



What Would Washington Think Today?



In December 1777, General George Washington and his soldiers fearfully fled from the British Army to Valley Forge. On Christmas Eve, Washington walked among his exhausted soldiers, who were hungry and shivering from cold. Next to one of the tents, he saw a soldier lighting a candle and whispering a few words, tears in his eyes. Washington asked, “Why are you crying?” The soldier replied, “I am not crying. I am a Jew, and I just lit Chanukah candles. I prayed that the G-d of Israel, who gave strength to the Maccabees to defeat their evil enemies, will give us strength too to defeat our enemies. We will triumph.” Washington returned to his tent with vigorous steps, a new light in his eyes.

This famous story ties the ancient nation of Israel, which has a very young country, with the nascent American nation, one of the oldest countries in the world. It is exciting and heartwarming to see how our own holiday touches the hearts of others as well. No one knows exactly what that soldier said, and how exactly Washington remembered it. When I read different versions of this story, it seems to me that, over changing times, it has become more

and more watered down, diluted. For example, Barack Obama declared that Chanukah is the “holiday of religious freedom,” which teaches the right to liberty of religion, and the fable of Washington and the candle tends to be interpreted in that spirit today. Less “G-d of Israel,” more abstract rights.

In the Hebrew Wikipedia, the entry “Chanukah” displayed the following strange sentence: “The main message of Chanukah is the triumph of freedom of religious worship.” Really? Did Matityahu ever hear of this? After all, this elderly *Kohen* from Modi’in called out, “Whoever is zealous for the Torah and keeps the covenant, follow me!” Or, in the popular version, “Whoever is for *Hashem*, follow me!” (מי לה' אָלֵי). He did not say, “Whoever is for freedom of religion, follow me.”

I understand why gentiles looking for inspiration in the holiday of Chanukah would find more universal values in it. That’s legitimate, even desirable. There are truly messages like this in all of our holidays. But when we exaggerate in diluting the original Jewish values in the holiday, we get a homeopathic medicine which is 100 percent water. On Chanukah, we want olive oil, not refined water.

George Washington himself was a deeply religious man, and through his religious beliefs, he also valued religious freedom. But if we turn religion itself into an insignificant trifle, what importance can there be to freedom of religion?

I am largely in favor of freedom. Yet the importance of freedom depends on the question of what it comes to protect. Israel denies most of its citizens the freedom to decide which postal service they want to use. It also

denies many citizens the choice of which school to send their children to. The latter outrages me a lot more than the former since education is a lot more important than snail mail. Educational freedom is important to me because education is important to me, and freedom of religion is important only because religion itself is important.

If we erase our G-d and our *Avodat Hashem*, our joy and our awe, the Temple and the Altar, from the values of Chanukah, what will remain from this beloved holiday? Freedom of religion will become about as important as freedom of mail. And ultimately, freedom of religion will also dissolve, because people tend not to fight for things that are unimportant to them.

For me, religion is a higher value, and therefore religious freedom is a higher necessity. I’m not a relativist, because I believe there is truth in the world. I’m not a pluralist, because I don’t believe in multiple truths. But I am tolerant because I believe there is no other way to live in our diverse and complex society today. If everyone tried to force their values on others, our lives would turn to *Gehennom*. We simply have no other choice.

Freedom of the individual is the only possible institution for shared existence in the 21st century. When it begins to falter, our shared existence is in danger. But all of that is not connected to Chanukah. Religious freedom is not a slogan but an essential, life-affirming need.

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