



The First Clash of Civilisations

One of the key phrases of our time is the clash of civilisations. And Chanukah is about one of the first great clashes of civilisation, between the Greeks and Jews of antiquity, Athens and Jerusalem.

The ancient Greeks produced one of the most remarkable civilisations of all time: philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, historians like Herodotus and Thucydides, dramatists like Sophocles and Aeschylus. They produced art and architecture of a beauty that has never been surpassed. Yet in the second century before the common era they were defeated by the group of Jewish fighters known as the Maccabees, and from then on Greece as a world power went into rapid decline, while the tiny Jewish people survived every exile and persecution and are still alive and well today.

What was the difference? The Greeks, who did not believe in a single, loving God, gave the world the concept of tragedy. We strive, we struggle, at times we achieve greatness, but life has no ultimate purpose. The universe neither knows nor cares that we are here.

Ancient Israel gave the world the idea of hope. We are here because God created us in love, and through love we discover the meaning and purpose of life.

Tragic cultures eventually disintegrate and die. Lacking any sense of ultimate meaning, they lose the moral beliefs and habits on which continuity depends. They sacrifice happiness for pleasure. They sell the future for the present. They lose the passion and energy that brought them greatness in the first place. That's what happened to Ancient Greece.

Judaism and its culture of hope survived, and the Chanukah lights are the symbol of that survival, of

Judaism's refusal to jettison its values for the glamour and prestige of a secular culture, then or now.

A candle of hope may seem a small thing, but on it the very survival of a civilisation may depend.

The Battle to Teach Moral Values is Won at School

It was a fateful clash of civilisations when Ancient Greece and Israel collided. Jews won. Had they not done so, there be no Judaism today and there would almost certainly be no Christianity or Islam.

These events are commemorated on Chanukkah, the eight-day Jewish festival of lights we are celebrating now. They happened 22 centuries ago, when Israel came under the rule of the Alexandrian Empire. After Alexander's death the empire split: the Ptolemies

in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. Each ruled Israel in turn.

Ancient Greece and Israel were profoundly different. The Greeks excelled at everything visual. The Jews worshipped the invisible God. To Greeks, the Jews were strange and superstitious. To Jews, the Greeks were pagans and idolaters.

The Ptolemies allowed Jews to practise their faith in peace but one Seleucid leader, Antiochus IV, believed in the active Hellenisation of the Jews. It was an act of hubris that cost him dearly.

Not all Jews were opposed to Hellenism. Some saw it as the future. It was cosmopolitan. Judaism, they felt, was parochial. The glittering achievements of the Greeks seemed to breathe a freer air than the pieties of their own people. Two high priests in particular, Jason, then Menelaus, saw Antiochus as an ally with whose help they could force the pace of cultural change.

They introduced a gymnasium into Jerusalem. Young priests began to spend more time on the body than the soul. They encouraged Antiochus to forbid the public practice of Judaism. They even erected a statue of Zeus in the Temple precincts. They began to offer pagan sacrifices on the Temple's altars. It was deeply provocative. The Jews called it the "abomination of desolation".

A priestly family, the aged Matthias and his sons, known as the Maccabees, rose in revolt. They won back Jewish independence, cleansed and rededicated the Temple, and relit its candelabrum, the Menorah. That is why to this day we light candles for eight days. Chanukah means "rededication".

The military victory was short-lived. Within a century Israel was again under foreign rule, this time by the Romans. It was the spiritual victory that survived. Realising that the real battle was not against an empire but a culture, Jews set about constructing the world's first system of universal education. The effect was astonishing. Although they were later to suffer devastating defeats at the hands of the Romans, they had created an identity so strong that it was able to survive 2,000 years of exile and dispersion.

What history taught them was that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need schools. In the short run battles are won by weapons, but in the long run they are won by ideas and the way they are handed on from generation to generation. Oddly but appropriately, Chanukah comes from the same Hebrew root as "education".

In Britain today we risk undervaluing and misconceiving our schools. We think in terms of league tables of academic results. But schools are more than this. They are the way a civilisation hands on its values across time. When a culture forgets its own values, especially when it thinks they are something we each invent for ourselves, it is about to die – not immediately but inevitably. That is why faith schools have become so popular. They have a strong and distinctive ethos. They honour the past. They create community and continuity. They teach children who they are and why.

Chanukah tells us that there are two different battles for freedom. One is fought by soldiers, the other by teachers, and it is the second that eventually determines the course of history. When civilisations clash,

strengthen schools. The world we build tomorrow is born in the lessons we teach today.

The Light of War and the Light of Peace

There is a law about Chanukah I find moving and profound. Maimonides writes that 'the command of Chanukah lights is very precious. One who lacks the money to buy lights should sell something, or if necessary borrow, so as to be able to fulfil the mitzvah.'

The question then arises, What if, on Friday afternoon, you find yourself with only one candle? What do you light it as — a Shabbat candle or a Chanukah one? It can't be both. Logic suggests that you should light it as a Chanukah candle. After all, there is no law that you have to sell or borrow to light lights for Shabbat. Yet the law is that, if faced with such a choice, you light it as a Shabbat light. Why?

Listen to Maimonides: 'The Shabbat light takes priority because it symbolises shalom bayit, domestic peace. And great is peace because the entire Torah was given in order to make peace in the world.'

Consider: Chanukah commemorates one of the greatest military victories in Jewish history. Yet Jewish law rules that if we can only light one candle — the Shabbat light takes precedence, because in Judaism the greatest military victory takes second place to peace in the home.

Why did Judaism, alone among the civilizations of the ancient world, survive? Because it valued the home more than the battlefield, marriage

more than military grandeur, and children more than generals. Peace in the home mattered to our ancestors more than the greatest military victory.

So as we celebrate Chanukah, spare a thought for the real victory, which was not military but spiritual. Jews were the people who valued marriage, the home, and peace between husband and wife, above the highest glory on the battlefield. In Judaism, the light of peace takes precedence over the light of war.

The Festival of Lights that Signifies an Inextinguishable Faith

What I find fascinating about Chanukah, the Jewish festival of lights we celebrate at this time of the year, is the way its story was transformed by time.

It began as the simple story of a military victory, the success of Judah the Maccabee and his followers as they fought for religious freedom against the repressive rule of the Syrian-Greek emperor Antiochus IV. Antiochus, who modestly called himself Epiphanes, “God made manifest”, had resolved forcibly to hellenise the Jews.

He had a statue of Zeus erected in the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem, ordered sacrifices to be made to pagan gods, and banned Jewish rites on pain of death. The Maccabees fought back and within three years had reconquered Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple. That is how the story is told in the first and second books of Maccabees.

However, things did not go smoothly thereafter. The new Jewish monarchy known as the Hasmonean kings themselves became hellenised. They also incurred the wrath of the people by breaking one of the principles of Judaism: the separation between religion and political power. They became not just kings but also high priests, something earlier monarchs had never done.

Even militarily, the victory over the Greeks proved to be only a temporary respite. Within a century Pompey invaded Jerusalem and Israel came under Roman rule. Then came the disastrous rebellion against Rome (66-73), as a result of which Israel was defeated and the Temple destroyed. The work of the Maccabees now lay in ruins.

Some rabbis at the time believed that the festival of Chanukah should be abolished. Why celebrate a freedom that had been lost? Others disagreed, and their view prevailed. Freedom may have been lost but not hope.

That was when another story came to the fore, about how the Maccabees, in purifying the Temple, found a single cruse of oil, its seal still intact, from which they relit the Menorah, the great candelabrum in the Temple. Miraculously the light lasted eight days and that became the central narrative of Chanukah. It became a festival of light within the Jewish home symbolising a faith that could not be extinguished. Its message was captured in a phrase from the prophet Zekhariah: “Not by might nor by power but by My spirit, says the Lord Almighty.”

I have often wondered whether that is not the human story, not just the Jewish one. We celebrate military victories. We tell stories about the

heroes of the past. We commemorate those who gave their lives in defence of freedom. That is as it should be. Yet the real victories that determine the fate of nations are not so much military as cultural, moral and spiritual.

In Rome the Arch of Titus was erected by Titus’s brother Domitian to commemorate the victorious Roman siege of Jerusalem in the year 70. It shows Roman soldiers carrying away the spoils of war, most famously the seven-branched Menorah. Rome won that military conflict. Yet its civilisation declined and fell, while Jews and Judaism survived.

They did so not least because of Chanukah itself. That simple act of families coming together to light the lights, tell the story and sing the songs, proved more powerful than armies and longer-lived than empires. What endured was not the historical narrative as told in the books of Maccabees but the simpler, stronger story that spoke of a single cruse of oil that survived the wreckage and desecration, and the light it shed that kept on burning.

Something in the human spirit survives even the worst of tragedies, allowing us to rebuild shattered lives, broken institutions and injured nations. That to me is the Jewish story. Jews survived all the defeats, expulsions, persecutions and pogroms, even the Holocaust itself, because they never gave up the faith that one day they would be free to live as Jews without fear. Whenever I visit a Jewish school today I see on the smiling faces of the children the ever-renewed power of that faith whose symbol is Chanukah and its light of inextinguishable hope.