

# The Maccabees Then and Now: Drivers of Our Destiny

**T**he festival of lights is celebrated by all denominations of world Jewry with grandeur and symbolism. Every aspect of the Chanukah story is compelling, giving us heroes we can identify with and emulate, and incorporating practical customs that enhance our festivities. The military and spiritual victory experienced by the original Chashmonaim serves not only as the primary basis for our observance of the holiday, but has been the paradigm for Jewish heroism for generations.

In the Rambam's *Hilchot Chanukah* 3:1, the Rambam presents the historical backdrop for the Chanukah story. This is an unusual departure for a sefer dedicated to halakhic application. The Rambam begins by detailing the affront to Jewish



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spiritual life and the violation of our holy temple. He then continues with an equally detailed description of Hashem's Divine assistance to our ancestors, which resulted in "*v'chazra malchut L'Yisrael*," the reinstatement of Jewish sovereignty in Israel that would endure for over 200 years until the tragic churban of the Second Temple. This is a bit perplexing as this *malchut* was not one of the tribe of Yehuda and the kingdom of David but rather one led by the Chashmonaim who were Kohanim. Nevertheless, the Rambam seemingly expresses a positive view of

Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel, notwithstanding that it is not in the ideal form.

Rav Yehuda Amital, zt"l, in *Be'er Miriam*, asserts that the narrative of the military victory and subsequent restoration of sovereignty illustrated by the Rambam is mirrored in the religious Zionism expressed in Eretz Yisrael today. Whether we subscribe to the "*derech hateva*" approach — the natural order of events unfolding — or the Divine intervention that augments those events in a more direct manner, the Jewish people

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TORAT EMET

TORAT CHAIM

TORAT ADAM

TORAT CHESED

**TORAT TZION**



are unified and celebrate Torah and Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael.

The above premise lends credence to the possibility that Zecharya's prophesy has been fulfilled in our time:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' צָבָא-וֹת, עַד יָשְׁבוּ זָקְנִים וְזָקֵנוֹת,  
בְּרַחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם; וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעָנָתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ, מֵרֵב  
יָמִים. וְרַחֲבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְלְאוּ, יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת,  
מִשְׂחָקִים, בְּרַחֲבֵתֶיהָ.

*This is what the Lord Almighty says:  
Once again men and women of ripe old  
age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem,  
each of them with cane in hand because  
of their age. And the streets of the city  
shall be full of boys and girls playing in  
its streets.*

**Zecharya 8:4-5**

The Maccabees of the Second Temple Period, which was the epicenter of the Jewish world until its destruction, fought an existential war to preserve Torat Tzion — the unique opportunity to observe the Torah in the Land of Israel. The very notion of the Maccabees as the champions of God's Torah and laws and defenders of Jewish sovereignty in our ancestral

homeland has been replicated in our time. Nowhere is this felt more profoundly than in today's modern State of Israel where the similarities are undeniable.

The kol Torah (sounds of Torah learning) emanating from batei midrash across the land is at historic proportions. The accepted norm whereby many Israeli youth immerse themselves in Torah study as a pre- or co-requisite to national service underscores the successful integration of Torat Tzion in daily life. This is also true for the thousands of overseas students — many under the auspices of Yeshiva University — who arrive each year to explore their heritage, strengthen their commitment to religious Zionism and dedicate significant time to Torah study. These unique experiences empower them to better serve the Jewish people and strengthen Jewish life in Israel and abroad.

The young men and women who serve our country in the IDF or *Sherut Leumi* are the epitome of modern Maccabees. Their uniform is their

badge of honor and their pride and sense of duty to the Jewish people is infectious. So much so that this calling has also become a viable option for students choosing to extend their gap year experience before beginning university.

As parents who greet our soldiers returning home just for Shabbat from training and exercises, we are privileged to witness daily miracles with their safe arrival time after time. When marching to battle is accompanied by the singing of "*anachnu ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim*" — we are believers (of God), children of believers — and led by a commander holding a sefer Torah, we set the narrative and are drivers of our destiny. They are the defenders of Torat Tzion.

The integration of religious Zionist professionals in every sphere of Israeli society ensures that Torah is prominent in shaping modern Jewish history. Our own YU alumni are among the CEO's, investors, and lawyers in many start-up enterprises and in all fields. We are healthcare

professionals, rabbis, educators, scientists and civil servants. In this way we are all modern Maccabees contributing to the ongoing success of the Jewish people through the prism of Torat Tzion.

The intrinsic connection between Torah and Eretz Yisrael as part of the redemptive process today is beautifully articulated by HaRav Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook, zt”l:

*Torah is a national constitution, a Divine cosmic and national law, embodied in a Divinely-chosen community, and fulfilled in a Divinely-chosen land. A Divine community with a real government, a real army, a real economy, and all of the other down-to-earth aspects of normal, national life.*

**Torat Eretz Yisrael: The Teachings of HaRav Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook, Ch. 5, pg. 104**

While the celebration of Torah and Jewish life in Israel is the most obvious parallel to the Chanukah story and to the Maccabees of old, it is by no means the only example of Jewish heroism and leadership. In Parshat Bamidbar, Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky zt”l, *Emet L’Yaakov, Parshat Bamidbar*, pg. 413, discusses the purpose of the “*degalim*,” the tribal flags used to

differentiate each *shevet*. The design and color of each flag represented the unique culture and purpose of each tribe. However, the focal point and the epicenter of the *machane*, the entire camp, was the Mishkan. Like Eretz Yisrael then and now, the Mishkan was the unifier and source of spiritual life, the common denominator of the nation.

A similar concept is mentioned in the introduction to the *Siddur Hameforash*. It is explained there that the Arizal believed that there is a unique *nusach* (textual style) for each of the 12 *shevatim*, with a corresponding specific gate in the heavens into which each *nusach* enters. Still, he composed a new *nusach* for a thirteenth gate, through which the common tefilla of all the *shevatim* could enter.

Though Jerusalem is the epicenter and unifier of the Jewish world, the broader Jewish community is taking control of its destiny across the globe. Each sector and community has a unique capacity to effect change and advance the mission of Am Yisrael.

Perhaps this is the point of the *piyut* that we recite after lighting the Chanukah candles — *Hanerot*

*halalu anachanu madlikin* — we light these candles — which can also be translated homiletically as “we are the candles that are flickering.” Our mandate is to take action by kindling a flame within ourselves. As Rabbi Dr. Berman said so eloquently at his investiture, we must be drivers of history. We can each on an individual level, and all on a national level, be modern Maccabees by strengthening our commitment to Torah observance as well as our connection to the Zionist enterprise that is the modern State of Israel. Then we can also fulfill the second part of the *piyut*:

ואין לנו רשות להשתמש בהם אלא לראותם  
בלבד כדי להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול על  
... נסוך

*We have no permission to benefit from the lights, except to look at them in order to offer praise and thanksgiving to Your great name for Your miracles ...*

We can pause to reflect and offer *hallel* and *hoda’ah*, praise and thanksgiving to Hashem for His Divine intervention in enabling the Maccabees of old and Maccabees of today to achieve all that we have. With the help of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, may we continue to strengthen Torat Tzion and serve as an example to enlighten the entire world.

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