



Chanukah 1948

November 1947. The UN's Partition Plan is announced and the War of Independence begins...

Mid-May 1948. The British Mandate ends and Ben-Gurion declares the new State of Israel, signaling the second and more intensive phase of the war. The bloody battles continue for over six months (more than 6,000 are killed, approximately 1% of all the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* at the time!)

May 26, 1948. The IDF is established and a young man who took part in the battles himself is appointed its first Chief Rabbi.

From his very first day in office, Rabbi Shlomo Goren (then still Goronczik) saw himself not as a functionary providing religious services to the army, but as someone blazing the trail and defining the vision for a sovereign Jewish army, perhaps the first since the days of the *Chashmonaim*.

The very idea of a Jewish army drew much ideological fire – from non-religious thinkers who viewed the use of force as a contradiction to fundamental Jewish values, or those who hoped the settling of the Land could gradually transpire without any violent confrontation at all. On the other side were ultra-Orthodox circles who held that any military action against the local gentiles was irresponsible and completely forbidden, endangering the lives of the soldiers and breaching the oaths described in the Midrash not to rise up against the nations of the world.

Other voices began to emerge from within the army itself. The military success earned with blood and sweat, huge self-sacrifice and brilliant strategy, led to the belief that כְּחֵי וְעֶצֶם הַיָּדָה, “my power and

the strength of my hand gave me this wealth.”

Indeed, one of the most famous Israeli Chanukah songs, written by Colonel Aharon Ze'ev, the IDF's Chief Education Officer during Rav Goren's tenure, is called “We Carry Torches” and is still played today at national *Yom HaAtzmaut* ceremonies. The chorus is:

A miracle did not happen for us

We did not find a cruse of oil.

We eroded rocks until we bled...

And there was light!

The song was written before the State was established, but became more relevant after the military victories. It stresses faith in the human spirit as opposed to reliance on Divine intervention.

December 1948. Chanukah. Against this backdrop, Rav Goren addresses the soldiers in Israel's fledgling fighting force. The war is coming to an end, the soldiers are exhausted, traumatized, wounded, but also bathed in euphoric triumph.

The Rav attempts to connect them to the spirit of the *Chashmonaim*. His task is to strengthen their sense of being party to a huge achievement, of displaying irrepressible human spirit, yet also telling them they are part of an unprecedented and magnificent miracle.

All that separates nobility of spirit from hubris is keeping one's values front and center: The clear knowledge of what we are fighting for and for whom we are fighting. The unbreakable link between the voice of Yehuda HaMaccabi and the sound of Sinai...

And this is what Rav Goren says to the entire army – almost all of which was

non-religious – at the end of the war, on Chanukah, December 1948: “...The mystery of the miraculous victory of the few against the many is the most perfect expression of the strength of the spirit when faced with oppressive military might... לֹא בְחַיִל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ כִּי אֶם בְּרוּחִי אָמַר ה', “Not by might nor by power but by My spirit, said G-d.”

Thus and only thus were the many able to fall before the few, because the few knew what they were fighting for and for whom they were prepared to die: for the purity of faith in the Word of G-d, for the Torah of their G-d and the Land of their forefathers, for human freedom and spiritual release from a foreign culture, and for universal justice that had been in grave danger...

Before our very eyes, the great miracle of Israel's redemption happened again... with the reawakened spirit of the *Chashmonaim*, we conquered our Holy Land...

Army of Israel! Holy soldiers of the War of Independence and Renewal, Chanukah is your holiday! In you, the spirit beats, and in your hearts is a holy, burning fire taken from the altar of G-d... Light the candles of freedom, carry torches, in the cities and the villages, in the bases and the outposts!

Carry with you the command [about going to war] to those standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai: ‘...You shall not fear them...

כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵהָלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לְכֶם עִם אֹיְבֵיכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם.

“For the L-rd your G-d goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to save you.”

Rabbanit Rachelle Fraenkel teaches Torah at midrashot in Israel.

