

Survival

Jewish Life as a Symbol

King Antiochus the Seleukide did not wander under a lucky star. He was always in search of money, always on the road, plundering all about. When he left Egypt in fear of the Romans, he turned against Jerusalem. He took possession of the temple, carried off the holy vessels, stole the golden altar, the table, the golden censers, and even the curtains. Then he gave orders to set the town on fire, to tear down the walls and to desecrate the temple.

Antiochus hated the Jews. They were the great disturbance in his instable empire, remaining loyal to their religion, faithful to their commandments, true to themselves. He thought of many ways to break their silent resistance. He gave orders to slaughter pigs at the holy place of the altar, tortured and crucified a number of noble Jews daily, on the suspicion that they kept living as pious Jews. Women and boys were strangled. If anywhere a holy book or a scroll of the law was to be found, it fell to the fire at once.

Out of this darkness, the Jews set themselves free. They freed themselves by the famous insurrection led by Mattathias and Judas Maccabaeus. The enormous fortune, which accompanied the Jewish warriors, seemed a miracle: out of deepest sorrow, this marvellous rising up, this amazing conquest of the superior power standing against them, this victory over the thousands of soldiers, the cavalry, the elephants of King Antiochus.

The climax of this triumph was the recommissioning of the temple of Jerusalem, the renewed kindling of the candles at the devastated holy place. Since then, this festival is celebrated year by year: Hanukkah, Feast of Lights.

The Menorah became the symbol of Jewish resistance, even in hopeless situations. Hanukkah means: We have overcome, we were rescued by our trust in God. Antiochus might find followers who try to extinguish our light, but our resistance is immortal too. When kindling the Hanukkah lights, all over the world the Jews will sing:

Woe was mine in Egyptland
Tyrants and kings enslaved me,
Till thy mighty, outstretched hand
from oppression saved me.

The woodcut on this book shows it again: this golden light triumphant, breaking through a density of distressing shadows. A powder dust of diffused lapis lazuli as a symbol of threat. The blue glazed bricks of Babylon and Assyria,. The deadly dangers described by prophets of old, nowadays confirmed in a horrifying way.

On the block of wood itself the candelabra has a different appearance: as if scratched into a wall. It seems to be a mark scraped in stone by a wounded hand or scribbled in haste by a captured man. The last message of a dying man in the rain of ashes. The message is: You must survive. Otherwise the candelabra will become a withered tree on a poisoned earth.

To strike a blow against Jewish life is always, symbolically, to strike a blow against life itself. Jewish life is a symbol of all life. This is revealed in both catastrophe and victory. We see the menorah in the woodcut as part of an extensive composition with marching soldiers: soldiers from Assyria, from Babylon, from Germany, from wherever. For a long time – but no longer – they fought against unarmed people, whose only refuge was spirituality.

The survival of the Jewish people through thousands of years of suppression and persecution can surely be called a miracle. So, too, the victorious existence of the state Israel. The survival of the Jewish state, its flourishing life and triumphs, will be a symbol of the survival of human life on a more and more endangered earth.

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