

Chanukah

More than 2000 years ago there was a time when the land of Israel was part of the Syrian-Greek Empire, dominated by Syrian rulers of the dynasty of the Seleucids.

The story of Chanukah starts with Antiochus III, the King of Syria. He waged war with King Ptolemy of Egypt over the possession of the Land of Israel some 170 years before Yeshua's coming. Antiochus III was victorious and the Land of Israel was annexed to his empire. At the beginning of his reign he was favorably disposed toward the Jews and accorded them some privileges. Later on, however, when he was beaten by the Romans and compelled to pay heavy taxes, the burden fell upon the various peoples of his empire who were forced to furnish the heavy gold that was required of him by the Romans. When Antiochus died, his son Seleucus IV took over, and further oppressed the Jews.

Added to the troubles from the outside were the grave perils that threatened Judaism from within. The influence of the Hellenists who accepted idol-worship and the Syrian

way of life was increasing. Yochanan, the High Priest, foresaw the danger to Judaism from the penetration of Syrian-Greek influence into the Holy Land. For, in contrast to the ideal of outward beauty held by the Greeks and Syrians, Judaism emphasizes truth and moral purity, as commanded by G-d in the holy Torah. The Jewish people could never give up their faith in G-d and accept the idol-worship of the Syrians.

Yochanan was therefore opposed to any attempt on the part of the Jewish Hellenists to introduce Greek and Syrian customs into the land. The Hellenists hated him. One of them told the King's commissioner that in the treasury of the Temple there was a great deal of wealth.

The wealth in the treasury consisted of the contributions of "half a shekel" made by all adult Jews annually. That was given for the purpose of the sacrifices on the altar, as well as for fixing and improving the Temple building. Another part of the treasury consisted of orphans' funds which were deposited for them until they became of age. Seleucus needed money in order to pay the Romans.

He sent his minister Helyodros to take the money from the treasury of the Temple. In vain did Yochanan, the High Priest, beg him not to do it. Helyodros did not listen and entered the gate of the Temple. But suddenly, he became pale with fright. The next moment he fainted and fell to the ground. After Helyodros came to, he did not dare enter again.

A short time later, Seleucus was killed and his brother Antiochus IV began to reign over Syria. He was a tyrant of rash and impetuous nature, contemptuous of religion and of the feelings of others. He was called "Epiphanes," meaning "the gods' beloved." Several of the Syrian rulers received similar titles. But a historian of his time, Polebius, gave him the epithet Epimanes which is "madman", a title more suitable to the character of this harsh and cruel king.

Desiring to unify his kingdom through the medium of a common religion and culture, Antiochus tried to root out the individualism of the Jews by suppressing all the Jewish Laws. He removed the righteous High Priest, Yochanan, from the Temple in Jerusalem, and in his place