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## The Maccabee Spirit

Chanukah is not a very important religious holiday. I've heard it from many rabbis: on the scale of grandeur, Chanukah is way beneath Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavu'ot. Chanukah isn't even mentioned in the Jewish scriptures. In fact, ironically, this holiday, which has its roots in a revolution against assimilation and the suppression of Jewish religion, is easily the most assimilated, secular holiday on the Jewish calendar.

But Chanukah feels really important to me, and not because it's the eight-night parallel to Christmas.

Let's start with the story, which can never be told enough.

In the year 167 before the common era, which is to say, long ago, in the land of Judea, the Syrian king, Antiochus, ordered his Jewish subjects to reject their religion and their god, and to worship as Greeks. Many did as they were told, but a small band did not. That small band became an army, led by a man

called Judah Maccabee – that's Mah-cah'-bee, not his Irish Catholic cousin, Mack'-a-bee – and his four brothers. Their name means “hammer.”

Three years later, against all odds, the Maccabees drove the Syrians from Jerusalem and reclaimed the temple; cleaning it, removing the Greek statuary and symbols, and, finally, rededicating it. As the story goes, though, there remained only a day's worth of undefiled oil with which to kindle the *N'er Tamid*, the eternal light of every Jewish house of worship. The lamp, however, remained burning for eight days – enough time to press a fresh supply of oil – and gave birth to the Festival of Lights.

Note that Chanukah commemorates this miracle, the miracle of the oil, and not the military victory of the Maccabees. Judaism does not glorify war.<sup>1</sup>

One of the many aspects of this story that I love is that the Maccabees take the making of light into their own hands. In the Jewish scriptures, it is G\*d that causes the burning bush to flare up: the angel of the lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush, “and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.”<sup>2</sup> A little further into the story of The Exodus, Moses and the Israelites arrive at Mt. Sinai, and, again, it is G\*d that causes the fire: “And it came to pass ... in the morning that there [was thunder and lightning], and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud, so that all the people in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with G\*d.... And Mt. Sinai was altogether on a smoke,

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1 please see [holidays.net/chanukah/story.html](http://holidays.net/chanukah/story.html) and [jewfaq.org/holiday7htm#Story](http://jewfaq.org/holiday7htm#Story)

2 Exodus 3:2

because the lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.<sup>3</sup> The menorah, though, is kindled by human hands; the Maccabees brought light into the darkness of their world, bringing freedom of religion to the Jewish people and setting an example of faith and resistance.

In the Chanukah story, it is human beings who bring the light of g\*d into the sanctuary, and who go forth from the sanctuary, bearing light: let it shine, let it shine, let it shine! The message of the Maccabee victory is just this: If we want a miracle, it's up to us.

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon, who serves the New London Synagogue in London, England, wrote a beautiful letter I want to share with you. He says, in part, "... [Recently,] we were in Berlin for a meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly of Europe, and since it is Chanukah time, one couldn't help but notice [Chanukah menorahs – ] *Chanukiyot* [-] in front of such places as the Jewish Museum.... Only sixty years ago, such a thing would have been impossible.

"The rule," Rabbi Jeremy Gordon continues, "is that the *Chanukiyah* must be lit in a place where it can be seen in order to publicly proclaim the miracle.... However, in times of danger, you do not put them in the window or in a public place.... The ability to light the Chanukah lamps where all can see them is a litmus test of freedom. There is, therefore, a measure of pride and comfort in

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3 Exodus 19:16-18

seeing the lights burning once again in Germany, and yet a stab of pain remembering the time when all the lights went out.

“The darkness is always there,” Rabbi Jeremy Gordon concludes. “So many people need light to be brought to their lives. That is what we must do. That is really the task of religion, and of religious people.”<sup>4</sup>

Chanukah comes as an opportunity to remember and reflect on the legacy of the Maccabees, that spirited revolt that proclaimed the victory of light in the darkness.

Do you ever experience something new – maybe a new word, or a new idea – and then, suddenly, it seems as if you see it or hear it wherever you go? It happens to me all the time. And over the past few weeks, in this first leg of the holidays between Thanksgiving and Chanukah, I've been keenly aware of the Maccabee spirit everywhere.

Laugh all the way to the dentist's office, if you want, or just get thee to the supermarket checkout: This week's *People* magazine features two of the best Maccabee spirit stories, ever. Here, let me spoil them for you:

First, can we talk about Chaz Bono? Born to Sonny and Cher and named Chastity – *don't get me started* – the person now known as Chaz suffered a

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4 please see [newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51](http://newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51)

miserably incongruous life in a female body until he got clean of his drug and alcohol addictions and found the courage to transition and claim his manhood. "It's hard for me to articulate how this feels," he says, "when you've lived your whole life in a body and [had] everybody relate to you as something you don't feel. When that ... gets righted, it's just amazing. [Now,] I finally get to live my life the way I've always wanted to."<sup>5</sup> That's mad brave, already, but then there's this: Chaz Bono has no intention of kicking back and enjoying his true identity without bringing the rest of us cousins and allies along. He's made a documentary and a book about his journey, he's spoken at the Transgender Law Center in San Francisco, and he's working with trans kids and their families, because he wants every transgender person to feel supported.

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Chaz Bono is a menorah, carrying the torch of the Maccabee spirit, making light in the darkness.

I read it in *People!*

And here's Maccabee spirit story number two from the same source: Lizzy

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<sup>5</sup> *People*, December 21, 2009, p. 110

<sup>6</sup> This is still Rabbi Jeremy Gordon. Again, please see [newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51](http://newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51)

Craze. I didn't know the name, and I doubt many if any of you does, but twenty-five years ago, just before her third birthday, Lizzy Craze made history as the world's youngest heart transplant survivor. Against all odds, she has lived to tell the story. Lizzy says, "I feel triumphant."

Lizzy's parents, Charlie and Susan Craze, lost three children to congenital heart failure before Lizzy was born. They did have one healthy son, Andy, but when he was sixteen, his heart also failed; Andy was given six months to live. And then Susan learned that she was pregnant again. Baby Lizzy was born with the same disease. Susan battled suicidal thoughts, and traveled to Lourdes, France, in search of a miracle.

Medical advances were on their side; Andy underwent a successful heart transplant, and has lived to tell the story. Fifteen months later, his baby sister received a new heart. Lizzy was given five years to live.

But she was having nothing of it ... and here comes the Maccabee spirit! Lizzy took dance lessons, played baseball, and perfected rolling her eyes when her anxious mother would hover. By fifteen, her kidneys had been destroyed by anti-rejection medication. Her dad, Charlie, donated one of his. Nothing stopped Lizzy for long: On prom night, she wore a strapless dress that revealed the top of the nine-inch scar running down her breastbone.

At twenty-eight, Lizzy juggles kickboxing, law classes, work as a computer specialist for *Facebook*, and time with her friends and boyfriend. At some point,

she'll need another heart. Lizzy says she'll cross that bridge when she gets to it. "Life is too short to worry about my heart," she says. "I experience all I can. And [- here comes my favorite line: And -] I'm not slowing down."<sup>7</sup>

Lizzy Craze has a mighty heart, kindled by some mystical partnership between humans and the divine. But now it's up to her to bear that light, to be the menorah.

*"The darkness is always there. So many people need light to be brought to their lives. That is what we must do."*<sup>8</sup>

I am not, says Lizzy Crane, I am *not* slowing down. Maccabee: the hammer. *¡Presente!*

My spiritual companions, let us take into our own hands this business of making light in the darkness. It is we who bring light into this sanctuary, and we who go forth, bearing light: let it shine, let it shine, let it shine! The message of the Maccabee victory echos down the ages and arrives here today:

If we want a miracle, it's up to us.

*Chag Urim Sameach!* Happy Chanukah!

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<sup>7</sup> *People*, December 21, 2009, p. 112-114

<sup>8</sup> This is still Rabbi Jeremy Gordon. Again, please see [newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51](http://newlondon.org.uk/articles/?article=51)