



## The Real Choice Today

Chanukah is perhaps the most beloved holiday of the year. The vast majority of Jews (religious and not so religious) light candles and eat donuts and latkes. On the occasions I have married non-religious couples on Chanukah, they usually ask me to begin the ceremony by lighting the candles.

It is no coincidence that the Rambam writes that “The *mitzvah* of *ner Chanukah* is a much beloved *mitzvah*.” This is an unusual statement as our Sages are not accustomed to assign grades to different *mitzvot*, and certainly not in *halachic* works, in which people’s emotional connection to *mitzvot* does not really influence the *halachic* discourse.

Therefore, this is evidently more than a social comment about the spread of the holiday among all sections of the people. The fondness we have for lighting Chanukah candles can teach us a significant principle we can use as a beacon for both our present and our future. The reason we are so connected to this holiday should serve us as a paradigm for our Jewish lives – and is perhaps something we are not always aware of in our crazy times.

The story of Chanukah does not start particularly well. It’s not all clear but it is agreed that the Greek Empire that ruled over *Eretz Yisrael* at the time forbade the Jews from keeping the *mitzvot* and worked to transform the Jewish population into another cultural Hellenist enclave. The Jews didn’t need too much persuasion as they were keen to discard the national yoke of *Torat Moshe* and become part of a “global village” soaked in a Greek culture that was very attractive and appealing.

Who wants to be an isolated minority in a hostile world boasting power, confidence and esthetics? Who would want

to exchange the magnificent Greek temples, the packed stadiums, for some dilapidated Jewish study halls?

Of course there were a handful who did believe in the Jewish people. They were able to miraculously vanquish the enemy on the military battlefield but spiritually and culturally? No chance.

We can see a similar scenario in our times too. Entire cultures are collapsing in the face of western culture, without even one shot being fired or one missile being launched.

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So it wasn’t simple at all to decide to celebrate Chanukah. Especially when its main theme is the dedication of the Mikdash desecrated by the Greeks. The same Mikdash that no longer stands. Why celebrate a day that no longer has any significance? Would anyone still celebrate *Yom HaAtzmaut* if – G-d forbid – Iran would destroy Israel?

Therefore, it is seemingly not the military victory we are celebrating. We are marking the cultural courage of those *Maccabim* who decided they wanted to remain Jews even if the Mikdash was no longer, and the Jewish State destroyed.

Their Jewish spirit was not broken.

On the contrary. It became stronger and gained traction. Our Sages compiled the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* and eventually the entire gamut of Jewish literature

that nourishes the Jewish people to this very day.

נר מצוה ותורה אור, “A *mitzvah* is a candle and the Torah is light” (Mishlei 6:23).

Thanks to this holiday, we reveal the light we have in our lives, the great privilege we have of being Jewish and being part of the great story our nation has brought to the world.

Rabbi Sacks zt”l used to say that in the past we were the chosen people. We were forced to be Jews. Our enemies generally didn’t allow us to assimilate (apart from Greece, who wanted to assimilate us along with all other nations.)

Now, we are the people that choose. We need to decide if we want to be Jews or not. In that sense, Chanukah is the quintessential contemporary holiday. Just like then, we need to choose. It’s not easy because we don’t have anyone physically forcing us like they did back then, and we have a powerful culture bombarding us from all angles. We need to decide.

The *mitzvah* of *ner Chanukah* teaches us the best way to spread the Torah’s messages.

To reveal the light within it.

To encourage the younger generation to continue to help the Jewish people grow and flourish, they must feel this thing is “beloved.” They must feel the Torah is relevant and meaningful for each and every one of them. That Jewish wisdom and tradition can make them better people, happier people, living lives of meaning, growth and purpose.

As indeed it can.

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For as long as Jews are Jews, they contribute something unique to the intellectual, spiritual and moral life of society. So that if Jews are no longer Jews there is a missing voice, an empty place, in the conversation of mankind.

RABBI SACKS

