

Fortress of Generations: Reading *Ma'oz Tzur*
Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Relative to other holidays, there are very few liturgical texts relating to the festival of Chanukah. For starters, the Book of Maccabees was never canonized. Furthermore, there is no Talmudic tractate devoted exclusively to Chanukah. Even our daily prayers during the festival, in which we add a Torah reading and the *Hallel* service, have only a brief paragraph, the *Al HaNissim*, which makes specific reference to the events surrounding the Chanukah festival¹.

Given this context of liturgical scarcity, one might argue that there is, consequently, far more pressure on *Ma'oz Tzur* to make a bold and clear statement regarding this festival of lights. Yet, upon first inspection, the *Ma'oz Tzur* seems to have surprisingly little to do with Chanukah itself.

Structurally, this medieval poem has six stanzas; an introductory paragraph containing praise for the Almighty as well as a prayer for the restoration of the Temple, a concluding paragraph with a plea for the final and complete redemption, and four body paragraphs. These four stanzas relate to four distinct periods of Jewish history, and only the final one is devoted to the Chanukah itself. Thus, in the context of *Ma'oz Tzur*, Chanukah shockingly receives no more attention than does the period of our enslavement in Egypt, the Babylonian Exile, or the Purim salvation. While it certainly is a beautifully constructed hymn relating to Jewish history at large, one cannot help but wonder how *Ma'oz Tzur* became the central text of our Chanukah liturgy.

Upon further consideration, however, one might argue that *Ma'oz Tzur*, given its contextualization of the Chanukah story in the broader framework of Jewish history, is in fact the perfect vehicle for expressing the message of the Chanukah festival.

In this reading of Chanukah, the central message of the festival is that the persecutions endured by our people in each generation are not a string of isolated events, but part of one integrated fabric, the unfolding tapestry of Jewish history.

This motif is uniquely resonant for Rambam, whose language at the opening of Hilkhhot Chanukah, stressing the edicts of the Greeks which were meant to abrogate the study of Torah and adherence to mitzvot, indicates that Chanukah was a paradigmatic she'at ha'shemad, a time of decree. As Rambam indicates, the Greeks were hardly the first to impose these kinds of edicts, nor, sadly, were they even close to being the last.

The story of Chanukah is the story of our response, paradigmatic in nature, to this kind of oppression, an indelible aspect of our historical experience: following the lead of the

¹ See Rashi, however, to Shabbat 21b (s.v. hachi garsinan who associated these two recitations, Hallel and Al HaNissim, as definitional to the establishment of Chanukah altogether; שלא נקבעו אלא לקרות הלל, ולומר על הנסים בהודאה). Whatever dearth of quantity there is, for Rashi, the magnitude of the extant material cannot be underestimated.

bnei vinab, the Torah scholar-warrior Chashmonaim, we redouble our commitment to Torah study and to punctilious observance of mitzvot. We do not satisfy ourselves with merely discharging obligations, but insist on fulfilling the mitzvah of *ner chanukah* at the level of *mehadrin min ha'mehadrin*.

As the last of our holidays, Chanukah is the festival meant to make precisely this point for each successive generation. It is the parting gift given to us by our Sages, whose flames serve to warm the long and cold exile, reminding us that the challenges we face in each generation are but the latest chapters in an epic of crisis and redemption. Our success, enabled by Divine assistance, is equally contingent on our preparedness to sacrifice for the survival and transmission of Torah. This is true in the generation of the Greeks, and the Babylonians prior to them, and the Romans after them, up until and including today's antagonists.

We take great comfort knowing that the Rock of our Salvation, *tzur yeshuati*, is every bit the fortress today than he was in centuries and millennia past, *ba-yamim ha-bem, ba-zman ha-zeh*.