

The Practice of Jewish Law is Forbidden!



Suppose we awoke one morning and found that Congress had passed a law forbidding the practice of Judaism? The study of *Torah*, the observance of *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, Jewish worship, all outlawed. Not only that, but in every synagogue the *Torah* is ordered removed, and in its place other symbols inconsistent with Judaism were erected.

What would we do? How would we react?

Looking back in time, this is exactly what happened in the second century BCE, when Antiochus IV forbade the observance of Judaism, placed idols in the Temple, and forced people to bow down to images of the pig in public. Circumcision was forbidden, and the laws of the *Torah* suspended.

Some Jews went along with the decrees. But a few, led by Mattathias the priest, and his son, Judah Maccabee, refused to be intimidated. They fought back. Many died.

But miraculously, they were victorious, the Temple was purified, and the practice of Judaism and the study of *Torah* were again legalized.

That is why we observe the eight-day festival of *Hanukkah*, which this year begins on Friday evening December 19, 2003, and continues to the end of *Shabbat* on December 27, 2003. The lighting of the *Hanukkah* candles is the most-observed rite among our people. According to the new Jewish population study, 90% of the community kindles the *Hanukkah*. But when it comes to the practices the Maccabees fought for, the percentages are far less sanguine. Only 40% belong to a synagogue, 20% keep kosher, under 30% light *Shabbat* candles or attend one service a month.

The truth is, there is no need for the draconian decrees of Antiochus, because for the vast majority of the Jewish community, we are already in compliance!

What a sad development in this land of freedom and opportunity. We live in an age where we are free, respected, and able to practice Judaism in dignity. The classics of Judaism are available in attractive, literary formats, with splendid English translations. Courses in Jewish education are available in every community and on many college campuses. But only the few avail themselves of the Jewish riches of our society.

Some say, if it were forbidden, we would rise up in protest and embrace Judaism more eagerly. But who would want that?

And so the challenge *Hanukkah* presents for us is not how to be Jewish in the face of oppression, but how to live it in a land of freedom and unlimited opportunity.

As we observe *Hanukkah* this year, perhaps we will take to heart that it is not the lighting of the candles to commemorate ancient heroism that is most important. Rather, it is that the lighting of the candles inspires us to light a candle of Jewish practice and learning today.

You have taken an important first step. You are part of the 40% minority that has chosen to be affiliated. Now it is time to take the next steps.

To study. We have a wonderful adult education program. Participate.

To pray. We have uplifting services that comfort the soul and challenge the mind. Come.

To practice. We are blessed with the heritage of the rituals of *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, and the holidays. Embrace them.

I wish you and your loved ones a Happy *Hanukkah*, a *Hanukkah* that gives thanks for the freedom for which our ancestors fought, and which inspires you to respond with study, prayer and observance.

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