

Fortress of Generations: Reading *Ma'oz Tzur*
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Relative to other holidays, there are very few liturgical texts relating to the festival of Channukah. For starters, the Book of Maccabees was never canonized. Furthermore, there is no Talmudic tractate devoted exclusively to Channukah. 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 Channukah festival.

Given this context of liturgical scarcity, there is that much more pressure on the *Ma'oz Tzur*, as the textual cornerstone of our Channukah celebration, to make a bold and clear statement regarding our festival of lights. Yet, upon first inspection, the *Ma'oz Tzur* seems to have surprisingly little to do with Channukah 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 Channukah itself. Thus, in the context of *Ma'oz Tzur*, Channukah shockingly receives no more attention that does the period of our enslavement in Egypt, the Babylonian Exile, or the Purim miracle. 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 Channukah liturgy.

Upon further consideration, however, one might argue that *Ma'oz Tzur*, given its contextualization of the Channukah story in the broader framework of Jewish history, is in fact the perfect vehicle for expressing the message of the Channukah festival. In this reading of Channukah, the central message of the festival is that the experiences 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. Perhaps, then, the absence of liturgy dealing with the specific events of the Channukah story itself is no accident at all. It is the deliberate framing by our Sages of the holiday as less about the events of a particular generation, than it is about driving home the message that we should always relate to contemporary events as part of the broader scheme of Jewish history. As the chronologically last of our holidays, Channukah 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. We take great comfort knowing that the Rock of our Salvation is every bit the fortress now that he was then, *bayamim ha-hem, baz'man hazeh*.