

# Light Up the World

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In the darkest days of the Holocaust, hundreds of talmidim from the Mir Yeshiva were saved through the selfless actions of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat stationed in Kovno. As the Nazis approached, Sugihara, against the orders of his government, issued thousands of visas, allowing the yeshiva's faculty, talmidim, and their families to escape certain death. Though their journey led them to Shanghai, China, where they faced harsh conditions, they were, nonetheless, spared from the horrors of the Holocaust. They were saddened by their saga and worried about the fate of their families, friends and townspeople.

As Chanukah approached, Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, the mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva, took the opportunity to offer words of strength and encouragement to his fellow refugees. He spoke of the powerful lessons of Chanukah and the story of the Maccabees, drawing parallels between the historic struggle of the Jewish people and their own fight for survival in a foreign land.

Rav Levenstein began by referencing the Rambam's account of the Yevonim's domination over the Jewish people for fifty-two years. The Yevonim, through their control over Klal Yisroel, sought to destroy the Jewish faith, corrupting the Jews' attachment to Hakadosh Boruch Hu. Theirs was a calculated effort to make the Jews apathetic, to strip them of their spiritual vitality, and to convince them that their identity and beliefs were irrelevant in the face of a dominant foreign power.

Yet, it was in the face of this oppression that Matisyohu Hakohein, a single individual, sparked a revolution. His courageous acts of defiance against the Yevonim became the catalyst for the Maccabean revolt, which ultimately brought freedom to the Jewish people. Rav Chatzkel emphasized that it was the inspiration of this one man, Matisyohu, that changed the course of Jewish history. The victory did not simply come from physical might, but from a deep sense of belief in Hashem and the refusal to accept the tyranny of the dictators and the majority of the people.

Matisyohu's actions were a clear message that one person's faith and determination could inspire an entire nation to rise up, regardless of how dire the situation appeared. Rav Chatzkel conveyed this lesson to the talmidim of the Mir Yeshiva, urging them to remember that even in the face of hardship and exile, they, too, could persevere, each one of them providing strength for the others.

Another central lesson from Rav Chatzkel's words was the danger of complacency and apathy. The Yevonim succeeded in weakening the Jewish spirit not merely through force, but by fostering a sense of helplessness and resignation. The Jewish people were made to feel that they were powerless, that there was no hope of defeating the Yevonim, and that they should simply accept their fate. The Yevonim sought to suppress the Jewish people's commitment to Torah and mitzvos by convincing them that resistance was futile.

Rav Chatzkel stressed that it was precisely this mindset of resignation that led to the threat of spiritual annihilation. The Maccabees, by contrast, rejected this mindset entirely. When Matisyohu rose to lead the rebellion, he taught his people to never accept oppression passively. His call to arms was a rejection of the notion that everything was lost and that the Jewish people had no future. By acting, he demonstrated the power of not allowing circumstances to dictate our faith or resolve.

For the talmidim of the Mir Yeshiva, this message was vital. In the refugee camps of Shanghai, the survivors could easily have become despondent and resigned to their situation. They had lost so much—families, homes, communities—and the future seemed uncertain. Yet, Rav Chatskel's words reminded them that they should not become complacent in the face of hardship. Their survival was not just a matter of enduring. It was an opportunity to continue their mission, to maintain faith and to never give up.

A key element of Rav Chatzkel's message was the importance of acting according to faith in Hashem rather than fearing the "facts on the ground" or the opinions of others. He referred to the way the Maccabees, against overwhelming odds, fought because they believed in the truth of their cause. Despite the seemingly insurmountable power of the Yevonim, Matisyohu and his sons fought not because victory seemed likely, but because they could not accept spiritual destruction.

In their time, the talmidim of the Mir Yeshiva were surrounded by a world that seemed to have abandoned them. They were far from their homes, living in difficult circumstances, and their families were scattered or lost. Yet, Rav Chatzkel urged them to remember the example of the Maccabees, never to fear the apparent strength of their enemies or the difficulties they faced, but to trust in Hashem's power to guide them through.

Finally, Rav Chatzkel reminded the talmidim that while Hashem granted the miraculous victory to the Maccabees, it began with human initiative—*isra'usa d'lisata*, the spark of inspiration that led to action. The Maccabees did not wait for a miracle to happen. They acted, believing in the truth and taking the necessary steps to make their vision a reality.

For the Mir Yeshiva talmidim, this lesson was especially poignant. Their survival was a result of both external and internal miracles. Sugihara's heroic act of issuing visas saved them physically, but their spiritual survival depended on their own actions, maintaining their faith, continuing their devotion to Torah, and inspiring each other to keep their *emunah* and *hasmodah* strong. Just as the Maccabees taught that we must act to bring about redemption, so too, Rav Chatzkel reminded them that they must be strong and not become overwhelmed by what is going on in the world.

While there were people at the time of the Yevonim who were privately *moser nefesh* to remain loyal to Torah and *mitzvos*, Matisyohu added that there is an obligation not only to worry about yourself and your family, but also to do battle against those who are working to destroy the people's attachment to Hashem and His Torah.

Until Matisyohu began his revolution against the evil ones, the hester ponim was such that it was possible to think that Yiddishkeit would be totally destroyed. This was because nobody had the self confidence that they possessed the strength of character and purpose to take on the enemy and foster the concept that with Hashem's help they could be beaten and Klal Yisroel could return to its exalted state.

Matisyohu showed Jews for all time the power of one good individual to inspire change. He showed the danger of complacency, the importance of acting in faith, and the belief that when we do so, Hashem will help us. We fear not the mighty, nor the powerful, nor the immoral majority. He showed that there is no such thing as nature and the concept that we have to go along with those who seek our spiritual destruction. Even one person or a few who fight lesheim Shomayim can bring us all salvation.

As Rav Chatzkel's words echoed through the halls of the Mir Yeshiva in Shanghai, they served as a powerful reminder of the resilience and strength of the Jewish people. The talmidim and hanholah of the yeshiva had already endured unimaginable suffering, but they were encouraged and strengthened to continue on the path they began in the Mir in Europe. Like the Chashmonaim, they were reminded that no matter how dire the circumstances, they could make a difference. One person's inspiration, a single act of courage, could change everything.

In the end, the story of the Mir Yeshiva's survival is a testament to the lessons of Chanukah: the power of one individual to inspire others to be strong, the danger of complacency, the importance of acting in faith, and the belief that, when we have emunah and bitachon, Hashem brings miracles that can topple the many and the strong and allow the few and the determined to survive.

And it was not only the Mir Yeshiva and the giants who led it and kept the yeshiva going in exile through sheer determination, dedication to Torah and belief in Hashem. Our people were rebuilt after the awful churban by individuals who fought lonely battles and restored the spirit of broken people, creating places for them to gather and communities in which they could live.

People such as Rav Aharon Kotler, the Satmar Rebbe, the Ponovezher Rov, the Klausenberger Rebbe, the Bobover Rebbe, and so many other unsung and famous heroes who lost so much took this lesson of Chanukah to heart. Their indomitable spirit not only restored what had been lost, but created the foundation for the miraculous rejuvenation, renaissance, and resurgence of Torah life that many had thought was dead and buried.

In the time of the Chashmonaim, even after the physical conflicts were won on the battlefields and the Yevonim were vanquished, the war was not over. The Yevonim had succeeded in secularizing a majority of the people, and a new campaign was begun to spiritually revitalize the people and engender a revival of observance. The ultimate goal of the physical battles was to bring the people back to Torah and restore the kedusha and vitality of Hashem's people.

The Hellenist Maskilim of the 1800s rewrote the story of the Chashmonaim to simply be another story of good triumphing over evil, of the strong and determined few beating the enemy's large fighting force. They did away with the Chanukah miracles and Chazal's teachings. They did away with the neis of the pach shemen tahor and turned the menorah lighting into a celebration of the war victory. They claimed that in the days of old, such occasions were celebrated by the kindling of numerous lights in private homes and public plazas. They wished each other "Chag Orim Sameiach – Happy Festival of Lights."

The Maskilim who had been battling traditional Judaism for years saw secular Zionism as a vehicle with which to continue their war. The Maskilim effectively used the new movement to battle religion. Secular Zionists adopted the theme and turned Chanukah into a celebration of a military victory by physically strong, heroic Jews. They named their football teams Maccabi to celebrate Jewish athleticism and muscles in the spirit of the Maccabees who fought the Yevonim, who basically invented sports and glorified human physicality.

And to this day, they wish each other "Chag Orim Sameiach."

Rav Yisroel Salanter was a Maacabi in the spirit of Matisyohu, as explained by Rav Chatzkel Levenstein. He also fought the Maskilim bitterly. He taught a generation how to act and how to conduct itself through the Mussar Revolution he spawned. He was one of the first in a long line of gedolim who advocated establishing Torah newspapers to combat the negative influences of those determined to besmirch Torah. He taught the young how to communicate and how to present themselves with kindness and sophistication. With gaonus in Torah and middos, he was a leader in preserving the Torah nation.

Another Maacabi in the spirit of Matisyohu was the Chazon Ish, the architect and leader of the Torah community in Eretz Yisroel following the Holocaust. He famously agreed to accept an invitation for a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, so two Jews at polar opposites of the spectrum met. One represented the holy mesorah of the Chashmonaim, while the other proudly dreamed of the Maskilim's vision of the "new Jew." The Chazon Ish brilliantly rebuffed Ben Gurion's contentions. He made it clear, with the ferocity of Yehudah HaMaccabi, that the Olam HaTorah was untouchable and that his "army" wasn't impressed by the military might of Ben-Gurion.

In our time, we, too, are confronted by those who outnumber us and possess greater might and strength financially, politically, and in their mastery of propaganda and self-promotion. They seek to undermine us, belittle our way of life, and humiliate us, while attempting to sway the more vulnerable among us.

The lesson of the Maccabees is not to fall prey to their smooth talk, propaganda, slick marketing and glossy presentations. The lesson of Matisyohu Hakohein is to always remain loyal to the truth and to fight for the truth, regardless of the consequences and risks to popularity and reputation. Know who you are and know what you represent, and know that Hakadosh Boruch Hu placed you here for a reason.

Do not be intimidated by the wealthy and powerful, who are often driven by ego and a thirst for control. Instead, remain steadfast in your moral integrity and honesty, allowing these values to guide your actions. In doing so, you will be blessed with true success. Though the journey may require patience and perseverance, remember the timeless wisdom of the wisest of men: 'The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, (Koheles 9:11). Work for the betterment of Klal Yisroel and, as bleak as it may seem at times, behind the confusion there is clarity, behind the darkness there is light, and behind the determined stands Hakadosh Boruch Hu.

At the apex of the Chanukah miracles was a small crucible of pure oil, and those precious few drops of oil lit up the Bais Hamikdosh, lit up the hearts and souls of the Jewish people, and still cast a bright glow around the world wherever there are Jews who are loyal to Hashem and His Torah.

Never grow despondent, never think it's all over, and never think that you don't have the power and ability to overcome the odds, to beat back those who mock you and seek your destruction. Always know that when you are an ehrlicher Yid, but really an ehrliche Yid, and the truth is on your side, me'at min ha'ohr docheh harbeh min hachoshech. Even if all you have is a drop of fuel, you have the power to succeed and to win. You have the ability to light up the world with Torah and maasim tovim, helping to prepare the world for the ultimate victory with the coming of Moshiach very soon.