

ON THE MACCABEES

From an address by Menachem Ussishkin to the Maccabi Association in Odessa, 1917

A child of Europe, a scholar of Roman Civilization, holds sacred and extols the adage: "A sound mind in a sound body". We, the children of Israel read -- as is well-known --from right to left, hold sacred also the opposite of that saying: "A sound body -- for a sound mind". A "sound mind" - that is decisive; a "sound body" - that is the means. And you have implemented that! You did not choose for yourselves the name "Samson", the symbol only of physical strength; you chose "Maccabee", symbolizing the power of the spirit. The Maccabees are renowned not for their physical prowess, but for their strategic brilliance. Many of these acts of bravery resound through the history of humankind's interaction with the Hebrews. The Maccabees are uniquely and hugely famous for the strength and daring of their belief.

I shall refer to just two moments from that splendid period:

Here is Modi'im, a remote village in the Judean hills, a few poor and anxious Hebrews gathered before an idolatrous altar to hear the words of King Antiochus. The King's man, guarded by his escort of Assyrian soldiers, commands the Hebrews to make a sacrifice to Zeus, foremost of the gods of Greece. All are afraid, all are meek, all are silent. But here is the voice of the aged Matityahu, eighty years old, tearing and rising through the silence: "*Even if my people abandon the Living God and worship Antiochus - I and my sons and what is mine do not, and will not agree! We shall always be loyal to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!*" And thus spoke Matityahu, his body frail, his spirit invincible; the call to revolt! This ancient and great spirit sensed and knew that in Life there is Truth Eternal, more precious than Life itself. And this also he knew: such tremendous truth is not at the whim of the majority, but each person must hold it sacred, and sacrifice to it even all the wealth of the land. And thus our Nation, descended from steadfast Jacob who always sent his sons to the fires of the Inquisition and to battle the riders of the desert, held faith with the Patriarch of the Hasmoneans. From that day until ours, the annals of Israel bear witness that the uppermost truth is not always the gold of the many, but that the uplifting spirit is ever with the few.

And here is another tableau from the scenes of those days:

The Palace of Kings: Antiochus on his throne, in the midst of his entourage, his courtiers and the regiments of his armies; before him - a statue of Zeus, and a young stripling, a mere boy. His brothers, all six, have already been put to death for their refusal to worship the idol. Now it is the turn of the very youngest of the brothers. The tyrant prepares to temper - just a little - his desire: he casts down his royal seal

before the idol in order for the boy to bend and lift it up, so that it will appear to the assembly that he prostrates himself before Zeus. Antiochus the wise monarch, the King of Kings, compromises, but the young Hebrew does not: *"No, O terrible and cruel King, I shall not do your will; I cannot lie, I shall not display treachery to my God, nor to my People!"* And sacrifices himself; and indeed, his body is slain, his brave, noble and holy soul flees, but does not part from this world. This Hebrew boy lives! After 2000 years, it sprang to life among the villagers who were at the mercy of evil beasts, the hangmen of Czar Nicholas I all over Greater Russia.

And nowadays, when compromise, retreat and spiritual poverty are the hallmarks of the age, it is worthy, young people of Israel, that you remember and hold dear the memory of that boy. In your lives: never compromise, never retreat from your spiritual paths! Brilliant desire, the discipline of thought, unshakeable loyalty to the gravity of your spiritual ideals - these are the formula for your lives.