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How Israel saved civilization - the story of Chanukah, 1953.

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HOW ISRAEL SAVED CIVILIZATION
The Story of Chanukah

December 6, 1953

A new chapter in the history of civilization began when Alexander the Great marched into Asia and began the conquest of the ancient world, in the middle of the fourth century before the Common Era. This amazing general took over in the course of time the whole of the Persian Empire which up to that time was the largest in extent in the history of mankind. The empire of Alexander the Great came to extend to the very gates of India and he opened that entire world up for Greek colonization, for Greek trade, for Greek culture. And wherever his armies came, or those of his immediate successors, they built Greek cities modeled after their own "polis"; their own type of city-state and the homeland. Cities which have their market-places, their theatres, their gymnasiums, their Temples, their art, which came to take on a distinctive Hellenic character. Some of these cities which Alexander and his successors established were small in size and some were very large, like the city of Seleucid on the Tigris, which came to have a population of over six hundred thousand people. And the city of Alexandria, in Egypt, which at one time boasted among its numerous other inhabitants more than a half million Jews.

These Greek conquerors brought with them also the beautiful Greek language and all the amenities of Greek civilization which was then the most highly developed civilization in the ancient world. Alexander himself was a pupil of Aristotle, one of the true gigantic philosophic minds of Greece, who influenced the thought of mankind practically up to the last century. And this means that at the time of the appearance of Alexander, Greece had already produced a remarkable civilization, in fact had already passed its zenith; the age of Pericles was over, the age of Plato and Sophocles, and Phidias. It's an amazing civilization, this Greek civilization. The Greeks gave us the beginnings of philosophy, of science, of the most perfect forms of art. The spirit of rational,

critical inquiry, the analysis of thought which is the indispensable technique of all true knowledge, that is the heritage of the Greeks to mankind. And it taught mankind how to think, critically, analytically. All systems of modern philosophy, and all systems of philosophy throughout the ages, and logic, and psychology, ultimately trace back their ancestry, their lineage to the Greeks. The Greeks posed all the problems and in a way attempted to give all the answers - though not all the answers were correct answers any more than all the answers today will stand the test of time.

The Greeks worked over all the data which had come to them from older civilizations like that of Babylon, and that of Egypt, and made remarkable advances in mathematics, in geometry, in mechanics, in astronomy, in geography, in physiology, in fact in all the sciences. And, of course, in art, in poetry, in drama, and some other branches of literature, the Greeks set the standards for all times to this day. And for a thousand years from the days of Alexander on, for a thousand years, Hellenic thought and speech and art and its way of life governed the life of the civilized world everywhere; from the Ganges to the Straits of Gibraltar. Even when Greece lost its political independence and Rome came to take over the Greek Empire, which Alexander and his successors had built, Greek culture, Greek ideas, nevertheless, retained their hegemony and the great schools of philosophy, in Athens and elsewhere in Greece continued to attract for centuries the scholars and the students of the ancient world. Any man who wanted to be known as a cultured man studied Greek literature, spoke Greek or wrote in Greek; wherever he lived.

Rome contributed many things to civilization but Rome made no significant contributions to art, or science, or literature. Its contributions were in the fields of organization - political administration. The building of the great roads of communication in the ancient world; the imposing of a Pax Romana, the Roman peace, upon the ancient world for centuries. But in the fields of the mind

and the spirit, Rome which succeeded Greece made no significant contribution. They were good copyists in those fields.

Now Palestine, in the second century, at the time of the Maccabees of whom we speak this week, Palestine was part of this Greek Empire, this Hellenistic world; a small part to be sure. And within Palestine the Greeks too had established their cities and their way of life, their theatres, gymnasiums, and the Jews of the second century were greatly attracted by them. Quite a number of them came to speak Greek along with their Aramaic, along with the Hebrew which was the holy language which they used in school and in synagogue. In fact, in some parts of the world outside of Palestine the Jews came to speak Greek almost exclusively and had so far forgotten their Aramaic or their Hebrew that it was necessary in the fourth century before the Common Era to translate a Hebrew Bible into Greek so that the Jews could read the Bible.

The Jews never built any iron wall around themselves or isolated themselves intellectually or culturally from the rest of the world at any time in their history, except when they were forced to by persecution. The Jewish mind has been throughout the ages remarkably receptive from ancient civilization; the Sumerian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian, the Canaanitish, the Egyptian, the Persian; the Jews borrowed many things, many ideas, and some of them are actually embedded in our own Bible and in other Jewish literature. The Jews freely received as they freely shared insights of learning and experience. But, of course, how true also of this amazingly impressive and attractive and glamorous Hellenic civilization. The Jews never despised the wisdom of other peoples. They had regard, as the Bible said, for the wisdom of the peoples of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. In the Talmud we have this very interesting statement that one who sees a sage, a scholar, a wise man of other nations, he should recite a blessing - "blessed be God who had imparted of his wisdom to all creatures."

The Rabbis praised the Greek language and concerning this translation into Greek of which I spoke a moment ago, they said that that was causing the beauty of Japheth, the beauty of Greece, to dwell in the tents of Shem, in the tents of the Jew. And thousands of Greek words, of course, have come to be incorporated in the Hebrew language, in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Of course, at times the Jews went too far, as they have a way of doing. The Rabbis said that Jews are likened to the stars in heaven and to the dusk of the earth, in the Bible, when they rise they rise clear up to the skies and when they fall they fall right down into the dirt.

At times they went very far; the uninstructed and the unalerted among the people; came to appropriate alien ways and ideas with excessive avidity and with a minimum of discrimination - just as many Jews do today; to the point where they began to sacrifice their own basic, indispensable Jewish ideals and standards and values. It was then that the spiritual leaders of our people arose to defend the sanctuary, as it were, of the inner life of the people; to safeguard what was intrinsically Jewish. Now in this Hellenistic culture which I have just described to you, in which there was so much that was attractive and valuable and sound, there was also much in the second century that was decadent, corrupt, and dangerous to the Jewish way of life, and the leaders among our people in those days did not object to the intellectual or artistic excellencies of the Greeks. Their objection was to the moral corruptions which frequently attended them. They were not afraid of the Lyceum or the Academy or the Stoa where philosophy was taught; what they feared was the Hippodrome and the Stadium and the Theatre and the Symmasium, in which in those days much profligacy and licentiousness and moral corruption played which threatened the breakdown of the religious and moral disciplines and traditions of the Jewish people. They were not afraid of the ideas of Plato, although some of the ideas even of Plato were repugnant to the Jewish conceptions of life. Thus Plato in his Republic, you will recall, advocated that women and

children be shared in common; an idea repugnant to the Jewish conception of the purity of family life. Nor was Plato's God-concept acceptable; it fell far short of the Hebraic concept of a God of justice and mercy and forgiveness.

It wasn't Plato so much that they feared; or Aristotle, who advocated slavery, who claimed that slavery is inherent in the constitution of society, an idea likewise repugnant to the Jewish ethical sense. But it was the licentiousness and the depravity of a decadent Epicurean philosophy which the Jewish leaders desperately resisted.

And so you read in this Book of the Maccabees from which I read to you this morning that when many Jews began to join the heathen and to stand aloof from the sacred Torah, from the sacred law, especially the young - the young who hankered after the broad-brimmed hats and the high laced boots and the graceful tunics of the " _____ ", the young Greeks who symbolized for them the youth of a dominant civilization and also symbolized for them a freer and gayer and more spacious life; and when these Jews began to forsake the Torah and to assimilate themselves completely, their habits of life and their conduct with the heathen, these leaders of the people struck back to preserve their own traditions, their own way of life, the life of a covenant and a holy people under the Torah.

The Crisis came in the middle of the second century before the Common Era when Antiochus IV, known as the illustrious Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled over that entire part of the world including Palestine; and he was afraid of pressures from without - of enemies, Roman and others who threatened his empire, set about consolidating his empire, creating a sort of a totalitarian regime among all the peoples and races which constituted his far-flung empire. And this Antiochus Epiphanes, I suppose for political consideration more than anything else, issued a decree, to quote again the Book of the Maccabees: "To his whole Kingdom that all should be one people, and everyone should leave his

laws and his faith", and accept the one prescribed by Antiochus. And all the heathen people, naturally, readily complied. The Book of Maccabees says: "And the heathen agreed according to the command of the King." Why not? There was little that distinguished one batch of Gods in the ancient world from another, in heathen polytheism. Polytheism is very accommodating; it could easily find room for new Gods and new rights. And in a pantheon of many Gods one more or less by one name or another, didn't make much difference. No ancient people ever died for its God. Ancient people abandoned their Gods for others as soon as they were defeated in battle, which means that their God was defeated by the God of the conqueror. The only people who resisted Antiochus, in that entire ancient world which he sought to consolidate, was the Jewish people, because Judaism is very exclusive, intolerantly, bitterly exclusive, as far as monotheism is concerned. "Thou shalt have no other God beside me." All the Gods of the humans are things of naught. And for a thousand years the Jews have stood on that basic fundamental Gibraltar-like conviction of theirs. They were a covenanted people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, dedicated to the ideal of the one God and his moral law in the world. It wasn't merely of the one God, but this one God had given to the people a Torah which represented a new moral code for mankind. Judaism came to abhor because of its Torah, came to hate the materialism, the licentiousness, the cruelty, the slavery, the idealization of war, the oppression of the weak and the poor, which was common in the ancient world. Judaism spoke of the rights of man, of every man made in the image of God, of the defense of the poor and the weak, of the end of war, of the beating of swords into plowshares. Judaism spoke of brotherhood, universal brotherhood, and universal justice and universal peace. Two different " " , two different " " .

And so when Antiochus sought to impose his way of faith, his moral code, upon the Jewish people, the leaders of the Jewish people and their followers

struck back. They would not abandon their faith. And so Antiochus began to persecute them. This is the first instance of religious persecution in Jewish history. And many Jews, as you read in the Book of Maccabees, many Jews preferred to die rather than to surrender their faith. And that's the first instance of martyrs in Jewish history. They began to revolt, and their leader Mattathias, and they had to fight not only these Greeks but they had to fight fellow-Jews, paganized fellow-Jews, assimilated Jews, who said as the Book of the Maccabees writes, "Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen, for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow."

The Jewish people was always saved by a few in their midst who remained loyal to their faith and to their vision. There was hardly a period in Jewish history when there were not a great number of Jews who fell away; for whom the going was too hard; who found one excuse or another for assimilating, for washing out their identity. In the middle ages it was because of persecution; in the nineteenth century it is because the allurements of careers and advancement which the renunciation of their faith would insure them. There are always such. But fortunately there always remained a sufficient hard core, a sufficient Maccabean nucleus which carried on the faith, the tradition, the way of life of the Jewish people. And so Mattathias and his sons led a revolt, they fought bitterly at great odds, you read in this chapter this morning. The people were afraid: "How can we being few in number face such vast multitudes; organized armies; well-equipped armies with the most powerful weapons known to these Greek conquerors?" But they were inspired by their leaders who said: "With God it is all one to help with many or a few. An individual, one man with God, is always a majority." And so they fought, first a small gorilla warfare in the mountains among the hills of Judea, confusing, discomfiting the enemy, and then their numbers increasing and confidence growing until Judah succeeded in welding together and training an army. And finally at the opportune moment he struck and defeated the host of the Syrian Greeks,

regained the City of Jerusalem, reentered the Temple which had been desecrated when Antiochus had set up his idols to be worshipped by the Jews, cleansed the Temple, rekindled the lights and the lamps which had been extinguished, and with psalms and music they celebrated the rededication of the altar and established the Feast of Chanukah for all future time. So that today, more than twenty-one hundred years later, far away from the City of Jerusalem, Jews are kindling Chanukah lights and celebrating the Festival of the Maccabees.

Why do I say that in so doing Israel Saved Civilization? Why, it is very clear. If there had been no Maccabees; if the Jews had accepted the decree of Antiochus and had joined the vast amalgam of the heathen, pagan peoples of the ancient world, Judaism would have disappeared; Christianity would never have been born. Christianity was not born out of heathendom and paganism but directly out of Judaism. Islam would never be what it came to be, a monotheistic faith. This victory of the Maccabees insured for mankind a progress in the fields of the spirit, in the fields of morality, according to Jewish tradition for more than twenty-one centuries.

It's well to think of those things during the Festival of Chanukah, how very frequently at the cross-roads of history, at critical moments for civilization, the Jewish people stepped in and saved civilization. The world would like to forget it; the world would like to think of the Jewish people as just another small people, numerically not very significant, politically never great, but history is there and the records are there. And here was one of the most decisive moments in the world's history. With this small people, living in a relatively poor country, politically not strong at all for they hadn't had political independence for hundreds of years prior to the time of the Maccabees, nevertheless, had enough of spiritual strength and stamina and conviction and vision and courage to fight for basic human ideals and in so doing to win freedom. May the spirit of the Maccabees abide with us and with our children in the days to come, amen.

advanced in mathematics, geometry, mechanics, astronomy,
geography, physiology, botany and other sciences.

And in art in poetry in drama, other branches, literature
set standards for mankind which persisted ^{to this day} for 1000 years.

4. In 1000 yrs. Hellenic thought and speech and art & way of life
permeated the life, the civilized world from the Alps
& the Alps, Gibraltar

Even when Greece lost her polit. indep. - and Rome took
over the Empire which Alex. had conquered but -
Greek culture retained its hegemony. Its great
schools continued to attract scholars of other

men, only when who worked to the height of their culture - that
& that a work in Greek

For Rome created (roads - laws -) made no sym. contribution
to art or science - just copyists.

5. Palestine was part of this Hellenistic world in 2c
within Pal. - polit. establishments 'polis' -

Jews were attracted by them - free - less austere -

Greek was spoken - along with Aramaic -

Schwarzgut 3c. -

Jews were built "iron wall" - isolated for centuries,
culturally from rest of world -

Jew mind remarkably receptive

From ancient civilization - Canaan. Babel (during Babel captivity) (3)
Prussian - embedded in Bible.

They freely received and as freely shared in trials, learning
and experience.

Hellene / Hellenic, Islamic. - Western Europe

Did not despise the wisdom, the Scriptures - High regard ^{"the wisdom of the people, the best of all the wisdom, EIGHT"}

"On seeing the signs, other nations, we should say, 'Blessed be God who hath imparted of His wisdom to his creation'"

The Rabbin praised the Heb. language for its beauty.

Septuagint "causing the beauty of Japhet to dwell in the tents of Shem"

Thousands / Heb. words - Mishna & Talmud

6. / At times went too far - the uninitiated and the uneducated
among the people appropriated alien ways and ideas with
excessive avidity and with a unwilling / discrimination
to - as many do today - to the point of overpassing

the basic Jewish values -

It was then that respon. sp. leaders - arose to protect
the sanctuary, the inner life, the people. - to safeguard
what was intrinsically & indispensably Jewish -

7. / In Hellenic culture, the 2c. - mind that was
attractive and valuable - mind also - decadent,
corrupt - dangerous to J. way, life.

- only the intellect. and artistic excellence
- Moral corruption - which is frequently attended then
- It was ^{not} by census, Academy, the stoic - which they found
- Stadium, hippodrome, theatre, gymnasium - from which moral propriety flowed - threatened a breakdown of religious and moral discipline & traditions, for the people
- not approved, idea, Plato - altho - republic want to justify standards of pure family life (women & children ~~held in~~ shared in common)
- and not concept - fell for - that - perceived not justice, mercy and for others

Incumbent depravity in deader Epuraism

And when "many Jews began to join the heathen and to stand aloof from the Mosaic Law" - esp. the young - handing after "the broad-brimmed hat, the high-laced boots and the graceful changes of the ephraim" - symbolized for them those who helped to a dominant civilization and to a free and open future

They were aroused! - fight back - to preserve - covenanted people - 37 12 - 1

8/. Crisis came with Antiochus - under 2nd C. - considerable decree that "to his whole Kingdom that all should be one people, and everyone should leave his laws and his faith" all heathen people readily complied. "all the heathen agreed, according to

the command, the king: Why not? For then was little that
designed one batch of jobs from another in haste, why then -
Why then was very accountably. ~~They~~ It could only find
room for new jobs and new needs - And in a parthen, and
in new a bus, by an a another name, did not make much
difference.

no agreement ever done for his jobs - He abandoned his
jobs for other as soon as he was defeated in battle.

Only Judas his remained exclusive - work, 1000, 1000
things, night! - For 1000 yrs had stood on that
conviction - Covenant - 2000 x 1000

9) And a moral cost - demanded of job - abhorred the
materialism, the heartlessness, the cruelty, the slavery,
the idolatry, was, the oppression, the poor & the weak -

- Universal brotherhood, justice and peace.

10) Judas in street back! Matthews - result - Faithful
would not abandon their faith - even when soever
men of law & the her
Jobs in Temple

Persecutions - put in Jew. history
Martyrs - put in world's history

Result - Matthews - not only ap. Square Jews, but
against Jewish hypocritical fellow. Jews - "Let us be so
and make a covenant with the heathen; for since we departed
from them we have had much sorrow!

Bitter struggle America - multitudes -

Fears of not their multitudes" - with first it is all out to

Wom - 20th Saved for civilization - the Hebrew ideas.

Had God - measured - absorbed in and out - it would
have disappeared - Christianty would never have come
with being - no Islam -

