

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayigash

The festive eight-day period of Chanukah has ended, and now we enter a period without any significant holidays until Purim. It behooves us to reflect on the uniqueness of the holiday of Chanukah and to internalize its message in a way that will strengthen us over the next few months.

The famous Maoz Tzur song, written by a 13th Century poet named Mordechai whose name appears in the acrostic of the letters of the first five stanzas, is popularly sung after lighting the Chanukah candles. However, the connection between the song and Chanukah seems mysterious, as only the final stanza mentions the tension between the Jews and the Greeks and the miracle of the eight lights. The first stanza contains a wish for a time when Israel's enemies will be defeated and the poet will sing a song at the dedication of the Altar, but this refers to the future third Temple and not to the Altar dedication of the Maccabees. The second stanza refers to the bitter slavery in Egypt and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, also seemingly having no connection to Chanukah. The third stanza talks about the First Temple, which was destroyed because the Jewish people worshipped idols, and then ends on the high note that they were delivered from the Babylonian exile after seventy years. But this would seem to have very little relevance to Chanukah, which took place during the Second Temple period. The fourth stanza tells how Haman sought to kill Mordecai and Hashem turned the tables and Haman was hanged. Perhaps the poet juxtaposes this stanza to the one relating to Chanukah because Purim is the only other Rabbinically-ordained holiday. But if so, perhaps we should sing this song on Purim as well, since both holidays have a stanza referring to their story. The final stanza (starting with "chasof"), written by a different composer who chose to add to the classic Maoz Tzur, contains a plea for salvation and in that way seems to parallel the opening stanza of Maoz Tzur. But again we are left in the dark as to what this has to do specifically with Chanukah.

In order to understand the song's deeper meaning and its specific connection to Chanukah, we need to understand more about the time in history in which Chanukah occurs. In the beginning of his chapter discussing the laws of Chanukah, Maimonides tells us the background to the Chanukah story and mentions that in the Second Temple period the Greek kings made religious decrees against the Jews. This stands in stark contrast to the laws of Purim, where Maimonides does not relate the story before delineating the laws. He must hold the historical background is just as important for us to know as the laws of lighting the candles.

Elsewhere, Maimonides tells us about an interesting development that occurred during the Second Temple period. In his laws of the Yom Kippur service (1:7), he says that heresy "sprouted forth" and people who denied the Oral Law interpreted the Torah in ways that conflicted with the Oral Tradition. He explains that even the High Priest was suspected of being influenced by the teachings of these Sadducees, and the court therefore would make him swear not to deviate from the way the Yom Kippur service should be done according to the Oral Law. What caused this confusion about the Oral Law specifically in the times of the Second Temple?



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The Talmud (Yoma 21b) says in the Second Temple period the Jewish people did not have the Ark, the fire from heaven, the lit-up breastplate, Divine inspiration/Prophecy, and the Divine Presence, all of which existed in the times of the First Temple. All of these lackings stemmed from the void created by the withdrawal of the Divine Presence (Shechina). When prophecy ceased, the Jewish people lost the spiritual channels the prophets had provided them during the First Temple. Without the intensity of the Divine Presence, the general populace's belief in G-d and the tradition weakened, and heretics who misinterpreted the Torah gained appeal. This also explains how the Greeks could succeed in influencing so many Jews to assimilate and adopt Greek philosophies and values.

At this crucial juncture in Jewish history, the Maccabees held on tightly to the Torah values of old and would not be drawn after Greek culture. When the Greeks defiled the Temple and the Altar, the focal points of all Jewish worship, the Maccabees fought to purify them and drive away the secular influences. Therefore, the author of Maoz Tzur repeatedly highlights the Temple service and the Altar, and the Torah reading on Chanukah also relates to the dedication of the Temple and the Altar.

In the very first stanza, the poet longs for the next time we will dedicate the Altar, when the Third Temple is built. He gives the background for the building of the First Temple, starting with the redemption from Egypt, for the whole purpose of leaving Egypt was to come to Israel and serve G-d in the ideal way there. After mentioning the exile from the First Temple, he describes how the Greeks defiled the Second Temple but the Jews prevailed over them and purified it, enabling them to serve there for another 200 years until its destruction. In between the stanzas about the First and Second Temples, he mentions the threat of Haman and his downfall, but this is not the main thrust of his piece as it is not centered around the Temple service. He simply includes it because he is mentioning threats the Jewish people survived and how Hashem saved them. While the poet does not mention the exile from the Second temple, the final stanza implies that we are now in exile and desperately need a salvation. This is all consistent with the theme of the song, which is a yearning to have the opportunity to serve G-d in the ideal way through the Temple and the Altar.

Today we do not even have the lesser intensity of Shechina the Jewish people experienced during the Second Temple period. Our connection to G-d relies on the study of Torah and performance of mitzvot. Proverbs likens Torah to the source of light itself and a mitzvah to a candle. The way we can light up our dark world, a world devoid of Shechina and G-d awareness, is through our connection to Torah and mitzvot. The candles we light on Chanukah remind us that despite the darkness in which we live, we have the ability in every generation to rise above it and light up the world through our actions. We sing Maoz Tzur after lighting the candles in order to internalize this point.

May we internalize the message of Chanukah and may it help us light up the dark winter days ahead of us!

Shabbat Shalom!

