

LUMINARIES

Personalities
in the
Rebbe's Torah

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מוקדש לחיזוק ההתקשרות לכ"ק אדמו"ר

נדפס ע"י

הרה"ת ר' אברהם צמח הלוי
וזוגתו מרת דבורה לאה ומשפחתם שיחיו
ראזענפעלד

Matisyahu

Matisyahu, the son of Yochanan Kohen Gadol, from the Chashmonai family of Kohanim, is famous for starting the legendary revolt against the Greeks, resulting in the story of Chanukah.

Matisyahu was the father of the band of the Macabee brothers: Yochanan, Shimon, Yehuda, Elazar, and Yonasan. His descendants ruled the Jewish people following the Chanukah story, up to the time of the Roman conquest.

The war began when Greek soldiers came to Modi'in and demanded that the Jews sacrifice a swine to Avodah Zarah. Outraged, Matisyahu killed the person offering the sacrifice as well as the Greek soldiers.

With the call, 'Mi LaHashem Eilai!' [Whoever is for Hashem, follow me!] Matisyahu gathered a band of loyal and courageous Jews who fought the mighty Greek empire, winning miraculous victories both physical and spiritual.

Chazal attribute the miracle of Chanukah and the victory of the Macabees primarily to Matisyahu. In the Rebbe's Torah as well, the *mesiras nefesh* and *avodah* of the Macabees is credited to Matisyahu. Additionally, Pri Eitz Chaim states that "Matisyahu *Tiken Hahod*" [Matisyahu repaired the *Sfirah* of *Hod*].

Matisyahu was not just a military leader. Matisyahu and his sons implemented various halachos as well.¹ The Gemara quotes a *Psak Din* about intermarriage from the Beis Din of Chashmonai. The Rebbe also highlighted Matisyahu's role as educator of the Jewish people.

Matisyahu died early in the war, and passed the mission and leadership on to his famous sons. The miracle of the oil and establishment of Chanukah occurred after his passing.

Matisyahu Ben Yochanan Kohen Gadol

The war between the Syrian Greeks and Matisyahu was far more than a military action. It was a clash of spirit and culture, of faith and logic. What ultimately triumphed was *Kedusha*.

The Greeks symbolized the cold and dry position of *sechel* and logic, which is a very powerful and persuasive force. They fought to uphold the reign of intellect, holding it supreme, finding *emunah* and *mesiras nefesh* to be misguided and outdated.

To fight against the champions of *sechel*, it is not sufficient to use *Chochma* of *Kedusha*, for it may become tainted by the secular and nonspiritual ideas and philosophies. Rather it is a deeper G-dly force that must be revealed to combat this *Klipah*.

Matisyahu Ben Yochanan was sent by Hashem to lead the campaign against the Greeks and their philosophies. Matisyahu means *Matnas Hashem*, a gift from Hashem. Only with the power granted to us by Hashem were Matisyahu and the Yidden able to prevail, bringing the spirit of *emunah* and *mesiras nefesh* into everything that they did.

The Rebbe explains that the title ‘Ben Yochanan’ indicates a man of great miracles. The two nun’s of Yochanan denote *Nissei Nissim*, ‘miracles of miracles. And “Ben” can mean “a person of”—not just the “son of.” (Just like ‘Ben Chorin’ means a person who is free, not ‘son of freedom.’) With the power of *Kedusha* that comes from the soul, the Macabees merited miracles far above the realm of nature. The Rebbe continues that he was also a Kohen Gadol, a person charged with entering the *L’fnei V’lifnim*, into the inner sanctum of the Beis Hamikdash. This represents the deepest levels of the soul.

Matisyahu Kohen Gadol

The opening words of *V’al Hanissim* for Chanukah read “In the days of Matisyahu, the son of Yochanan Kohen Gadol.” This implies that Matisyahu served as Kohen Gadol.

There is much discussion and controversy as to whether this was actually the case. Some hold that it was his father Yochanan who was Kohen Gadol. Others explain that he was given this title out of respect, though he never held the position. There is a third opinion that says that he was a *Mashuach Milchama*, a Kohen anointed to inspire the people in wartime.

In *Kisvei HaArizal* it says that Matisyahu was in fact the



TZIYON OF MATISYAHU KOHEN GADOL IN THE ‘YAAR BEN SHEMEN’ NEAR THE CITY OF MODI’IN

Kohen Gadol,² and the Rebbe quotes this opinion of the Arizal in a beautiful *sicha*:

The idea of Chanukah—lighting up the darkness of the streets and leading the world towards Moshiach—was initially accomplished by Matisyahu as Kohen Gadol and Nossi of his generation. The Rebbe compares this to our times, when the Rebbe, Nossi Hador, leads today’s battles and shines the light needed to overcome the darkness outside.³

In another *sicha* however, the Rebbe says that Matisyahu was not the Kohen Gadol. In fact, the Kohanim Gedolim of his time were *Misyavanim*, of the Hellenized Jewish party.⁴ As proof, the Rebbe cites his residence in Modi’in rather than Yerushalayim, where, according to the Rambam, the Kohen Gadol must remain.⁵

Throughout the years, the Rebbe mentions the various opinions and theories on this matter, but does not offer a conclusive opinion.

Matisyahu's Resilience

The Rebbe learns from Matisyahu what our correct attitude should be in confusing and difficult times.

Equating his battles with the modern situation of secular influences and assimilation, the Rebbe highlights Matisyahu's response.

Instead of going to war, Matisyahu, as Kohen Gadol, had the option to go to Yerushalayim—the capital and center of the political and religious dispute, to begin wheeling and dealing with the Greeks, but he refused to do so.

Others tried brokering some sort of deal, offering religious compromises in return for the protection of the Beis Hamikdash.

But Matisyahu would not have it. He was not looking to be Kohen Gadol, or to be in the Beis Hamikdash or Yerushalayim, rather, he knew that he needed to be in Modi'in and fight those who wished to remove his fellow Jews from Hashem's ways. Matisyahu stood up to the desecration of Hashem's

name and fought to restore the Shechina to the Beis Hamikdash and the Jewish people.

Today too, some push for compromise, claiming that this is the only chance we have at preserving Yiddishkeit.

Matisyahu taught that one must fight for what's right even when there may be advantages that come from compromise. As the Rebbe put it "Who needs the Beis Hamikdash if they are bringing *Avodah Zarah* into it?"⁶

In another *sicha*, the Rebbe explains that Matisyahu, when faced with *Chilul Hashem*, did not wait to gather witnesses or check with the Beis Din, rather he went ahead and stood up for Hashem's honor.

While there are times for discussion, Matisyahu saw a time for action, because *Chilul Hashem* outweighs all other calculations.

Zeidim Beyad Oskei Torasecha

The Rebbe explains that the battles waged by Matisyahu and his sons were against not only the Greeks but also their Hellenized Jewish countrymen. Both physically and spiritually, it was against their wayward brothers who they needed to fight and ultimately win over.

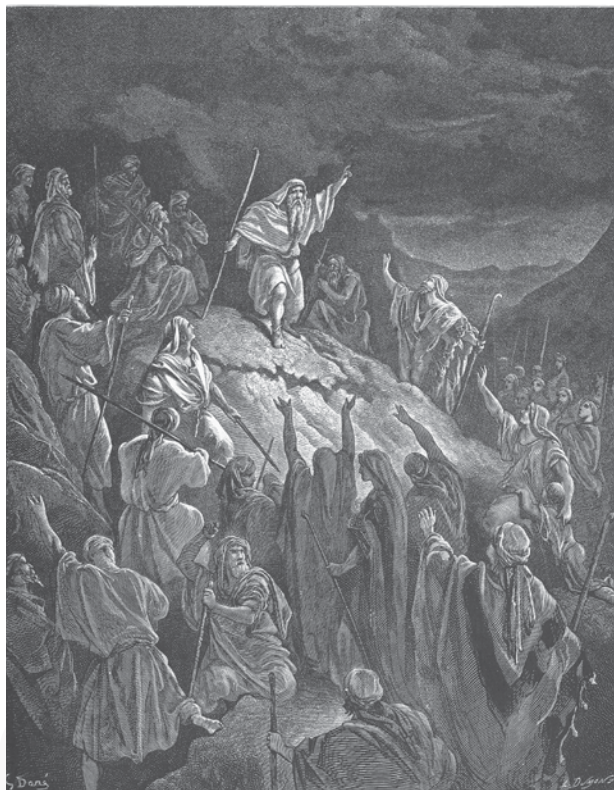
This brings us to another side of Matisyahu. According to some opinions, he was not even the Kohen Gadol, and he and his sons were not the Jewish leaders at the time (see above). They were not in Yerushalayim or any other political center, rather they waged their war from the small town of Modi'in.

The Jewish establishment of the time, including the *Kehuna Gedolah*, was in the hands of *Misyavnim*. They were the majority of the people, and much better established.

Yet, even with all the cards stacked against them, Matisyahu and his sons went to war. As *Kohanim* (*Shevet Levi*) they were not military men or accustomed to the art of war, nevertheless, with only a small group of Yidden loyal to Torah and Mitzvos, Matisyahu and his sons had no choice but to take matters into their own hands.⁷

The Chashmonaim

The war for restoration of true Yiddishkeit was a noble one. Even though the Mishnah doesn't discuss the story of Chanukah, the Baraisa explains that the *possuk* "*V'lo Gealtim*" [and I have not repulsed them], means that Hashem sent Shimon Hatzaddik, Chashmonai and his sons, and Matisyahu Kohen Gadol.⁸



MATISYAHU INSPIRING FELLOW JEWS TO REVOLT (PAINTING BY GUSTAVE DORÉ, 1866)

Rashi interprets the *possuk* in Daniel “*Amad al kano maavir nogesh heder malchus*” [His place will be taken by one who will dispatch an officer to exact tribute for royal glory] as referring to “Matisyahu Ben Yochanan, who would strengthen his hold on the mountain of Modai, and evict the Greeks from the land. His glory will live on in his children who will lead the Jewish people.”⁹

Even so, the Chashmonaim’s retention of power was not seen positively by Chazal. They were meant to remain in the realm of *Kehuna* while returning the *Melucha* to the tribe of Yehuda and the house of Dovid. ¹



THE NUSACH OF “BI'MEI MATISYAHU” AS PRINTED IN 1738 IN A SIDDUR FROM BAVARIA

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL

מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים, ורבים ביד מעטים, וטמאים ביד טהורים, ורשעים ביד צדיקים, וזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך

“You gave over the mighty into the hand of the weak, the many in the hand of the few, impure in the hand of the pure, wicked in the hand of the righteous, and sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with your Torah”

The Rebbe explains that the miracle of Matisyahu and the Macabees’s war wasn’t just with the Greeks, but also the *Misyavnim* who allied with them.

The terms “impure” and “wicked” as opposed to “righteous”, and “sinners” do not make much sense when describing the Greeks. The *Misyavnim* on the other hand, knowing about Torah and Mitzvos and fighting it, can be referred to as impure etc.

The three levels of pure, righteous, and occupied with Hashem’s Torah, used to describe Matisyahu and his people, represent the service of Hashem in thought, speech, and behavior. *Tehorim* refers to people pure of thought, *Oskei Torasecha*, to people who study Torah, and *Tzadikim*, to people whose actions are righteous. “Many in the hand of the few” also refers to the Maccabees vs. the *Misyavnim*, saying that even compared with their brothers, they were fewer in number.

This understanding magnifies the miracle. Firstly, when most of your own people side with the enemy, it makes the battle much harder. Secondly, even though a large portion of the Jewish people were not only unworthy of the miracle, but actively fighting against it, Hashem still made this great miracle.

The Rebbe concludes that the term used for victory in *V’al Hanissim* is “*Mosarta*” [you gave over], meaning that the victory was not in crushing the other side, but rather transforming them into full-fledged *Tzadikim*. The Rebbe draws a comparison to today and teaches that even if opposition comes from fellow Jews, we should not hold back from fighting for the truth and bringing our brothers back home.¹⁰

Of course, today, those opposed to the Torah are *Tinokos shenishbu* who, due to the darkness of *galus*, simply don't know better. How much more so is our obligation to bring them close, and show them love, influencing them *b'darkei noam ub'darkei shalom*.

על ידי כהני הקדושים “Through your Holy Kohanim”

There is a *Machlokes Haposkim* whether a person may give up their life for a mitzvah when not obligated to do so. It seems from Rashi that it is permissible but the Rambam and the Ramban hold otherwise.

Nevertheless, the Kesef Mishnah on the Rambam explains that in a case where one is a great Chossid and a G-d fearing person, and sees that his generation's piety and devotion is weak in certain areas, he may be *moser nefesh* to inspire and teach his generation.

The Rebbe explains that in this case, the *mesiras nefesh* is for *Kiddush Hashem* and upkeep of the Jewish faith, not just for the one specific Mitzvah.

Regarding the *mesiras nefesh* of Matisyahu and his sons in the time of the Chanukah story, the Rebbe says that while the period of Greek oppression is usually considered a *Gezeiras Hashemad* [a decree against observing the Torah], which warrants *mesiras nefesh* across the board, going to war is a different story.

Even in a case where one must be *moser nefesh* for every Mitzvah, there is still no obligation to actively go and fight, especially if, by the rules of nature, you have no hope of victory.

This did not stop Matisyahu and his sons, who waged a war that they could not naturally win, with utmost *mesiras nefesh* for Hashem and His Torah.

This is why they are referred to in *Haneiros Halalu* as “your Holy Kohanim” (and in Rambam “the great Kohanim”). This title explains why they were able to go on *mesiras nefesh* even when not obligated. They saw themselves as the holy and great people who are applauded for their *mesiras nefesh* that inspires their generation.

The Rebbe concludes that it is this higher-then-logic *mesiras nefesh* that ultimately won over the Greek ideas.

The Hellenists were not against Torah and Mitzvos, they were bothered by the supernatural, devotion and belief in something that is higher than logic. To combat this, *mesiras nefesh* of the highest order is necessary, showing and proving the transcendent Divine in each person and in the world.

This carries over to the miracle of the oil as well. The Greeks did not *destroy* the oil, they defiled it, trying to separate Jewish practice from its spiritual aspects. The Maccabees found one pure jug of oil – one that had the stamp of approval of the Kohen Gadol – representing *bittul* and *mesiras nefesh* higher than logic and reason.¹¹ The miracle showed that with even a tiny amount of utter devotion, the light of *Kedusha* prevails.

1. Sifrei HaMacabbim.

2. Shaar Hagilgulim, end of Hakdamah 32.

3. Zos Chanukah 5713.

4. Referring to Jason and Meneleus.

5. Sicha Mikeitz 5732, note 23.

6. Sicha Yud Tes Kislev 5731.

7. Mikeitz – Shabbos Chanukah 5732.

8. Megillah 11a

9. Daniel 11:20.

10. Likkutei Sichos 30, Chanukah 2. Mikeitz – Shabbos Chanukah 5732.

11. Likkutei Sichos 35, Vayeshev – Chanukah.