

THE PROGRESS REPORT

Happy Chanuka!

By Fred E. Foldvary

Chanuka (also spelled Hanukkah) is a Jewish freedom holiday that can be appreciated by gentiles as well. This year, 1998, Chanuka starts the evening of Sunday, December 13 (25 Kislev in the Jewish calendar, starting Sunday evening) and lasts until December 21, the 8th day. The festival celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people in Israel from the Hellenist-Greek rule which sought the assimilation of the Jews into an alien Greek culture and religion.

Chanuka was also a victory of the righteous few against the oppressive many, an inspiration to those everywhere who seek their freedom. Perhaps Chanuka was too inspiring, since the memory of that victory would later spur Jews to rebel against the much stronger Romans, when at the time resistance was futile.

The story of Chanuka starts with Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Greek general who conquered the Persian empire. Israel, which had been under the rule of the Persians, became part of Alexander's Greek empire, which is also referred to as Hellenist. The successors of Alexander wanted not just to rule an empire but also to extend the Greek or Hellenic culture to the inhabitants. Many of the Jews became Hellenized, assimilated into Greek customs. They took on Greek names and spoke Greek. But some Jews opposed this assimilation and formed the "Hasidean" movement against it.

Then one of the Hellenist kings, Antiochus III, sought to unify the Hellenic lands, which were split into several kingdoms. Antiochus required his subjects to erect statues of Greek gods and of himself, and then his son, Antiochus Epiphanes, who became king in 176 BCE, went further, appointing the Hellenized priest Jason as governor of Israel. Jason opened the holy Temple in Jerusalem to Greek pagan statues and pagan rituals. The Hasidean leaders led a rebellion, throwing the officials and priests appointed by Antiochus -- and the statues -- over the walls of the Temple.

Antiochus IV sent his army into Jerusalem and slaughtered 10,000 Jews, and then put in new statues and Hellenistic priests. To further hellenize Israel, Antiochus outlawed the Sabbath day, Torah study, and circumcision. A new revolt was sparked when a Greek official tried to force a Jewish priest named Mattathius (Matityahu) to sacrifice to Greek gods. Mattathius instead killed the official, and a new war began. Mattathius and his five sons, who led the battles, came to be known as the Maccabees, from the Hebrew word for "hammer."

Antiochus sent a large army to Israel to defeat the rebellion, and was planing to capture many Jews and sell them as slaves. In 164 BCE, the Jews defeated the Greek army and again purged the Temple of Greek idols. The Maccabees won independence from Hellenist rule and established a new Kingdom of Judah, which remained independent until conquered by the Romans in 67 BCE.

On the 25th day of Kislev in 164 BCE, the Jews celebrated the rededication and purification of the Temple. According to the legend, they found only enough special olive oil (with the seal of the high priest) for lighting the Menorah to last for one day, but each day, it continued to burn until after the 8th day, when new oil was ready. The miracle of the 8 days has been celebrated every year afterwards, with a new candle lit each day, thus as the days pass, one, two, three, and finally all 8 candles are lighted.

The lighting of the candles of the Chanuka menorah is symbolic of the power of enlightenment over the forces of darkness. In the battle of the Jews against the Hellenist Greeks, light triumphed over darkness, and the menorah is lighted to represent not just the memory of that victory, but today's torch of light against the forces of darkness that ever threaten our peace and liberty.

To Jews, who have been threatened with both physical and cultural destruction, the lighting of the menorah also symbolizes the survival of the Jewish people. The holiday is often celebrated at home, symbolizing that the home, not the temple or synagogue, is the main sanctuary of religion and culture.

Lovers of liberty world-wide can take heart in the story of Chanuka, showing that a small band of righteous, dedicated freedom lovers can prevail over the forces of superior power. But let us also remember the defeat of the later Jewish revolts against Roman rule. Victory against injustice is never guaranteed, which is why it is precious when it occurs.