

Chanukah – An Assembly by Mike Freedman

The name Chanukah means Dedication and I am going to tell you the story of events which happened two thousand two hundred and sixty one years ago and which Jews still celebrate today.

One hundred and seventy years before the birth of Jesus King Antiochus IV ruled the Syrian Empire, which included the land that we now know as Israel. The Syrian Empire was part of a much larger Greek civilisation and so most people worshipped Zeus and the other gods of Ancient Greece.

Among the people of that country, though, were many people who followed other religions and among them the Jews, who worshipped their own God in their own temple in Jerusalem. The Kings before Antiochus had been happy for them to do so. But Antiochus was different. He insisted that everyone should worship the Greek gods and he made a law which forbade Jews from following their own religion. This law made it illegal for anyone to claim to be a Jew, or to keep the Jewish sabbath or the Jewish festivals.

Antiochus had statues of the Greek gods put up in every town and village and insisted that everyone take part in worshipping them. Worst of all, in Jerusalem Antiochus's soldiers took control of the temple, which in those days was the Jews' most important and holy building. They took the jewels and other precious objects with which the temple was decorated and set up a statue of Zeus on the altar. They also stole the menorah. Now the menorah was a special object, which the Bible says had been designed by God himself. It was a huge lamp with seven branches, each branch was an oil burning lamp. One branch in particular, the middle one, was called the Ner Tamid, the Everlasting Lamp, and was never allowed to go out. It was a sign of the never ending power of God. Even today every synagogue has a Ner Tamid, although these days it is usually an electric lamp.

The penalty for breaking Antiochus's law was death. Many Jews obeyed the law but many did not and many were executed for keeping the sabbath or the festivals.

In the small town of Modin, about half way between Jerusalem and the sea lived a priest called Matathias who was determined to keep to his own religion and beliefs. Mattathias had five sons, Johanan, Simon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan. When Antiochus's soldiers came to the town and set up a statue of Zeus in the market square Matathias was angry. When they insisted that everyone in the town worship the statue he was furious and when a Jew stepped forward to obey the soldiers Matathias was so mad that he grabbed a sword from the nearest soldier and killed the man on the spot! You can imagine the scene. The soldiers tried to catch him, the townspeople who mostly agreed with Matathias overpowered and killed the soldiers and so the revolution began.

The statue was pushed over and Matathias declared, "If you are for God follow me!" The rebels took to the hills. From there they made lightning raids on the Greek soldiers and then disappeared back into the hills where they knew all the paths and the caves. It may have been the first guerilla war. Matathias and his sons were soon joined by others and soon they had quite a large force.

Now, Matathias was already an old man, indeed before long he became ill and died. The leadership of the rebel army fell to his son Judah who trained the men and led them in battle. He was so successful at beating Antiochus's soldiers that he soon became known as Judah

Maccabee, which means Judah the Hammer. Eventually the Maccabees, as Judah and his army were known, could meet the Greeks in full scale battles - and win.

In the summer of year 167 before the Christian time the fighting was over and Judah Maccabee and his followerd had regained control of the temple. But when they went in what a sorry sight met their eyes. The place was a wreck! Mess, graffiti, broken furniture, doors off their hinges and more - the left over remains of a hundred drunken parties!

They set to work to clean it up. You can imagine that it took quite some time. Finally it was ready. A new menorah was put in its place and on the 25th day of the month of Kislev (three years to the very day since the temple had been invaded) the Ner Tamid was relighted and the temple was rededicated with prayers and celebrations. The celebrations lasted for 8 days and Judah declared that forevermore the 25th day of the month of Kislev should begin an eight day festival to remember the rededication of the temple, and to be a reminder of the importance of people everywhere having the freedom to keep to their own beliefs and their own ways of life. Jews keep this festival to this day. Each day of the festival, as the sun goes down, Jews light candles in a chanukiah, which is a special menorah with not seven lights but nine. There is one candle for each day and one extra called the Servant Candle which is used to light the others. They light one candle on the first day, two on the second, three on the third and so on until on the last day all are alight. Once the candles are lit they say this prayer:

We kindle these lights to commemorate the wonders, the heroic acts and the marvellous and consoling deeds which You performed for our fathers through your holy priests in those days at this season. During all the eight days of Chanukah these lights are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them, but only to see them in order to thank Your name for the wonders, the victories and the marvellous deeds.

Chanukah is a fun festival. There are games, parties and, usually, lots of food. It is traditional for children to be given presents of small amounts of money but these days children are often given other presents, too - just like Christian children are at Christmas.