

# RABBI SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH ON CHANUKAH\*

Excerpted by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Originally חנוכה [Chanukah] belonged to a series of festive days listed in Megillath Taanith. . . . These days conveyed recollections of blissful events that proclaimed the invisible yet open intervention of God's almighty rule for the preservation of the people and the Law.

The silent beam of friendly lights relates the victory of light over darkness and tells of the "pure" Menorah's rescue from the clutches of Greek corruption. Chanukah recounts the rededication of the Sanctuary, which had been despoiled by the Greeks. The celebration of the eight-day Feast of Light recalls the victorious survival of the Sanctuary, not the courage of the Maccabees. It does not commemorate the liberation of the Jewish homeland from the grip of enemy hands; it hails the never-ending power of the Jewish Light and of the Jewish Sanctuary.

Chanukah represents the clash of two doctrines, two views, and two civilizations, capable of molding opinions, training and educating those who until this very day compete for mastery of the world. Hellenism and Judaism: These are the two forces whose effect upon the nations mark the historical development of humankind, and which surfaced in Judea for the first time in the days of Mattathias. Hellenism and Judaism: when examined in depth they are the two leading forces that today again are struggling for mastery in the Jewish world.

On the stage of history only two elements have appeared to dominate human intellectual development and actions: Hellenism—the blossoming of the spirit of Japhet which found expression in Greek culture, and Judaism—the spirit of [Shem's] Godly teaching lived and fulfilled by Israel. The Hellenistic spirit creates civilized, gentle, joyful and free people. And yet, Hellenistic culture contains only a small fraction of the truth that eventually effects the salvation of humankind. As long as Hellenism is not coupled with the spirit of Shem, as long as it prides itself on being the sole road to happiness, it falls prey to error and illusion, degeneration and decay.

Hellenistic culture knows how to arouse the desire for ennoblement of human character and life. But its measure for this ennoblement is only sensual beauty based on the symmetry of harmony and beauty. The search for self-ennoblement is motivated solely by a delight in one's own personality, by satisfaction with its improvement, and by

the pleasure derived from the awareness of a nobler existence.

Hellenistic culture is a protector of rights and freedom. These concepts, however, are applied only to those who are educated; they are subject to an arrogance that claims that the rights of human beings begin only after they have attained a certain level of culture. Therefore, sensitivity and concern regarding one's own self, and those close to oneself, are paired with an enormous callousness, with an utmost cruelty, which assumes that the inferior "uneducated masses" lack genuine feelings of honor or a sensitivity for freedom or human rights. Attica, so vainglorious about its rights and liberties, saw no contradiction in the fact that three-quarters of its inhabitants lived in servitude and slavery.

Hellenistic culture was unable to fashion a proper life-style for the individual, for families or for communal existence. When permeated by truth, elevated by purity, guided by righteousness, perfected by love, daily life with its variety of sentiments, feelings, thoughts, words, enjoyments and actions becomes a harmonious whole. The Japhet spirit conveyed only a hint of this total concept, its complete realization rests with the "God of Shem": יפת אלקים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם—"God will open the mind of Japhet, but will dwell in the tents of Shem." The spirit of Shem as disseminated by the Jewish people has made its impact upon humankind as no other force before it.

Even since Shem proclaimed the name of the "Only One" in the world, darkened minds have become enlightened, cobwebs of error and illusion have begun to disappear, and a true understanding of humankind's task in this world has become evident everywhere. Shem's revelation of this new name deepened the awareness of the world having been fashioned by an almighty creator. Ever since Shem proclaimed the name of the "One God" to all the nations did it become possible to consider all humankind as one community, one family, moved by a common spirit originating from a common source, working to reach a noble goal and developing toward a great future. Ever since Shem implanted the name of his "One God" in the minds and hearts of humankind has there blossomed a love that reaches out to the poor and the sick, to the unhappy and the destitute.

However, only a fraction of Shem's teaching was successfully conveyed to humankind. Only the theory was revealed to humankind while the "Law"

was omitted; the one factor was withheld on which the redemption and the harmonious organization of all humankind is based. Theory, even in its purest, unmutated form, only enlightens the mind; it is unable to redeem the “tents” of earthly existence and to achieve the perfection and purity of life itself. God’s glory is not confined to human minds and hearts alone, but yearns for the dwellings of humankind that are erected in the Divine spirit: וישכן באהלי שם—“It will dwell in the *tents* of Shem.” It is the Law alone that teaches humankind how to prepare its dwellings to welcome the splendor of God.

Only a fragment of the concept of God as promulgated by Shem was accepted (by the Church), and His Law was misjudged, cast away and scorned as an inferior ideology. It abandoned the reality of earthly existence, and emphasized the “next world.” Only when the Law of Shem’s God builds the dwellings of humankind, when His word enlightens the mind and warms the soul, when His Law becomes the yardstick for the fulfillment and progress of human existence on earth, only then will bliss and freedom, joy and pleasure enter the souls and homes of mortals on earth.

The teaching of Shem frees humankind from the pre-Hellenic belief in the unapproachable authority of powerful gods; it frees humankind from the Hellenic delusion that transformed human characteristics into godly attributes. It shows God, the One God, in His freedom and holiness, in His omnipotence and wisdom, in His justice and truth, in His love and His mercy. He calls to you: you are My likeness and I shall be your example; be holy and true, just and loving as I am, use all your strength, use the whole outside world, reign over the outside world that I have entrusted to you, according to My will; consecrate your earthly life and existence to build Me a sanctuary on earth so that I shall dwell in your midst and will bless you with My presence. This consecration of human life and existence for God, making it a sanctuary for God, a “tent of humankind in which God dwells,” is the substance of divine Law.

Japhetic culture offers humankind its own pleasure, its own sense of grace and beauty as the motive and measure for its own perfection; but it also leaves humankind subject to human shortcomings and weaknesses, errors and delusions. The opposite delusive belief (Christianity) denies the possibility of humankind’s ennoblement (“original sin”) and robs life on earth of all justification and happiness. The Law of the God of Shem, however, establishes God’s will as the motive and measure of humankind’s ennoblement. Just as this law shapes into a Divine sanctuary all the thoughts and

feelings, sensations and impulses, attractions and enjoyments of the whole spiritual-sensual life of the individual through the force of purity, freedom and holiness, it also builds the institutions of social life such as marriage, family, community, nation and states. The whole earthly existence will thus truly achieve that perfection which the Hellenic culture sought in vain in the limited sensual confines of human pleasure. Such perfection and beauty can be created only by Divine Law. This Law is the loudest protest against falsehood at either extreme. It protests as loudly against rejection as against deification of sensual life; it is as much opposed to overindulgence as it rejects suppression; it establishes right as the pillar of human society, and does not believe that love can compensate for the right that has been denied.

On the eve of the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev you kindle the Chanukah light in your home, and for eight days with the greeting of the ever-increasing light, the memory of an old story, of ancient times crosses the threshold of your mind.

Is this a story of the past?

“In those days rebels against the law came forward and tried to persuade the people thus: ‘Let us go and make a covenant with the people around us, for since we have separated ourselves from them many misfortunes have befallen us.’ These words found favor in the eyes of the multitude and several of the people declared themselves ready and set out to go to the king. The king granted them permission to introduce among themselves the customs of the heathens. They then erected a gymnasium in Jerusalem after the Greek manner—they let their foreskins grow; and withdrawing from the sacred covenant, they united with the nations, they abandoned themselves completely to the practice of what was evil.” (1 Maccabees Ch. 1)

Is this a story of the past?

“Jason, the brother of Onias, succeeding to the office of High Priest, arose, and went to the king, and promised him 360 talents of silver and in addition 80 talents from other revenues. Over and above this, he promised him another 150 talents, if he should be authorized to exercise supreme power and to erect a college and an institution for physical exercises. . . . When the king conceded this and Jason had received this authority, he immediately set about to lead his countrymen astray, persuading them to adopt Hellenic customs; he abolished those very commendable practices which the former king had instituted for the Jews; he discarded the customs that were in accordance with the law, and he substituted for them unlawful usages. Through this scandalous and criminal behavior of the godless and by no means high-priestly Jason, the move-

ment towards Hellenism and the impulse to adopt foreign practices became so strong that even the priests no longer concerned themselves with the service of the altar; instead they became contemptuous of the Temple, neglected the sacrifices, and ran out to participate in the illicit performances on the palaestra at the proclamation announcing the throwing of the discus. Their ancestral dignities they slighted, and Hellenic applause seemed to them the highest attainment." (2 Maccabees Ch. 4)

Is this, then, a story of the past?

If religious decadence in the Jewish sphere fills you with grief and sorrow, if you are nigh to despair of our future, if in fear you exclaim, "Has there ever been so gruesome a situation in Israel," then consider this story: see how once before, 2,000 years ago, High Priests, men entrusted with what is most sacred in Jewry, with the highest religious office, were themselves the first to betray God and His holy Law, to woo the favor of kings by religious treachery, seducing the Jewish nation and its youth. They vied with the well-to-do and the educated of their people in contempt of the Divine laws and Jewish morals, in honoring and adopting un-Jewish ways and un-Jewish culture—see how already thousands of years ago, the alluring light of culture and political advantage, in the shape of civic rights, has been employed by Israel's seducers to tempt them to revolt against God and His holy word.

For you must note that this revolt of which voices of the past have just given an account, this revolt was not one provoked from without; it was not the consequence of Antiochus' wild attack on Judaism; this revolt of the Jewish teachers of God's Law, and of the upper classes of society in Judea, was voluntary; it preceded the frenzy of the king; it was, strictly speaking, the actual cause, the real origin of the subsequent fanatical anti-Jewish outbreak. Not in his wildest dreams would it have occurred to Antiochus to convert Jews from Judaism to Greek culture, had not Jews and priests of Jewry disclosed to him that Judaism no longer held a first place in their heart, that they were only waiting for the royal command to place Zeus on the altar of the Eternal, and that at the same time the common people, the lower classes, could be easily lured into the other camp—or made to suffer martyrdom if they refused.

Jewry was persecuted, but everyone believed that Judaism was everlasting. It required nineteenth-century priests and disciples to set the spectacle of disloyal Jews before the eyes of princes and people, before any statesman conceived the idea of reforming Jewry by means of decrees and legal measures. It is only natural; respect yourself,

respect your past, respect your own sanctuary, and you will see that whatever opinion is held of you, whether you are regarded with favor or with disfavor, respect will not be denied you. But if you do not respect yourself, if you look contemptuously on the tombs of your ancestors, if you no longer consider your sanctuary worthy of respect, even of recognition, how can you demand that a stranger shall respect you, or respect your fathers? You may find many things in the world, but for respect you will beg in vain.

What was the mistake made by these "men of progress," "men of culture," "priests of reform," the political traffickers of religion, of the time of Antiochus in Judea? Listen to the illuminating tale of the Chanukah lights:

"The renegade sons of Judea had gone to such lengths, that the Greeks themselves finally dishonored the divine sanctuary by using it as a temple for Zeus.

One single pure spark, loyally treasured in but one single Jewish heart, is sufficient for God to set aflame once more the whole spirit of Judaism. And of all the oil, if all the forces that were to have preserved the light of God in Israel, were to be misused for the light of paganism—even then, one little crucible of oil, one heart which in a forgotten hidden corner, imprinted with the High Priest's seal, has faithfully remained untouched and undefiled, this one crucible is sufficient to become the salvation of the entire sanctuary when the right time and hour has come. "And even though all countries were bowed in obedience to Antiochus, if every man forsook the land of his fathers and assented to the king's command, even then, I and my sons and brothers will not forsake the laws of our fathers"—thus spoke the loyal Hasmonean heart of one single hero advanced in years—and Israel's sanctuary was saved.

It was not Judas Maccabeus who defeated Antiochus of Syria; it was the Jewish light that gained the victory over the dazzling luster of Hellenic splendor. The spirit that Mattathias had harbored in his priestly breast and had nurtured in his children was the rock upon which the Hellenic evil was smashed. This spirit, not the warrior's sword nor the priest's tiara interwoven with the crown of princely might, maintained the Law among the people.

Nor was it the Hasmonean dynasty of priests and kings who inherited Mattathias' spirit of devotion to the Law. But the people remained upright. Not in the palaces and temples, but in the humble dwellings of the people did the Hasmonean spirit of loyalty to the Law survive, did the Hasmonean light find an eternally secure place.

When the Hasmoneans celebrated their last Chanukah, they placed the lamp of consecration into the hands of every Jewish family . . . so that the consecration begun with the rededication of the Temple might be truly completed in the Jewish home, and that this consecration might be repeated year after year with ever-renewed inspiration. And so, by consecration its homes anew each year, every succeeding generation was to advance further and further in the consecration of the Sanctuary of God until that day when the House of God's Sanctuary would be sustained by every household in Israel, by the entire "House of Jacob," a day when the ultimate, true Chanukah can begin, marking Israel's arrival at the height of its goals.

All the millennia of our history have demonstrated the triumph of the Chanukah spirit in Israel's midst. Israel is the one nation that knows not only the historic Chanukah but also a constantly renewed Chanukah, a reconsecration celebrated over and over again, each time with greater inspiration and more intense devotion to the goal that was set for Israel from the beginning at a sevenfold height. Why, then, should we lose our courage now and celebrate Chanukah only as frigid remembrances of olden days instead of *חינוך על פי דרכו* [educate according to his way—Proverbs 22:6], a preparation and consecration for our own future? Why, then, should we not kindle the lights of Chanukah in our homes, confident that ultimately we will be able to reach our goal in an ever-brighter blaze of light? Israel began its Chanukah by kindling the lights of its homes from the light of the Temple, but the new, ultimate Chanukah will be attained when the light tended in Israel's homes will triumph so that they may ignite the light of the Temple to become a true, everlasting *נר תמיד* [eternal light].

Do not all the signs of our times indicate that we are in need of a new, genuine Chanukah? Do we not see the danger from the days of Antiochus once again threatening the temples and the homes of Israel, and does not the Sanctuary cry out for a new Hasmonean spirit to save it and its children from the taint of Hellenism that kills Jewish truth and Jewish life? Those who, as leaders and educators of the Jewish community, should be forming an iron phalanx around God's Sanctuary, have been duped by Hellenism, which bids man worship himself as a deity, deifies the humanist ideal with all its weaknesses and shortcomings, and makes etiquette and social acceptance the sole yardstick for duty and morality. It is a way of life that, instead of elevating humankind toward the light of the Divine, has dragged the Divine down into the murky twilight of elegant human sensualism. This

lifestyle, which robs man of his dignity and the Jew of his duty, has corrupted the very leaders who should be laboring to preserve the Sanctuary in its true character and to save the people, in its loyalty, from the onslaughts of un-Jewish evils. Have not the Jewish aristocracy and the Jewish priestly elite virtually defected from Jewish Law once again? Have they not, even as their predecessors "in days of old, at this season" (*בימים ההם בזמן הזה*), abused the sanctity of the synagogue and of the Torah, of the Jewish school and of the Jewish community that was entrusted to their care? Have they not misused their positions of privilege close to the seats of power and authority to replace the spirit of Torah with their own spirit of defection, using the synagogue and the Jewish school to alienate Jewish homes and families from the Sanctuary of Jewish Law? They have almost succeeded in their work of treason, so much so that even the most stalwart among the faithful have been shaken in their resolve. They have so blurred our awareness of our duty as Jews that the Torah-true hardly dare to speak up with their former candor in defense of our duty toward God.

In the face of such a desperate situation, how could we afford to be still without the new Chanukah? The Jewish spirit must be determined to wage the fight to restore the rights of the nation and the purity and consecration of the Sanctuary, so that when future generations will kindle the Chanukah lights in their homes, they will be able to look back upon a very recent past in which God again demonstrated His wondrous nearness, a past in which their forebears entered once again, as His children, into the Dwelling Place of His Word in His House, cleaned His Temple of all that is un-Jewish, and restored the lights of consecration in their homes that stand as outer courts surrounding the Sanctuary of God.

Therefore, go and kindle your light at the festival of the Maccabees. To kindle it in your synagogue, in your temple, is not enough: *נר איש וביתו* [one light for a man and his household—Shabbat 21b] is the precept of Chanukah. In your own home there shall be a light for you and for your house. Of what avail is it to us if we sing praises in our houses of worship, if in the temples we call ourselves Jews in a momentary access of devotion, while our homes are un-Jewish and we do not harbor in our homes the light of the Jewish spirit? Our salvation has not issued from temples in the past, nor will it now—the deliverance will come from the home.

Do not regard your home with unconcern. And if you, yourself, were the only one who still preserved the spirit of the Maccabees in his home,

remember that one single Jew, one single Jewish house is ultimately in itself sufficient to serve as foundation for the re-erection of the entire Jewish sanctuary.

But do not forget איש וביתו: that is the injunction—you *and* your house. If you desire to live for Judaism, you must not remain content to saturate only yourself with the Jewish spirit; only when you have established the Jewish spirit as a heritage in your home will you have lived for Judaism. . . .

Nor will you ever halt in your holy endeavors, you will never be satisfied with yesterday's achievements, you will strive ever forward, the light in your house must grow ever brighter, for

you are well aware that progress, not retreat—מורידין מעלין בקדש ואין מורידין [you may ascend in holiness and not descend—Horayot 12b]—is the watchword of holy endeavor, and if anywhere, then here we see that he who does not advance retreats.

And your tranquil work and activity in your own home will radiate beyond the threshold of your home, and the friendly, joyous light of God that reigns in your home will stimulate your neighbor to seek the same radiant Jewish home life.

\* Excerpted from *Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch* (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 1985, 1997).

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