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A hidden lesson of the Hanukkah story

• DAVID GOLINKIN

This year, the weekly portion of *Miketz* occurs during the holiday of Hanukkah. While this might be a simple coincidence of the Jewish calendar, there is, nevertheless, a strong connection between Hanukkah and the story of Joseph and his brothers. It can be summed up in a saying of Rabbi Yitzhak Abarbanel (on Judges 21:5): “All the good of Israel and its survival depends on its unity.”

We were all taught as children that the Maccabees were “the good guys” and the Greeks were “the bad guys.” This is undoubtedly true, as we read in the First Book of Maccabees (1:41-50):

“Then the king [Antiochus] wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that each should give up his customs... And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. He directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid... sacrifices... in the sanctuary, to profane Sabbaths and feasts..., to build altars... for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised... And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.”

But according to the Second Book of Maccabees (Chapters 4-6), the decrees of Antiochus were the result of the senseless hatred among the Jewish leaders at the time, who plotted ceaselessly against one another, like an episode from *Game of Thrones*: Jason grabbed the High Priesthood from his brother Onias; Menelaus grabbed it, in turn, from Jason. Onias slandered Menelaus to the authorities, who retaliated by having Onias murdered. Jason then tried to capture Jerusalem by force. As a result, Antiochus thought that the Jews were revolting against him. He captured Jerusalem, killed 80,000 Jews, plundered the Temple, outlawed Jewish practices and defiled the Temple – all on account of the senseless hatred mentioned above.

The lesson of the Joseph story is the same. As our sages stress (*Shabbat* 10b), if not for the senseless enmity between Joseph and his brothers, Joseph would not have been sold into slavery in Egypt, and the Children of Israel would not have been enslaved there for 400 years.

History repeated itself in the year 70 CE, as we have learned in the Talmud (*Yoma* 9b): “...but the Second Temple in which they engaged in Torah and mitzvot and acts of loving kindness – why was it destroyed? Because of senseless hatred.” And so we learn from the stories about the Destruction found in the tractate of *Gittin* (56a). There was enough food and wood in Jerusalem for a siege of 21 years. When the rebels saw that they could not convince the sages to fight against the Romans, they



REEDS GROW in a Scottish salt marsh: ‘If a person takes a bundle of reeds – can he break them at the same time? But if he takes one at a time, even a child can break them.’ (Wikimedia Commons)

burned all the wheat and barley and a famine ensued. Indeed, this story is confirmed by Josephus (*Wars* IV, 6, 1-2; V, 1, 1-6).

Our prophets and sages understood the danger of disunity and they therefore stressed time after time that unity leads to redemption. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet predicts the reunification of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel (v. 16-22):

“Take a stick and write on it ‘Of Judah’...and take another stick and write on it ‘Of Joseph – the stick of Ephraim’ ... Bring them close to each other, so that they become one stick in your hand...Thus said the Lord God: ‘I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations... and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them a single nation in the land.’”

And so we have learned in Midrash *Tanhuma* (ed. Buber, *Nitzavim*, pp. 48-49):

“If a person takes a bundle of reeds – can he break them at the same time? But if he takes one at a time, even a child can break them. And so you find that the people of Israel will not be redeemed until they are one bundle...”

The United States recently held midterm elections, while the State of Israel recently held municipal elections. As is frequently the case, many candidates in both countries engaged in mudslinging against their rivals, accusing them of this, that or the other. One notable exception was Aliza Bloch, a religious-Zionist candidate who was elected mayor of Beit Shemesh, despite the fact that Beit Shemesh has a majority of haredim. She ran a campaign based on unity. She

said in her victory speech: “The people of Israel look today to Beit Shemesh with new hope. Beit Shemesh decided to cancel its walls. Beit Shemesh decided to tear down its *mehitzot* [dividers]” (*The Jerusalem Post*, November 1).

This is the dual lesson of Hanukkah and of Joseph and his brothers: disunity leads to defeat and exile; unity leads to redemption. May we remember this lesson as we light the Hanukkah candles. Happy Hanukkah! ■

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A CYCLIST rides past campaign signs for Arizona US senatorial candidates Kyrsten Sinema and Martha McSally, following the US midterm elections in Scottsdale, Arizona, on November 7. (Reuters)