

A CHANNUKAH MORAL.

A SERMON BY RABBI EDWARD N. CALISCH

Now when the time drew near that Matathias should die, he said unto his sons, "Now hath pride and rebuke gotten strength, and the time of destruction, and the wrath of indignation; Now therefore, my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers. Call to remembrance what acts our fathers did in their time, so shall ye receive great honor and an everlasting name. (*I Maccabees ii. 49-51.*)

The book of the Maccabees, from which we quote our text this morning, is not in the canon of the Scriptures. It is a part of the Apocrypha. It would doubtless have been a part of the Scriptures, had not the canon of the Scriptures been closed before it came into existence. From it however we glean a fair and reasonable story of the troublous times that led to the Maccabean revolt, of the progress of the war, the triumph of Judas and the cleansing and rededication of the temple. It is a story of courage and heroism, of patriots' valor and prowess, more worth than the shields and spears of mercenary masses. It is a story that re-echoes the word of the prophet, (*Zechariah iv. 6*) that not always do numbers and force and might prevail, but that the spirit of God and the love of faith gird the loins with an irresistible sword and cover the breast with impenetrable armor.

The story of the Maccabees is interesting to the world at large from many standpoints. It is a source of pride to us, because of the glory of the heroism and the undaunted courage displayed. The picture of an injured and oppressed people, rising up in the might of their righteous resentment in defense of home and hearth and liberty, is always an inspiration to those who view it. It tells that the human breast will endure wrongs as long as they are endurable, but when the tyrant steps over the bounds, that hold patience to be a virtue, then no mass of weighty waters e'er bursts asunder its restraining dam more impatiently than do the oppressed wrest the yoke of tyranny from off their necks. With the Maccabees, this step too far was taken by Antiochus, when he sought to touch the faith of Israel. Their land could be pillaged and robbed, their homes plundered, tribute levied upon them by the Syrian monarch, and Israel felt itself too weak to resist; but the moment the sanctuary of faith was touched, the moment the desecrating hand of the heathen was laid upon the altar dedicated to the most high God of Israel, that moment weakness fled, and impotence was done. Every peasant became a hero, every arm was muscled with iron and sinewed with steel, every breast held a lion's heart, and every man in Israel was ready to do battle with the tyrant, or give up life in the attempt.

This phase of the Maccabean story is illustrative of Israel's life through all time. Beaten and buffeted by kings, plundered and robbed without mercy or scruple by monarchs and princes, the victims of every royal caprice or popular madness, massacred as the cause of every pestilence and scourge, they bore all things and wore the "badge of patient sufferance" upon the gabardine of their degradation. But when faith was endangered, when the sacred law was hung in the balance, there was no resistance too fierce to be offered, no

sacrifice too great to be endured, no death too agonizing to be met, and with the martyr's calm. It is safe to say that had the decree of Isabella, of Spain, been "expulsion or the surrender of all worldly possessions," Israel would have surrendered all worldly possessions and remained in the land, to begin anew the combat of existence, no matter how trying the conditions. But when the order came, "expulsion or baptism," there was no alternative, there could be no alternative when faith was concerned, and Israel left Spain.

The incident from which we have taken our thought for to-day is highly picturesque. We have before us, the scene of the death-bed of the father of the Maccabees. Where it took place we do not know, save that it was in the friendly shelter of some mountain fastness, whither the people had fled and were in hiding. Mayhap 'twas in some cavern deep, whose chambers had been hollowed by the universal Architect Himself. Gathered round the couch were the five heroic sons, destined soon to become the leaders of an independent people. There were Simon, the wise and prudent, Judas the valorous, and Eleazar the self-sacrificing, together with John and Jonathan, and in the background the sorrowing figures of the multitude of Israel. As the hour drew near for his end, the old priest gathered his fast departing strength and gave his last impressive charge to his children. And he said: "Now therefore my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers. Call to remembrance what acts our fathers did in their time; so shall ye receive great honor and an everlasting name."

He then recalls the names and deeds of the fathers, mentioning Abraham, Joseph, Phineas, Joshua, Caleb, David, Daniel and others. He tells them, "thus consider ye throughout all ages, that none that trust in Him shall be overcome," and then giving them more earnest charges and sage counsel, Matathias blessed them and was gathered to his fathers. (*I Maccabees ii, 50-70*)

This scene has its precedent and counterpart in the deathbed of Jacob. The patriarch had gathered roundabout him his sons and those of his son, Joseph. He called them each by name, and with that prescience with which mortal eyes soon to be closed seem gifted, he pictured the future of each of them. And having so done, and having blessed them in the name of Him who only can give and withhold, Jacob was gathered to his fathers.

Each one of these, the patriarch and the Asmonean priest, as they closed their eyes on the scenes of earthly struggle, gave to those who came after them the moral of their lives' experience and knowledge. And in both instances this was the same. There can be no interest in life greater than the Law of God. There can be no wisdom profounder than that wisdom which is the fear of God, no knowledge greater than that which teaches us to depart from evil (*Job xxviii 28*). Jacob dying, told unto his sons what would come to each according as each had lived, had held fast to truth and the moral law, had followed in the path of God. Matathias dying, told unto his sons, "Be zealous for the 'law' and give up your lives for the covenant of your fathers."

Friends, it seems though Matathias spoke

even unto us to-day. 'Midst all the memories that cluster round this Channukah feast, this legacy of the Maccabean father to his children comes out to us, his children still, and calls to us with no less timely warning. True, no outward tyrant threatens. Our lives are not endangered. Our sanctuary is menaced by no stranger hand or alien force. The full, bright orb of freedom casts its warm rays upon us, and we walk with step as free and head as high and with the glorious privilege of American citizenship, as secure as any. Our acts are in our own hand, to do or to refrain, and no one to say us nay. Why then need we forfeit our lives for the covenant of our fathers?

Yet in this very freedom lies the greatest danger. We are led to forsake the covenant of our fathers, not by threats or force, or tyrant's loud command, but are tempted from it by inducements and allurements that are silent, sweet, and subtle, and continuous in their presence.

We are threatened by foes that are the stronger because they are the more insidious, because they are subjective. Here are the allurements of position, plenty, power, gain, and material advantage, that are enticing us away from the Law. Here are the enemies within us, the fast-increasing ignorance of our faith and its doctrines, the consequent indifference, coldness, and neglect, not to mention irreverence, which are but the legitimate fruitage of ignorance. We need to-day the Maccabean spirit to subdue and crush these enemies. We need to heed the warning of Matathias to be "zealous for the Law," and yield our lives of selfish ease, of comfort, and convenience for the ordinances of our fathers.

I recognize that it is hard to be a Jew. There are a thousand and one difficulties, differences, and conditions that make our existence harder than others. It always has been so. It doubtless will be so for time to come. But that difficulty was intended, and by just so much as it is difficult, by just so much is the victory greater when it is won. We need the Maccabean spirit, not for a single combat, but for a perpetual conflict. The enemy with whom we contend is one, that like the dragon's heads, no sooner is he subdued and crushed, but that another takes its place. We struggle all the day long, yet when we lie down to rest at night it is with the consciousness that though we have conquered, yet when the sun relumes the eastern skies and we arise again, the struggle must be recommenced and the enemy resubdued.

For this struggle we need the warning of Matathias, to be "zealous for the Law," that each one of us may down the tyrant of irreverence and indifference that threatens us, that we may regain the citadel of faith that has been wrested from us, that we may cleanse and purge the altars of our hearts from all desecration, and rededicating them unto the Holy One of Israel, rekindle the flame of our loyal devotion which shall be never, never quenched. Amen.

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