



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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Flames of Dignity and Resilience

Winston Spencer Maccabee

BY RABBI DR. MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

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In 1969, Winston Churchill’s biographer Martin Gilbert interviewed Edward Lewis Spears, a longtime friend of Gilbert’s subject. “Even Winston had a fault,” Spears reflected to Gilbert. “He was too fond of Jews.” If, as one British wag put it, an anti-Semite is one who hates the Jews more than is strictly necessary, Churchill was believed to admire the Jews more than elite British society deemed strictly necessary. With attention now being paid to Churchill’s legacy as portrayed in the film *Darkest Hour*, I thought it worth exploring the little-known role that Churchill’s fondness for the Jewish people played at a critical period in the history of Western civilization.

The film highlights three addresses delivered by Churchill upon becoming prime minister in the spring of 1940, with the Nazis bestriding most of Europe. Of the three, his two speeches before Parliament—the one that promised “blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” the other that “we shall fight on the beaches”—are more famous. The most important disquisition, however, may have been the radio remarks delivered on May 19, as they were the first words spoken by Churchill to the British people as leader of His Majesty’s Government. Britain faced, he said, “the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny which has ever darkened and stained the pages of history.”

The Nazis had thus far destroyed every adversary that they had faced, leaving in their wake a “group of shattered states and bludgeoned races: the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, the Belgians—upon all of whom the long night of barbarism will descend, unbroken even by a star of hope, unless we conquer, as conquer we must; as conquer we shall.” Noting that he

was speaking on a celebratory day in the Christian calendar, Churchill then concluded with an apparent scriptural citation—a rare rhetorical choice for him—as inspiration to his country at the most perilous moment in its history.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Centuries ago words were written to be a call and a spur to the faithful servants of Truth and Justice: “Arm yourselves, and be ye men of valour, and be in readiness for the conflict; for it is better for us to perish in battle than to look upon the outrage of our nation and our altar. As the Will of God is in Heaven, even so let it be.”

Thus ended Churchill’s first radio address as prime minister to the British people, which has come to be known as the “Be Ye Men of Valour” speech. That evening, Anthony Eden told Churchill: “You have never done anything as good or as great. Thank you, and thank God for you.” The scriptural conclusion was a stunning success, stiffening the British spine and capturing the English imagination. But where in the Bible is the verse with which Churchill concluded and for which his speech is named?

In fact, the citation is from a work of Jewish apocrypha—the first book of Maccabees, which describes the triumph of the Maccabees over the Seleucid Empire, leading to the holiday known as Chanukah. Churchill would have known it from the Apocrypha portion of the King James Bible. In the book’s third chapter, Judah Maccabee exhorts his troops prior to the recapture of Jerusalem:

And Judas said, Arm yourselves, and be valiant men, and see that ye be in readiness against the morning, that ye may fight with these nations, that are assembled together against us to destroy us and our sanctuary: For it is better for us to die in battle, than to behold the calamities of our people and our sanctuary. Nevertheless, as the will of God is in heaven, so let him do.

As Hillsdale College's Richard Langworth has noted, Churchill altered the quotation, as "the writer in him could not resist an editorial improvement." One edit that he made is particularly interesting. In paraphrasing Judah, Churchill spoke of the outrages against "our altar," rather than "our sanctuary." Here Churchill combined an understanding that Judah's victory concluded with a rebuilding of the altar (the word "Chanukah" itself refers to the *chanukat ha-mizbeach*, the dedication of the sacrificial altar in the Temple). Through Churchill's rhetoric, England was transformed into an altar for which the English must be willing to sacrifice, and ultimately rededicated.

Even more fascinating is the choice of citation itself. Why would Churchill select this verse with which to conclude his first address as prime minister? Like traditional Judaism, Churchill's own Anglican Church did not include the book of Maccabees in its canon, and there are any number of biblical instances, from Moses to Joshua to David, of eloquent exhortations in war.

The answer possibly lies in the fact that the Chanukah story is one of the few instances of a biblical battle waged against overwhelming odds. It is a tale, as the Jewish liturgy puts it, of *rabbim be-yad me'atim*, of the many falling into the hands of the few. As the film depicts, Churchill's own cabinet contained those who, like Lord Halifax, were so frightened by the British plight that they urged negotiation and capitulation. Churchill's choice of quotation from Maccabees is thus understood in the context of the verses earlier in the same chapter, where Judah's own compatriots confess themselves daunted by their situation.

Who, when they saw the host coming to meet them, said unto Judas, How shall we be able, being so few, to fight against so great a multitude and so strong, seeing we are ready to faint with fasting all this day? Unto whom Judas answered, It is no hard matter for many to be shut up in the hands of a few; and with the God of heaven it is all one, to deliver with a great multitude, or a small company: For the victory of battle standeth not in the multitude of an host; but strength cometh from heaven. They come against us in much pride and iniquity to destroy us, and our wives and children, and to spoil us. But we fight for our lives and our laws. Wherefore the Lord himself will overthrow them before our face: and as for you, be ye not afraid of them.



Sir Winston Churchill

In 1960, a retired Churchill met with David Ben-Gurion, another leader who had overseen a war in which the many fell into the hands of the few. Churchill gave Ben-Gurion an essay that he had composed in 1931 titled "Moses: The Leader of a People." In it Churchill appears to describe his own journey during the decade to follow.

"Every prophet," he wrote, "has to come from civilization, but every prophet has to go into the wilderness. He must have a strong impression of a complex society and all that it has to give, and then he must serve periods of isolation and meditation. This is the process by which psychic dynamite is made."

It was in the wilderness, Churchill wrote, that Moses encountered a vision of a burning bush, through which God, from the midst of an ethereal fire, informed him that "there is nothing that man cannot do, if he will it with enough resolution." Churchill composed these words in 1932; eight years later, he returned from the political wilderness, with "psychic dynamite" that helped save civilization. Churchill, seeking a source of inspiration in England's darkest hour, turned to the story behind the Jewish Festival of Lights. It is a fascinating footnote in the life of a man who wrote these words in 1920: "Some people like Jews and some do not, but no thoughtful man can doubt the fact that they are beyond all question the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world."

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Dignity in Flames

BY RABBI DOV LERNER

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The flames of the Hanukkah candles symbolize both enchantment and futility in a way that speaks to the narcissism of our age.

To understand how, we need to turn to the work of a pivotal thinker. Immanuel Kant's philosophical toil marked perhaps the most decisive moment in the history of modern thought. He wrote during the eighteenth century, in an age in which the sway of confessional faith began to fade and the pillars of traditional metaphysics underwent irreparable change. Aristotelian beliefs that had seized the stewards of a whole slew of religious creeds—from Avicenna to Aquinas to Maimonides—were deserted in a powerful critique of pure reason.

With the ground caving beneath the feet of revealed ethics (which threatened to bring about a Nietzschean politics), Kant and his peers and devotees frantically sought a surrogate to bind people together and inspire them to virtue. Kant, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), outlines the notion of the categorical imperative and what he calls the Kingdom of Ends (Reich der Zwecke).

The Kingdom of Ends is an imaginary realm in which human needs and responsibilities are perfectly balanced. The central tenet of this moral paradise is that each person serves as an end in and of themselves, and never as a means to another's ends. Everyone serves one

another, and no one uses anyone else; there is no abuse or exploitation, no persecution or manipulation—each and every human being keeps an unassailable and essential dignity.

The ritual choreography of the Hanukkah candles stresses a similar attention to ends. The candles grace window-panes and doorframes in a row of low flames, but maintain a ritually endowed futility throughout the night: They may not serve as a means to reading or eating or seeing beyond themselves in any way. The flames are lit and seen, but never used; while the blazes draw our gaze, the wicks have no utility. The rhythmic liturgy makes this confession: “*Ein Lanu Reshut LeHishtamesh Bahem, Elah Lir’otam Bilvad*,” which means, “We have no authority to make use of them, but only to look at them.”

So devoted were the rabbinic sages to this prohibition that measures were taken to avoid even inadvertent use. The extra wick—the shamash—is always present, independent of the candles marking the number of the night. It is there not only to ignite the others, but to preclude any illicit use of prohibited light by diluting the ritual flames’ illumination.

And yet, despite the embargo on their use, the flames are at the center of a publicity campaign unlike anything else in Jewish life. They are lit in homes and synagogues and parks and public squares, in the White House and at the Western Wall. Though forbidden for use, they are enchanting. They encapsulate the truth of Oscar Wilde’s words: “All art is quite useless.” Though clearly satirical and acerbic, Wilde’s maxim suggests that uselessness can be a mark of profound worth, casting an object not as empty but invaluable, not as vacant but purposefully unusable. Art, for Wilde, ceases to be art if it is used—much as human beings, for Kant, lose their dignity through abuse.

The Hanukkah candles glisten through the winter, signaling that we need to see beyond mere utility, to discover in others an inalienable dignity—and never treat those others simply as means. While Kant’s Kingdom of Ends failed to impede the rise of Nietzsche and the anarchic ethics of a will to power (or the ideology of utilitarianism, for that matter), the wicks lit by the Maccabees more than twenty centuries ago still burn, exhibiting dignity in flames.



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