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1. Throughout ages, Chanukah variously interpreted. Is to credit of this minor festival that it has unique meaning for every age. And important, therefore, to show its relevance to our own day with its problems, values and aspirations.
2. Through the ages, we have always recalled the Miracle of the Oil. It is important to remember this NEIS SHEMEN, for the beauty, the warmth and the religious quality of this aspect of Chanukah is eternally fresh and captivating. But - not enough.
3. At beginning of Zionist era, when it was important to educate Jews to more militant attitude, emphasis was placed not on NEIS SHEMEN but on NEIS MILCHAMAH. The military victory was given prominence, and the Maccabees lost their priestly character and became Zionist heroes, Jewish Leginaires, Haganah leaders; while anachronistic historically, were extremely valuable pedagogically. Their fight was for the Homeland, nothing more nothing less.....

That too is an important and integral part of Chanukah. It IS a call to activism, to resisting oppression and preserving the homeland and nation. But it is a great and treacherous mistake to make of the Maccabees merely secular military heroes. If that were the case, Chanukah would be celebrated with military parades and cannon salutes, and ~~in~~ we would reverence symbols of warfare. But the fact is that we say Hallel, not parade, and light candles, and not reverence swords. FACT is that we recall NEIS MILCHAMAH only as praise of G-d - it was He Who delivered us, not the Macabbees (merely instruments of G-d's redemptive powers); it was our love for Torah that stood us in good stead, not our strategy; the victory was not a human one but a Divine one.

4. In America, in addition to the purely religious aspect (NES SHEMEN) and the influence of Zionism in establishing the military aspect (N.MIL.), a third aspect comes to the fore. The Macabees fought for Freedom of Rel., Freedom of Conscience. It was a war which was the first of its kind, and heralded much in advance the democratic revolutions throwing off oppression etc. etc.....

That is true..... But does not exhaust the meaning of Chanukah. Macabees fought to prevent Greeks from forcing us to their way of thinking, but did not fight for privilege of Jews bowing to idols and eating forbidden foods. Incident started when a Hellenized Jew of that era ate forbidden meat (non-Kosher) in presence of observing Jews. It is Freedom of Religion, yes, but much much more than that.

5. A fourth aspect of the Chanukah celebration that is frequently mentioned comes closer to a significant interpretation for our age, but not all the way. And that is, that it was war between two cultures. Judaism and Hellenism diametrically opposed. Was victory of monotheism over paganism, True Religion over Idolatry, supremacy of Holiness over Supremacy of Beauty., the Ethical life over the brutal and cruel, though esthetic, life.

That is true enough - as matter fact, all that we mentioned is true: Miracle, Martial assertion and national self-determination, Freedom from religious oppression, resistance to idolatry.

But if we are to look for something more significant, we must find in the antagonism between Judaism and Hellenism some element which is critical of our society today. I say that advisedly, because the chief function of Religion - any religion - in Society is or ought to be critical. Only by being so can it lift it higher and ennoble it.....

6. Would say therefore, that what must be stressed is opposition of Jews & Judaism not to Hellenism with its idolatry alone, but to its whole attitude to Religion - even its own Religion. Paganism had religion, and believed in it. But pagans relegated their religion to their temples, and their service was either sacrificial or magical. An act or a few spoken words were supposed to have some magical effect in appeasing the gods. But their Religion did not enter their personal or governmental lives in any deep way. It was a cult, nothing more. And it is that that Hellenized Jews wanted to do with Judaism. It is THAT against which the Macabees fought. It is that which is the sin of our own age - and against which Chanukah agitates this very day.

7. Talmud expresses formula for law of Chanukah in three significant words: NEIR ISH UVEISSO - the candle, the man, and his home. The sense of Dedication which is involved in the candle lighting is never to be restricted to some kind of magical placation of desert gods. It is to involve all of man ISH, his whole personality and character, at all times, in this Chanukah or dedication. And it is not to be exclusively a Temple function. The whole war, you might think was fought to preserve the Temple for ~~defiling~~ sanctity, from Greek defiling, should not then the celebration be one of Temple or Synagogue Service? NO! UVEISSO - restrict it to Synag. and you have drawn its teeth and neutralized its power. It is to be a function of the HOME.....

8. Now compare this intensely Jewish attitude ~~of~~ toward Religion, the basic principle that Man's duties to and answerability to G-d must pervade all of his waking moments, to not only the Hellenists of several thousand years ago, but to the Religion which predominates in Western Civilization.

Archbishop Temple of London (London Times, Dec. 24, 1952, quoted by Epstein, "Faith of Judaism" p. 307) "In discharging his duties in the world, a Christian cannot consciously remember G-d for most of the day. The distinctive quality of his service and, therefore, the influence of Christianity on the world, will be determined by the comparatively rare moments in which Christian discipline obliges him to remember G-d".

Here is the Hellenistic, the Greek-pagan element in Christianity. To be Jewish means not only to have a different religion, but a completely different approach to that Religion. That is what the Macabees believed, that is what they fought for, that is what Chanukah means to us today. It means that you may not "kick G-d upstairs" and keep Him prophylactic in a clean and reverent attic while you go about the main portion of life without Him. It means Religion is Life, or there is no religion.

9. It is a tragedy, but a historical fact, that the dynasty of the Hasmonean family fell prey to the same mistake they fought so gallantly at the beginning. After the initial spirit of the great victory wore off, the Hasmonean kings began to show signs of corruption. Not that they denied that there was a G-d or that they were good-hearted people. But they reserved the Temple only for Religion, and they sufficed with a few well-chosen prayers and donations. Otherwise their lives were empty of G-d, of Jewishness, of observance, of ethics. They became Jewish pagans, and succumbed to Antiochus' persuasion peacefully and voluntarily. They built up the Temple, but tore down the Image of G-d which was impressed on their souls. They offered prayers in reverent solemnity, but violated Justice callously.

It was against this attempt by Jews - this SORT of attempt, characteristic of almost every age and even more so of our own - that the Prophets of Israel fought. It was a fight against making of the Torah mere ritual, mere ceremonial, mere sentiment, and of degrading the Divine Name to the status of a carefully guarded fiction (Martin Buber, "At the Turning" p. 16),

10. It is this, then, which Chanukah comes to teach today. It is a challenge, a call, a summons to return to the Jewish conception of Religion in which it is not merely compartmentalized, not shoved away into a Temple, not sterilized by a hypocritical "respect" which makes it impotent and meaningless.

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The gentile ~~historian~~ John Macmurray (quoted Epstein ibid p. 308) maintains that whereas other people "have a religion, the Jews are the only people who were and are religious. They alone conceived religion not as a particular sphere of human activity, but as the synthesis of all". That is what Chanukah must mean to us, that is where it must criticize us. We must not have religion. We must be religious. In the AL HANISSIM PRAYER, we read of the victorious Macabees returning to the Temple and there lighting the candles. But before that, in order and importance, we read that there was a victory of OSKEI TORASECHA - people whose entire life was Torah. That comes first - living Torah, in all aspects of Life.

11. May that message of Chanukah inspire us to absorb G-dliness in all parts of our life even as the light of the Chanukah candles fills our homes. Only then will there be a true PIRSUMEI NISSA - a real miracle, worthy of our pride.