

A LITTLE OIL GOES A LONG WAY

by Steven M. Swersky.

Possibly the most significant symbol embracing the hopes and yearnings of all Jews is the Western Wall of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, commonly called the Wailing Wall. The Wall stands for the continuity of our people, and for our prevailing against the forces of uncountable enemies. It is a unifying common denominator, dear to every member of the diverse and scattered Jewish nation. If there is one Holy place on Earth which is regarded as the focal point of Divine goodwill, it is the Wall.

During the reign of King Antiochus of Assyria whose religious leanings were towards those of the Greeks, violent anti-Semitism in the form of pressure to abandon their beliefs and customs was pitted against the Jewish people. The culmination of this harsh and discriminatory behavior was a decree on the 25th of Kislev, 165 BCE, by Antiochus which formally forbade Jews from praying to their God, practicing Kashrut, or celebrating their holidays and Shabbat.

The Syrian army was ordered to forcefully substitute the Greek religion for the Jewish one. Pagan idols were set up in Jewish Holy Places, and unclean animals were sacrificed there. Misery and death were rained on those who refused to comply with the decree.

Matityahu, the priest from Modi'in, and his five sons led by Yehuda decided to take action against this injustice. They set up a resistance army in the mountains and called themselves the Macabees. For three years the Jewish army, led by Yehuda Macabee, fought against the Syrians and finally expelled them from Palestine, coincidentally, on the 25th of Kislev.

They were a free people once again.

The Macabees rushed to their Temple and removed the pagan idols and unclean animals. They discovered that the Menorah which traditionally had to be burning at all times was out, and the Temple was in darkness. The oil required to light the Menorah took eight days to manufacture, and to the dismay of all, only one day's worth of oil could be found. Yehuda lit the Menorah, knowing that it would only last one day, and set about making some more.

A great Miracle occurred. Instead of lasting only one day, the oil carried through for a full eight days, allowing enough time to produce more. Thus the lights in the Temple never went out.

On the 25th of Kislev every year, the Jewish people celebrate the Holiday Hannukah, giving thanks to the Lord for the deliverance of the Temple, as well as for the greatly extended life of the small quantity of oil.

Hanukkah marks one of the most celebrated victories of the Jewish nation. All branches of world Jewry celebrate the holiday which has the dual implications of a great Miracle as well as a military victory. It is significant that the miracle came after the armed struggle, since it appears that the Divine endorsed the military action.

Much of the essence of the San Diego Jewish Academy mirrors the spirit of Hannukah. Preserving our individual religious and cultural identity is one of the pillarstones of the center. Judaica and Hebrew studies are imparted to the students every single day. Kashrut, benching, and traditional Hallacha, are woven into the fabric of every child's day. In the rush of the modern world where assimilation and loss of the Jewish tradition is one of our peoples' greatest fears, the Academy builds the ethics and values of Jewishkite.

In parallel to the Macabees who were secular as well as religious, the Academy prepares its progeny for the world out there. Cogniscance is given to academic excellence in all educational fieids, and the children are provided with the means to compete very successfully with the cream of the country.

As were the Macabees, the Academy is a forward-looking community, the very antithesis of complascence. Aims are set, plans devised, and goals are achieved.

The word "Hannukkah" actually means "dedication." Dedication and perserverance are the "oil" of the school.

Central to the holiday is the lighting of the Menorah candles which starts with one being lit and an extra one added on each successive day. On the eighth day a fully-lit Menorah illuminates the whole household. Our children are the "lights" of the school, educated, cared for, and loved by all the staff members. As the students progress from year to year, their Menorot get fuller and glow ever more brightly!

Hannukkah is a happy time. Kids play with dreidels to win almonds and raisins; donuts and potato latkes cooked in the ever-significant oil are heartily eaten. In modern times, children are given presents in order to divert their attention away from the Christian Holiday practices.

Notice next time you are in Shul that it faces Westwards, towards the Temple of Jerusalem. And give some thought that it is only due to the tenacious spirit of the Macabees that the remains of it exist at all. Enjoy the Festival of Lights!