

Message for Chanukah

One of the most prominent Jews in the US Civil Rights movement was Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Warsaw-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20th century. Heschel had taught the Talmud in Germany but emigrated when the Nazis rose to power. Heschel's sister Esther was killed in a German bombing. His mother was murdered by the Nazis, and two other sisters, Gittel and Devorah, died in Nazi concentration camps. The deaths of these family members along with the writings of the Tanakh, particularly those of the prophets, had a profound effect on Heschel's sense of social justice and it played a part in his joining the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Heschel became a great friend and supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. As Heschel's daughter later recalled, "My father's relationship with Dr. King felt a little miraculous. My father went to Chicago to give a speech at a conference on religion and race that had been organized by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. And that's where he met Dr. King for the first time. And something happened in that moment. They suddenly, instantly became very close, in a very deep way. And they worked together, lectured together and talked together for years after that. Within a few months, Dr. King came to a convention of members of the United Synagogue representing Conservative synagogues around the country and spoke with my father about race, Soviet Jews and Israel. And they continued in that way. Clarence Jones, Dr. King's personal attorney, told me they would have meetings to plan things and Dr. King would always say, "Well, somebody call Rabbi Heschel and see if he's free that day. They were on each other's minds and they were present even if they weren't physically in the room; they were present to each other." When King called Heschel to ask him to march with him at Selma the former did not hesitate to respond. "It was a Friday afternoon, shortly before Shabbat, that I was at home with my mother and we received a telegram asking my father to come to the march in Selma. We called my father, who was still at his office, and he came home, made flight reservations and packed his suitcase before Shabbat. It was a nervous Shabbat for us. When Shabbat was over, my father made Havdalah and we went downstairs. And I remember that moment vividly because I was worried that he may never come back, that he was going to a very dangerous place. And so I remember vividly when he kissed me goodbye and he got into a taxi to go to the airport. And it was frightening also because my father was not in great health. The picture that everybody looks at today with great pride was a moment of tension and fear, but you don't see it on their faces." And yet, according to Susannah Heschel, that moment was also a holy one in her father's mind. "He felt holiness in the march; it reminded him of walking with Hasidic rebbes in Europe, which is a religious act. He said that Dr. King told him that this was the greatest day of his life. It wasn't like Bloody Sunday, which was a few weeks earlier. It wasn't a moment of terror. It became a religious moment when all Americans, in a sense, came together and said that we are a moral nation. He revitalized us, and my father was part of it."

As is apparent, Heschel's personal experience of persecution attuned him to the oft-repeated message of the Hebrew prophets, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with

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your God." And it was this that compelled him to act when he witnessed the suffering of others. Indeed, to act thus was, for Heschel, a principle means of connecting with the God who surpasses all our understanding. As the sages of the Talmud have Hashem say, "Oh, that my people would forsake me but keep my Torah, so that by keeping my Torah they would come to know me." Heschel's religious philosophy fully embraced this concept. As Heschel wrote, "To perform deeds of holiness is to absorb the holiness of deeds." "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does." Whereas the term ceremony merely expresses what we think, mitzvah expresses what God wills: a mitzvah [commandment/good deed] is "a prayer in the form of a deed." In other words, one doesn't come to know God so much by means of direct revelation or theological speculation, but through the simple practice of Torah - since the Torah is an expression of God's character and will. Opposing injustice, as the Maccabees did at Chanukah, is central to this expression of character and will, and nothing animates us to oppose injustice quite as much as having experience it ourselves. Perhaps this is why Jews, having suffered so much throughout history, have not just a unique, but a powerful contribution to make in opposing injustice today. With regard to our own experience of injustice and oppression the Torah commands us in Devarim 25:17, to "Remember what Amalek did to you on the road as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the road as you were exhausted and straggling behind when you were tired and weary. He did not fear God. Therefore, when Adonai your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the Land Adonai your God is giving you as your inheritance to possess, you are to blot out all memory of Amalek from under heaven. Don't forget!" In this passage then we are specifically commanded to "remember" and not to forget the injustices perpetrated against us by the Amalekites. This memory of injustice is intended to inform subsequent action. The perpetrator of injustice is to be blotted out. The bully is to be brought down. Indeed it is important to note in this respect that the command to remember and blot out was not given to the generation that suffered the oppression of Amalek but to their children. As a consequence we are to conclude that it is the Biblical duty of each Jew to actively work against injustice and oppression in the present on the basis of the past. This attitude also informs the commandment that we must "neither wrong nor oppress a foreigner living among you, for you yourselves were foreigners in the land of Egypt." Just as we are to oppose injustice in the present because of the lessons we are to derive from our past, so also we are to actively comfort the oppressed and marginalised. We are to empathise with the sufferings of others and give succour to them because we too have suffered. We know from our past what it is like to be friendless, marginalised, defamed and persecuted and so we are commanded to befriend and support all those who are like us in this respect in the present. In this way our sufferings, which might otherwise have the power to break our spirits, to make us bitter, to fear, and to cause us to withdraw from others, will work creatively to produce the alternative of love and compassion in us. As we extend our hands to others who might be experiencing persecution and injustice we thus begin to reflect God's own attributes of love and mercy. Therefore, in the Torah God commands us "not to abuse any widow or orphan" for "If you do abuse them in any way, and they cry to me, I will certainly heed their cry. My

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anger will burn, and I will kill you with the sword — your own wives will be widows and your own children fatherless.” Moreover, “If you loan money to one of my people who is poor, you are not to deal with him as would a creditor; and you are not to charge him interest. If you take your neighbour’s coat as collateral, you are to restore it to him by sundown, because it is his only garment — he needs it to wrap his body; what else does he have in which to sleep? Moreover, if he cries out to me, I will listen; because I am compassionate.”

You know, the Torah has been unfairly castigated by many people as being harsh and vindictive, as being the product of a vengeful, tribal god. Indeed, the Tanakh which contains the Torah is also often unfairly contrasted against the Messianic Writings - the so-called New Testament - which alone is alleged to contain the revelation of God as being full of love and compassion. However, anyone who seriously studies the Torah will know this to be a canard. On the contrary, the Torah constantly beats with a heart of love and compassion because *God* is revealed to be full of love and compassion. As Tehillim 86 says, “Adonai, you are kind and forgiving, full of grace toward all who call on you.” “God, arrogant men are rising against me, a gang of brutes is seeking my life, and to you they pay no attention. But you, Adonai, are a merciful, compassionate God, slow to anger and rich in grace and truth.” For this reason the Tanakh constantly rails against injustice and demands the punishment of the oppressor - because this is what God Himself is demonstrated to do. That is why throughout the Tanakh, beginning with the seminal event of the Exodus, God is portrayed as a liberator who is constantly working to set the oppressed free. “In their trouble,” says Tehillim 107, “they cried to Adonai, and he rescued them from their distress. He led them from darkness, from death-dark gloom, shattering their chains. Let them give thanks to Adonai for his grace, for his wonders bestowed on humanity! For he shattered bronze doors and cut through iron bars.” It is because God is a liberator, that we, His people, are to be like Him. Indeed, as we have seen, this conception has informed Jewish thought for millennia.

Indeed, there is no better time for us to contemplate all this than at Chanukah, a festival which memorialises how a handful of Jews stood up against oppression two thousand years ago. Antiochus Epiphanes sought to impose Greek thought, religion and practice upon the Jews in Israel, and was brutal and unforgiving in his pursuit of this aim. Jewish peculiarity and refusal to assimilate to the Greek ways offended Antiochus, as in fact it continues to offend many today, and he thus sacked the Holy Temple and carried off its gold. He also, as Josephus records, placed an idolatrous image of himself in the Holy Place, sacrificed pigs upon the altar and renamed the Temple as the Temple of Zeus. Second Maccabees records to this effect that “Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. For the Temple was filled with debauchery and revelling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws. People could neither keep the sabbath, nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves to be Jews.” But this is not all! Not content with merely desecrating the heart of the Hebrew cult, Antiochus then attempted to

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convert our people to the Greek religion at the point of the sword. Jews were forced, on pain of their life, to offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. He also forbade circumcision and his soldiers tore up Torah scrolls and killed anyone suspected of having followed the mitzvot. The cruelties perpetrated against our people were unimaginable, as First Maccabees records: "They kept using violence against Israel, against those who were found month after month in the towns. On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar that was on top of the altar of burnt offering. According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung infants from their mothers' necks." We remember these cruelties each year at Chanukah, as we also remember the response of not just a single family, but a single man. For while many Jews, for fear of their lives, succumbed to Antiochus' threats and enticements, one Jew, named Mattathias, refused to submit. When Antiochus' officers arrived at a town called Modi'in they carried out their usual procedure of building an idol altar and calling upon the head of the chief family to perform the first sacrifice after which the rest of the people usually followed. Mattathias, a devout priest, refused vehemently to perform this act, but whilst he was still talking with the officer another resident approached the altar to offer the sacrifice. Mattathias was filled with righteous indignation, at which point he and his sons with him grabbed their swords and slew both the man and Antiochus' officers, shouting at the same time, "If anyone be zealous for the laws of his country, and for the worship of God, let him follow me." With this act Mattathias and his sons fled for the hills and many others in Israel who heard of it soon joined them in their rebellion. Mattathias gathered a considerable force and waged a guerrilla war against Antiochus' forces, destroying pagan altars throughout the Land and killing those who had embraced the Greek gods. After Mattathias' death command of the rebellion passed to his son Y'hudah, who became known as Maccabeus – the Hammer. Under his leadership the strength of the rebels continued to grow until they both met and defeated a number of times in battle Antiochus' main army which he had sent into the Land to crush the rebellion. It was at this point that Y'hudah restored the Temple to the worship of Hashem and at which the miracle of lights took place.

As the Maccabees discovered, words are cheap, in the end only action counts. As Jews we are not exemption from taking action. On the contrary, both our history of persecution and our commandments, compel us to get involved and to act in bringing relief to those who are oppressed. Just Rabbi Heschel did! Is someone hungry? Then feed him! Is someone thirsty? Then give him something to drink! Is someone oppressed or being bullied then stand by his or her side. And do not be overcome by the odds. Just as the actions of one man, Mattathias, had a domino effect and transformed the fate of our people, bringing down the oppressor, so too may our actions today. Few of us can truly envisage the knock on effects of any mitzvah. As are not required to complete the work, but then again neither are you are allowed to stand idly by. As the Sages say, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." Indeed, as Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" Faith like this, like Mattathias' and like Heschel's, is transformative, let us go and do likewise. As the shaliach

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Yaakov, the brother of Yeshua, once wrote, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such 'faith' able to save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and someone says to him, 'Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!' without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead. But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!"