law", though it is not judicial law as we know it, but rather the basis of this "b'rit" of theirs. Many of these are horrible and disgusting in the extreme, as for instance the law which forces the circumcision of all male children; others are senseless, such as the law which forces them to rest on the seventh day, to let the land lie fallow on the seventh year, and to free all slaves after seven years of servitude. Other laws make a fetish of washing, so that they are cleansing themselves eternally, and their law forbids them to shave, so that all the men of the land wear long hair and close-cropped beards.

This Legate sits in one day as Simon holds court, and one case disturbs him greatly:

During this day's judgment, one incident occurred that was of such interest that I feel I should repeat it. A tanner came before the Maccabee, and he had with him a frightened Bedouin boy, a waif of one of the many barbarian tribes that roam the desert to the South. Five times this boy had run away, and each time the tanner had regained possession of his lawful property, several times at considerable expense. Quite naturally, he was aggrieved; yet the law forbade him what would have been a normal act in the public weal in Rome - that is, to flay the boy and hang his skin in a public place as a lesson and a warning to other property.

Instead, the tanner came before the Ethnarch asking permission to brand the boy so that even when his term of servitude was over, he would carry the sign of a slave with him through life. To me, this appeared both a mild and just request, and I expected Simon to grant it out of hand. But the Maccabee appeared unable to make so simple a decision, and he demeaned himself by entering into conversation with the slave, asking him why he had run away.



"To be free," the boy answered.

The Maccabee was silent for quite a while then, as if those obvious words contained some deep and mysterious significance. When he finally spoke rendering his decision, his deep voice was filled with the most awful melancholy I had ever heard. These words he spoke, which I noted down:

"He will go free in two years, even as the law says. Don't brand him."

Whereupon the tanner demanded indignantly, in that insolent tone any Jew feels free to use to any other, regardless of birth or station, "And the money I paid the caravan?"

"Charge it to your own freedom, tanner," the Maccabee said coldly.

The tanner began to protest, addressing the Maccabee by his own name, Simon ben Mattathias; but Simon suddenly leaped to his feet, one great hand out, breaking in on the other, shouting at him:

"I've judged you, tanner! How long ago was it that you slept in a lousy goatskin tent? How short is your memory? Is freedom a thing you can put on or take off, as you would a coat?"

That was the only time I saw the Ethnarch angry - the only time I saw the deep and corroding bitterness within him emerge, yet it gave me the best clue to what the real Simon ben Mattathias is.

We dined together that evening, and at the table I couldn't help smiling at the curious and primitive scene I had witnessed earlier.

"Did you find it amusing?" the Maccabee asked me. There was something burning within him and I chatted easily for a while, to take the edge away, asking him various questions about slavery and concerning their curious religion. When his mood had become a little more amiable, when only we two sat together, the sons having gone to their beds and his wife to take the air on the balcony for a while, complaining that her head ached, I said to him:

"What did you mean, Simon the Maccabee, when you asked that tanner whether freedom is a thing you can put on or take off, as you would a coat?"

The old man was handling a bunch of the wonderful, sweet Judean grapes; now he put them down and stared at me for a moment or two as if I had awakened him from sleep.

"Why do you ask?" he finally said.

"My function is to ask, to know, to understand, Simon ben Mattathias. Otherwise, I fail Rome and I fail myself."

"And what is freedom to you, Roman?" the Maccabee wondered.



"How is it that you cannot ask a Jew a question without him questioning you in turn?"

"Perhaps because a Jew's doubts match your own, Roman," he answered, smiling rather sadly.

"Jews have no doubts. You told me yourself that they were the chosen people."

"Chosen? Yes - but for what? In our holy scrolls, which I am certain you despise, Roman, it says, 'And I will give thee for a light unto the Gentiles -'

I couldn't help saying, "What amazing, incredible egotism!"

"Perhaps. You asked me about freedom, Roman, and with us, that is somehow different than with others, for once we were slaves in Egypt."

"You said that before," I reminded him, "like a spell. Is it a spell - or an incantation?"

"We don't deal in spells or incantations," said the old man contemptuously. "What I said I meant. We were slaves in Egypt once, a long time ago, a long, long time ago in terms of the 'nokri', but with us the past lives; we don't destroy it. Then we were slaves and we labored morning, noon and night under the lash of the overseer - and we were given bricks to make without straw, and our young were torn from us and man was separated from his wife, so the whole people wept and cried out to the Lord God in our agony. Thus it was burned into us that freedom is a good thing and deeply connected with life itself. All things have their price, but only in the blood of brave men can freedom be measured."

"That is very moving," I answered, rather dryly, I am afraid, "yet it doesn't reply to what I asked you. Is freedom your god?"

Simon shook his head resignedly, and now indeed he was the Jew, completely the Jew and one with my dry and despicable camel guide; for this rude highland chieftain was pitying me even while his patients extended itself.

"All things are our god," he mused, "for God is all and one and indivisible - and I do not see how I can explain it better, Roman."

"And other gods?" I smiled.

"Are there other gods, Roman?"

"What is your opinion, Jew?" I asked him, forging the insult and allowing it to penetrate, for I was sick to death of his humility-ridden insolence.

"I know only the God of Israel - the God of my fathers," the Maccabee said imperturbably.



"Whom you have spoken to?"

"I hever spoke to Him," the old man answered patiently.

"Or seen?"

"No."

"Or had witness of?"

"Only in the hills and fields of my native land."

"Where he walks?"

"Where, among other places, He abides," the old man smiled.

"Yet you know there are no other gods?"

"That I know," the Maccabee said.

"I would think," I said, "that a decent respect for the gods of others, would prevent such a bland and broad elimination - or at least for the feelings of others."

"The truth is the truth," he replied, genuinely puzzled.

"And do you know the truth so well, Jew? Can you answer all things, all questions, all doubts, all hesitations, all bewilderment? Did God give you the truth when he chose you, a handful of mountain peasants, out of the whole great and boundless and civilized world?"

I expected him to be angry, but there was no sign of anger in his pale and puzzled eyes. For a long while, he looked at me, searched my face, as if he were seeking to find something there that would quiet his own bewilderment. Then he rose and said:

"You will excuse me, for I am weary," and he left me alone.

This Roman representative looks upon the Jews as the enemies of mankind and so informs the Senate for these reasons. First, they are people who speak about and insist on the rights of the individual. They refuse to accept the principle which was accepted throughout the ancient world, that slavery is the real basis of freedom. The Jews were prohibited from striking a slave. The whole economy of the ancient world was built upon perpetual serfdom, and here was a people that challenged that whole conception of free men living off the backs of the slaves. He found in this people a fierce and unbending pride, an independence which he



called insolence, a people unwilling to bend its knee to anyone, where the <sup>beggar</sup> lowest/ can stop Simon the Ethnarch and talk to him, people with an amazing conception of democracy which is a menace to the empire. And he found a people that refuses to recognize that war is a part of the social pattern of civilization, a people that fights - that knows how - a people that has carried on 30 years of the bloodiest struggle and emerged victorious, and a people that seeks peace and hates war - a people which visions the day when "we shall beat our swords into ploughshares and lay down our arms". That, the Roman, the representative of the great empire which had already conquered half of the world, he could not understand, and therefore feared, and so he warned the Senate that Rome and Judea cannot exist in the same world.

These two philosophies of life are mutually antagonistic, having waged war one upon the other throughout the ages, the struggle between the destiny of the individual and dictatorship - subjection of the individual and superiority based on military might. Fast, in writing his book, "My Glorious Brothers", has made us aware of two things - first, of the fighting Jews of whom there is a noble record in history from the days of Joshua through David through the Maccabees to the men who later on challenged the whole might of Rome to the men of 1948, to the men who fought on the field of battle everywhere - this vivid recounting of the old story brings to the fore again the type of Jew not often thought of - the warrior Jew. And secondly, it is brought home to you the things for which this fighting Jew fights, the things of the spirit and the things of God, the rights of man, human freedom, rights of conscience. And for these things Jews have always fought and have been ready to die - these things for which Jews are fighting today and will continue to fight until the end of time. The remarkable world-building, civilization-fashioning people - the Jewish people - the heirs of Abraham and Moses and the Maccabees.