



# A Historical Background of Chanuka

By Rabbi Dovid Sapirman

## Some Historical Background

The war of *Chanukah* occurred in the middle of the era of the Second *Bais Hamikdash*, in the year 3622 (134 BCE). However, to really appreciate this story, it is helpful to know the historical background of the three hundred years preceding that war.

When the Jewish nation was defeated by *Bavel* in 3338 (418 BCE), the First *Bais Hamikdash* was destroyed and *Yerushalayim* was burned. The Jews who survived the slaughter in *Yerushalayim* were marched off to *Bavel*, where they settled in all-Jewish cities. The seventy-year period between the destruction of the First *Bais Hamikdash* and the building of the Second *Bais Hamikdash* is known as *galus Bavel*. The Babylonian empire lasted another fifty-one years, until it was conquered by the Persian empire, nineteen years before the building of the Second *Bais Hamikdash*. At this point, *Bavel* became no longer a kingdom unto itself, but merely another province in the vast Persian empire. All Jews that had previously been under *Bavel's* dominion now came under Persian rule. The Persian empire consisted of one hundred twenty-seven provinces and Jews were already scattered throughout these provinces.

One year later, a king named *Koresh* became the emperor of Persia. *Koresh* had been mentioned explicitly by name in the prophecy of *Yeshaya Hanavi*. He foretold that *Koresh* would give permission to rebuild the *Bais Hamikdash*. When *Koresh* was shown the scroll of *Yeshaya*, he was willing to comply with Hashem's ancient instructions. In 3390 (366 BCE), he gave permission for any Jew wishing to return to *Eretz Yisroel* to do so. He also returned the vessels of the *Bais Hamikdash*, which he had acquired when *Bavel* was conquered.

The first group that returned to rebuild the *Bais Hamikdash* and *Yerushalayim* was led by *Zerubavel*. *Zerubavel* was a descendant of *Dovid Hamelech*, and *Koresh* appointed him governor of the Province of *Yehudah*. The trip from *Bavel* to *Eretz Yisroel* was dangerous, and there were many foreign peoples living in the land. They resented the arrival of the Jews and the authority they had been given by the king. It was a great sacrifice to make this trip and settle in *Eretz Yehudah*. The group that went along with *Zerubavel* was relatively small, because most people were not willing to relinquish the comfort of their homes in *Bavel*.

It wasn't long before our enemies wrote a slanderous letter to *Koresh*, accusing the Jews of planning to rebel against him as soon as they would complete the wall of *Yerushalayim* and the building of the *Bais Hamikdash*. *Koresh* believed the slander, and issued an order that all construction must be stopped. This order remained in effect for the rest of *Koresh's* life, during the entire time that *Achashverosh* was king, and until the second year of *Daryavesh II*.

It was during this time that the story of *Purim* took place. Subsequently, *Daryavesh II*, a son of *Esther* and *Achashverosh*, gave permission for the Jews to rebuild the *Bais Hamikdash*. He even gave funds to assist in its construction. He stipulated, just as *Koresh* had done before him, that the first story be built of wood. If the Jews would ever rebel against him and try to regain their independence, it would be easy to destroy their *Bais Hamikdash* by setting it on fire. The Persian empire lasted a total of 54 years until it was defeated by the Greeks.

## **The Kingdom of Greece**

Far away to the west, across the Mediterranean Sea, there was a people that lived on very rocky, mountainous terrain, on the Aegean peninsula and its nearby islands. Today we call this country Greece. At that time, however, these people were divided into many city-states and kingdoms. They did not live in harmony, but were usually warring with each other. Because they were not united, it was easy for King *Daryavesh* to conquer them and impose taxes on them. One of the kingdoms in the northern part of Greece was called Macedonia. Their king was Philip, who managed to conquer and unify the entire country into one united people. Now that Philip had the entire nation behind him, he turned his attention towards the enemy - Persia. As Philip was engaged in war with Persia, he was killed by one of his assistants, and it seemed that all his efforts would now be thwarted.

Philip had a nineteen-year-old son, whose name was Alexander. Alexander was exceptionally talented at battle, and immediately assumed the leadership of his father's armies. Although vastly outnumbered, his soldiers went to battle against *Daryavesh* and defeated the Persian army in 3442 (1314 BCE). This brought an end to the Persian empire forever.

## ***Doniel's Visions of the Four Kingdoms***

All this history had long been foretold by the prophets, especially *Doniel*. During *Galus Bavel*, prophetic visions were shown to *Doniel*, informing him of the four nations that would enslave the Jewish people. In one vision, he saw four wild animals, each one destroying the one that came before it. *Bavel* was shown as a lion, Persia as a bear, Greece as a leopard, and the fourth as an awesome animal with iron teeth, which would trample and consume everything in its path. This fourth animal symbolized the mighty, vicious kingdom of Rome.

In his first vision, he was not shown many details about the second and third wild animals. In the second vision, he was shown much greater details about those two nations. This time, they were portrayed in a different form. The second beast was a ram which would gore with its horns, and all the other animals would be unable to stand up to it. This represented Persia, which would be extremely successful in conquering many nations, and amass a huge empire of one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. *Doniel* prophesied that a he-goat would come from the west so rapidly that it would appear to be flying, without its feet touching the ground. The goat would attack the ram with tremendous rage, and the ram would not have the strength to withstand the attack. This prophecy referred to Alexander and the Greek army.

## **Alexander's Conquests and *Shimon Hatzadik***

Alexander travelled far and wide, conquering nation after nation. He amassed a vast empire which spread from Greece all the way to India, and down to Egypt. As soon as Persia was defeated by Greece, all of Persia's possessions automatically came under Grecian rule. In the course of his conquests, Alexander came to *Eretz Yisroel*. There was no thought of resistance or rebellion; the Greeks were simply too mighty. At that time, the community in *Eretz Yisroel* was still very young as the *Bais Hamikdash* had been built only thirty-four years earlier. They were

also living among bitter enemies, the *Kusim*. (When the ten tribes had been sent into exile almost 240 years earlier, the conquerer *Sancheriv*, king of *Ashur*, imported a people called the *Kusim* to settle *Eretz Yisroel*. The *Kusim* had been living there ever since, and bitterly resented the return of the Jews to their ancestral homeland. They were sly and ruthless, and tried to interfere with the rebuilding of *Yerushalayim* and the *Bais Hamikdash* in any way that they could, even resorting to violence.)

Now, with the arrival of Alexander, the *Kusim* found an excellent opportunity to slander the Jewish people. They told Alexander that the Jews were planning a rebellion and did not respect the king. Alexander gave them permission to kill the Jews and do with them as they please. The slander became known to *Shimon Hatzadik*, who was a grandson of the *Kohen Gadol*. He dressed himself in the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* and marched out to meet Alexander, followed by a parade of the most distinguished Jews and young *kohanim* holding torches. When Alexander saw *Shimon Hatzadik*, he hurried down off his horse and bowed down to the ground before *Shimon*. His officers said to him, "A king such as yourself bows before this Jew?!!" He answered them, "Before each victorious battle that I fight, I see a vision of this man leading me into victory." Alexander asked *Shimon* why he came to him. *Shimon* answered, "Is it possible that, because of idol worshippers' slander (that we are rebelling against you), you would destroy a house (the *Bais Hamikdash*) where they pray for you and for the success of your reign? "Who are they?" Alexander asked. "These *Kusim* who stand near you right now!" said *Shimon*. Alexander replied that the Jews could punish the *Kusim* for their treachery in any way they wished. From that time on, Alexander gave power to the Jewish people to rule over the *Kusim* and deprive them of their independence.

When Alexander was taken on a tour of *Yerushalayim* and the *Bais Hamikdash*, he stated his intention to have a statue of himself built in memory of his visit. Of course, it was strictly forbidden to have a statue erected in the *Bais Hamikdash*! The Jews appeased him by promising that every male child that would be born to the *kohanim* in the coming year would be named Alexander in his honor.

### **After Alexander's Death**

Although the *Yevanim* remained in control of *Eretz Yisroel* for 180 years, Alexander himself reigned for a total of only twelve years. One of his officers put poison in his wine, and he died at the age of thirty-two. As he was dying, he wrote a last will and testament in which he divided his empire into twelve parts. Alexander's wishes were not carried out, and after much fighting the empire was finally split into four parts. The land of Egypt was given to an officer who adopted the name *Talmy*. All the kings who followed him were also known by the name *Talmy*. The second portion consisted of Syria, *Bavel*, and also the Jewish land of *Yehudah*. The third was an empire carved out of Persia and eastward into Asia, and the fourth consisted of Greece and Macedonia. *Eretz Yisroel* was at times under the rule of the northern king, but sometimes shifted back to the rule of the southern empire in Egypt. Not too long after the division of the empire, *Talmy* defeated the northern kingdom and took the land of *Yehudah* for

himself. (Much later, at the time of the war of *Chanukah*, the king of the Syrian Greeks to the north was Antiochus, and *Eretz Yisroel* was in his domain.)

### **The (Septuagint) תרגום השבעים**

Talmy II was a scholar who loved books of all sorts. He had a deep respect for the *chachomim* and for the *Torah*, and wanted, more than anything, to be able to study the *Torah* in Greek. So, he commanded the *Kohen Gadol* to send him seventy of the greatest *chachomim*. When they came, he put each one in a separate place and commanded them to translate the *Torah* into Greek. All the *chachomim* understood that there are things in the *Torah* which could not be translated literally for a gentile king, because he would not understand them. He would belittle and make fun of the *Torah*. Although they could not confer with each other, each of the *chachomim* altered the text from a literal translation to a loose translation, and all seventy versions were identical! This translation is called the Septuagint, which in Greek means "the translation of the seventy."

From that time on, the words of the *Chumash* were accessible to the nations of the world as well as to the Jewish people. *Chazal* tell us that when the *Torah* was translated into Greek, darkness settled upon the world for three days. It was considered a tragic time, as sad as the day when *Bnei Yisroel* made the golden calf. Although we don't begrudge other nations the opportunity to learn from our *Torah* and be influenced by it, the *Torah* was greatly cheapened by this translation. *Torah* is infinite, with an infinite number of meanings and lessons to be learned from each word and every letter. The translation limits the *Torah* to just one, superficial meaning. Also, the fact that the *Torah* was now in the hands of the gentiles meant that they could distort it if they wanted to. This they certainly did, in the course of time! The Christian religion is based on a very distorted understanding of the *Tanach*. Islam also is based, to a great extent, on a distorted view of the *Tanach*.

### **The צדוקים**

During the period when the *Yevanim* were in control of *Eretz Yisroel*, new heretical ideas arose, for the very first time in history. One was the prevalent denial of the belief in *Olam Haba*. In order to counteract this belief, The Men of the Great Assembly decreed that after each *bracha* in the *Bais Hamikdash*, the people should respond by blessing *Hashem "min ha'olam v'ad ha'olam."*

Early in the era of the second *Bais Hamikdash*, two groups arose that corrupted our *mesorah*. These were the *Tzadokim* and *Bitussim*. The founders of these two groups, *Tzadok* and *Bituss*, were *talmidim* of *Anitgnos Ish Socho*. When he taught, "Do not be like servants who serve the master with intention of receiving reward," they declared that he meant to say that there is no such thing as an afterlife. Of course, *Anitgnos* meant no such thing! He only meant that we should serve *Hashem* out of love, and not for the reward. However, these two *reshaim* actually understood from *Anitgnos'* words precisely that which they wanted to hear. The belief in the Afterlife is a major hindrance to one who desires to live a life of indulgence and constant

partying. After all, if there is an Afterlife, then this world is merely a preparation, a temporary stopover, where we earn our place in eternity. Reward and punishment need not necessarily be meted out in this world, since *Hashem* has forever to settle the accounts. If, on the other hand, this life is the only existence, and since we see no obvious pattern of reward and punishment, then the only sensible thing to do is to indulge in as many pleasures as we can while we are alive. This was precisely what *Tzadok* and *Beitus* wanted to do, so they grabbed at the opportunity to misinterpret *Antignus'* words to that effect.) Although they claimed to believe in *Hashem* and in the written *Torah*, they really did not believe in anything at all. However, they knew that the people would not tolerate them if they told the truth, so they said that they do not believe in the oral *Torah* and in the right of the *chachomim* to enact Rabbinic laws. They broke away from the *Torah*, and their followers became known as *Tzadokim* and *Bitussim*. These two groups were greedy and ruthless, with no other interests but money, power, and indulging themselves in the pleasures of this world. They were a constant source of trouble to our people up until the time that the *Bais Hamikdash* was destroyed.

### **The New Ruling Class**

When the Jewish people were under the Greek-Egyptian rule of *Talmy*, he demanded that they pay him very heavy taxes. *Chonio*, a son of *Shimon Hatzadik*, was a very selfish and irresponsible *Kohen Gadol*. He refused to bother collecting the taxes for *Talmy*, even though this posed a threat to national security. *Chonio* had a nephew named *Yosef ben Tovia*, who was brilliant and charming, yet sly and without scruples. He convinced his uncle to let him go to Egypt to appease the king, and was given money for expenses from government funds. With this money, he first bought lavish gifts to win over the king's messenger so he could obtain an extension of time to pay the taxes. Then he went to the *Kussim*, with whom he was very friendly, and negotiated an enormous loan. When he went down to Egypt, he had enough money to buy lavish gifts for the king and his ministers, and also to purchase the concession of collecting the taxes in the land of *Yehuda*. Of course, a tax collector needs a police force behind him, so the king supplied him with an army of three thousand soldiers to help him collect the taxes. He returned to *Eretz Yisroel* with an army behind him. The first place he went to collect taxes was the city of *Aza*. He demanded that they pay seven times the original amount of the tax. The people there did not respond to this request, so he took ten of their leaders and had them hanged. He also robbed the citizens of their money. The news spread across the land, and the people were terrified. From then on, whenever *Yosef* approached a city, the people came out to greet him with the tax money in advance. In this manner, he gained control over the entire *Eretz Yisroel*. All of *Yosef's* assistants became very wealthy, and they became the ruling upper class among the Jewish people.

### **The Misyavnim**

*Yosef* and his followers became the first *Misyavnim*. The word “*Misyavnim*” means “people who make themselves into Greeks.” These Jews longed to be part of the Greek culture,

and live the same lifestyle as the Greeks. They cast away observance of *Torah* and *mitzvos* in order to live their lives like their gentile conquerors. When the Jews had lived under the Babylonians and the Persians, they never tried to assimilate into these cultures. The Babylonians and Persians were coarse, rude people, in whom there was nothing to admire. Not so the Greeks. Greek culture was very aesthetic and attractive. The Greek language was very beautiful. In this language, they wrote poetry and ballads about their heroes. They staged plays and sang songs of bravery. The Greeks were experts in architecture and built magnificent buildings. They revered physical beauty, especially of the human body. The men spent their days in gymnasiums in sports, games and body-building.

The Greeks worshipped many gods. They attributed to their gods all the faults that humans can have. Their gods were immoral, and fought in rivalry over girlfriends. They robbed, lied, and deceived one another. It goes without saying that, if the Greeks imagined their gods behaving this way, they would not hesitate to act this way themselves. They had no guilty conscience when they did something wrong, because their belief did not teach right and wrong, only indulgence. Such a lifestyle is tempting to people. Although every person has the capacity for greatness and nobility, there is also a side of the human personality which longs for a life of indulgence without restrictions.

### **Violence and Corruption**

*Chazal* tell us that enemies that come from outside are not nearly as harmful as those that come from within the Jewish people. The *Misyavnim* were not content to live their lives unhindered by the restrictions of their ancient faith. They wanted to take control of the whole country, and force everyone else to live as they themselves desired to live. They accomplished this through the influence they gained by giving significant bribes to the king in Syria. In the long period between the appearance of the first *Misyavnim* and the war of *Chanukah*, life as an observant Jew became increasingly difficult. These evil, power-hungry Jews manipulated the Syrian-Greek kings to give them control over the nation, and particularly over the *Bais Hamikdash*. The position of *Kohen Gadol* was sold to the highest bidder, regardless of how corrupt an individual he was. They introduced foreign innovations into the *Bais Hamikdash* and *Yerushalyim*. The atmosphere in the Jewish land rapidly deteriorated to be more Greek-like than Jewish. Any resistance from the G-d fearing *tzadikim* was put down by brutal force. This was the situation even before the beginning of Antiochus' reign.

### **Antiochus**

Antiochus would not have forbidden the Jews to forsake the *Torah* of his own accord. It was the *Misyavnim* who incited him to do so. The real enemies in the story of *Chanukah* were the *Misyavnim*, even more than the Greeks. A very corrupt individual from the *Misyavnim* purchased the appointment of *Kohen Gadol* through a massive bribe. The king then gave him control of the entire land. The *Sanhedrin* was stripped of all its power, and the *Misyavnim* went all out to desecrate everything holy to the Jewish people. At the insistence of the new *Kohen*

*Gadol*, a gymnasium was built right near the *Har Habayis*, where young *kohanim* were encouraged to spend their days in body building and sports competitions, rather than studying the *avodah*. Soon a feud arose, and a new *Kohen Gadol* (who was not even a *Kohen*) was appointed. It was only then, in 3616 (140 BCE), that Antiochus began making decrees against *mitzvah* observance.

### ***Mesirus Nefesh for Mitzvos***

There were three years during which the *korban tamid* was not brought at all. In addition, there were numerous decrees the *Yevanim* instituted to prevent *Bnai Yisroel* from doing *mitzvos*. Many courageous and pious Jews made every effort to circumvent these decrees. When the king forbade bringing *bikurim* to the *Bais Hamikdash*, Jews loaded their wagons with *bikurim*, covered with dried figs to conceal the *bikurim*. When the guards on the highways asked them where they were going, they responded that they were going to the pressing house to press the dried figs into round cakes. The guards let them through, and they brought their *bikurim* to the *Bais Hamikdash*. When the *Yevanim* decreed that no one was permitted to bring wood for the *mizbeach*, they made the wood into ladders and pretended they were going to pigeon coops in the area. When they got through, they took the ladders apart and brought the wood to the *Bais Hamikdash*. Both of these exploits are remembered in the *Kinos* we read on *Tisha B'av*.

The *Yevanim* decreed that no one may perform a *bris milah*, on pain of death. Many Jews risked their lives, and indeed many lost their lives, performing this precious *mitzvah*. They had to do it secretly, and devised various methods of letting people know there was to be a *bris*. In some places, they lit candles, (which is the reason there is a *minhag* to light candles at a *bris*). In other places, they would make noise with a grinder to grind the medicine powders that would be sprinkled on the baby's wound.

Some Jews chose death rather than surrender their faithfulness to *Hashem*. *Megilas Antiochus* is a historical document written about *Chanukah*. It is recorded there that when the *Yevanim* decreed that every Jew must openly break the *Shabbos*, one thousand Jews went to hide in a cave. The *Misyavnim* tattled on them, and troops were dispatched to the opening of the cave. The Jews were given the choice of compliance or death, and they all chose death. (This was *halachically* correct, because in a time of forced conversion, one is obligated to give up one's life.)

When the *Yevanim* saw that the Jews were not buckling under, they made new and even harsher decrees. They did not allow any *Torah* study, and they interfered with Jewish family life. Life became basically unbearable for anyone who wanted to keep *mitzvos*.

### ***Matisyahu and His Sons***

*Matisyahu*, son of *Yochanan* (a former *Kohen Gadol*), was already a very old man at the time of the war of *Chanukah*. He and his five sons were hiding in the village of *Modeyin*. Their distress over what was happening knew no bounds. *Matisyahu* secretly sent his son *Yehudah* through all the Jewish cities to gather all who feared *Hashem*, with the ancient battle cry, "Whoever is for



*Hashem* come to me!" A group of the devoted ones came with him back to the village, and *Matisyahu* blessed them and encouraged them. He told them to *daven* to *Hashem* and to fight against their enemies.

The treacherous *Misyavnim* informed the government of an impending rebellion, so they sent an army to *Modeyin* to forcibly convert *Matisyahu* and his followers to their idolatry. When they arrived, they built an altar to the Greek god and commanded that a pig should be offered up on it. They asked *Matisyahu* to be the first, but he refused, saying, "You do what your king commands you, and we will do what our King commands us."

One of the wayward Jews now slaughtered the *chazir* and brought it up on the altar. *Matisyahu* was enraged, and zealously acted for the *Kavod* of *Hashem*. He and his sons pulled out small swords that they had concealed under their garments. *Matisyahu* jumped onto the altar and chopped off the head of the Jew who had offered the sacrifice. Then he proceeded to kill the commanding Greek officer. The rebellion was on! *Matisyahu* and his sons attacked the Greek army so fearlessly, and killed so many, that the rest ran away. *Matisyahu* broke apart the altar, and proclaimed, "Whoever cares about the *Torah* of G-d, and upholds His covenant, should come and join me." *Matisyahu* lived only one year after the beginning of the rebellion. Before his death, he appointed his son *Yehuda* to lead the war effort.

## A Long War

There were many episodes of attacks by the massive armies of the *Yevanim*, compared to the very small group of *Chashmonaim*. The help from *Hashem* was unmistakable and miraculous. Just as we say in *Al Hanisim*, it was "the mighty in the hands of the weak and the many into the hands of the few." After much fighting, the Jews were finally able to reach the *Bais Hamikdash* and cleanse it from the mess that the *Yevanim* had wrought there.

The miracle of the oil is well known to all Jews, young and old. However, we need to understand why this miracle was necessary. The general rule is that *Hashem* does not want the world to run miraculously, and only performs a miracle when there is a dire need. Was it really necessary for *Hashem* to make a miracle so that they could light the *Menorah* all that week? What would have happened if they would have had to wait another week until they could produce a fresh supply of oil? After all, the *Menorah* hadn't been lit for so long! Was it *pikuach nefesh* that it be lit during that week?! There is a very important message here, one of the most fundamental messages of the *Yom Tov* of *Chanukah*.

The war of *Chanukah* was not fought for independence from foreign rule. *Eretz Yisroel* had already been under the dominion of alien rulers for three hundred years, since the fall of the First *Bais Hamikdash*. It was fought exclusively so that *Yidden* could continue to learn *Torah* and keep *mitzvos*, just as they had always done since *Matan Torah* at *Har Sinai*.

The family of *Matisyahu* and their followers had been *moser nefesh al kiddush Hashem*. They spared no effort, and no sacrifice was too great. Their comforts, their possessions, and even their very lives were all secondary to their desire for *k'vod Shomayim*. They gave their all, and held nothing back. They deserved a heavenly sign of approval. The oil of the *Menorah*

symbolizes the light of *Torah*, which was precisely what they had preserved with their superhuman sacrifices. In response, *Hashem* also did something He generally prefers not to do; He made a miracle to show them how great was their *z'chus* in preserving the *Torah* for all future generations.

One of the greatest lessons we can learn from *Chanukah* and the *Chashmonaim* is that we should always do our utmost for *Kiddush Hashem*. This should be first and foremost in our minds, in all that we do. Then *Hashem* will bless our efforts, and we will be *zocheh* to the final *geula*, when we will all join to greet *Moshiach Tzidkainu*. Amen!

### **The Ani Maamin Foundation**

This essay is part of the activities of the Ani Maamin Foundation. Ani Maamin's goal is to spread *chizuk* in *emunah* in our *Torah* world to educators, parents and children alike. By creating audio and written materials that show how compelling our *emunah* really is, we hope to bring about a heightened awareness and clarity in *emunah* to *bnei Torah* everywhere.

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