

Not By Might Nor By Power:
 A Sermon for Hanukkah¹
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Shabbat Shalom and Hanukkah Sameach

Our Haftorah this morning includes a line made famous in Debbie Friedman's song: "*Not by might and not by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.*"

So, what does that verse really mean? Is might and power really irrelevant? Jewish powerlessness over the centuries has had horrendous results: Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, with whom I worked when the Holocaust Museum in DC was being organized, would always say that absolute powerlessness invites absolute persecution.

No, powerlessness is not a great thing. So, I don't think that this verse denies the importance of might and power. After all, the Maccabee victory that we celebrate on Hanukkah, was a military victory as much as a spiritual victory for the Jewish people. True, the Maccabees were outnumbered and out armed, as were the founding defenders of the modern State of Israel, and it took God's spirit, faith in something greater than themselves, to overcome self-doubt. That spirit motivated the Maccabees in 165 BCE, before the common era, and the young pioneers and new immigrants in 1945, who won independence against much mightier foes for the Jewish state.

Faith in something greater than themselves, is of course, faith in God, Jewish values, Jewish learning, and even if you don't believe in God, a sense of what is right and just based on those values.

Not by might, not by power but by My spirit alone...

Many demagogues and dictators have risen and fallen throughout history and continue to do so. They rise and remain in power because they are tremendously effective at intimidation. They use their power to spread fear so people don't stand up to them. That is what Antiochus did as well. He used the fear of being killed for one's faith to force Jews to abandon their Judaism. It didn't work out the way he wanted but it did work out for many of the upper class who wanted the benefits, the wealth, and the power that they got by following his program.

Dictators and demagogues have power because not only because they intimidate those around them, and therefore make people afraid to stand up to them. They gain and keep their power also because they use half-truths and lies to emotionally whip up their populations, directing these emotions, this anger, against a vulnerable, identifiable minority in society. Misdirecting anger and unease away from that dictator, away from the perpetrators, to those who *could* be targeted, protects the dictator. Unfortunately, that dynamic, what we today might call propaganda, has been very, very effective throughout history because when people's emotions are triggered, they stop thinking critically. They stop thinking clearly. They tend to knee-jerk in the direction that those spreading those lies and those half truths intend. That is pretty scary. The Jewish people as an identifiable minority throughout history in many nations have more often than not been the target of such lies and half-truths. Such lies and half-truths contributed to centuries of persecution before Christianity, but particularly with the rise of Christianity in Rome

and its spread through Europe, and to a certain and lesser degree throughout the Muslim world – all places where we lacked military might to protect ourselves. Lies and half-truths still continue today and result in the continuing rise of anti-Semitic attacks on Jews around the world and here in the US, particularly on the part of the Christian Alt-Right, but not only the Christian Alt-Right.

Ironically, propaganda was partially responsible for the persecutions that gave rise to the Maccabee revolt. Scholars for years have debated why did Antiochus Epiphanes IV who was a Hellenized Syrian King, the Seleucid King, outlaw Jewish practices like circumcision and Torah study and obligated Jews to sacrifice to Hellenized gods. Hellenistic rulers before and after him allowed local ethnic groups the right to worship as they saw fit and to follow their ancestral laws without hinderance as long as they recognized Seleucid power, politically, and paid their taxes.

Well, now scholarly consensus is that a small group of corrupt Jewish priestly leaders, vying for power, prestige, acceptance and wealth – in other words Hellenistic favors from the King for themselves and their followers – sought to quickly convert Judea into a fully Hellenistic state. To do that, they maligned their own people and they convinced Antiochus that his only recourse was to outlaw all Jewish practice on pain of death. How mean was that?!

We, Jews, have learned the hard way, then during the Maccabee rebellion, if we did not know it before, that part of our job as Jews is to question everything, to think through what we hear and carefully weigh what is being said against what God's spirit, God's values and teachings, teach us. Weigh those things and see: does it sound like it is right? God is telling us to be careful, not to let ourselves get whipped up by emotion in a way that derails our ability to think critically and evaluate the veracity and the reliability of what is being said. We should seek the full context of any discrete fact, or what is presented as fact, to understand the larger picture of the issues at hand. These are good rules for any civil society. They are the foundation upon which Jewish study and debate have held our People together for thousands of years and represent one of our major contributions to larger civil society.

We Jews also learned the hard way, if we did not know it before, that the damage such misinformation can do is very considerable. It takes not only might and power to create a just society. It also takes God's spirit, the sense that there is a Higher Moral Authority Who holds every individual accountable for one's actions even under duress and, especially, in the face of fear.

Just think about any terrible period in history. Thankfully, there were many righteous rescuers throughout the Holocaust but it was once said to me and it made me think: What would have happened if there had been just 6,000 Oskar Schindlers (who saved 1000 Jews.) We would not have had a Holocaust. What would it have happened if countries around the world had stood up to their fears, if their leaders had stood up to their fear of political retribution, and allowed refugees in? There would not have been a Holocaust. Spirit becomes equally, if not more important, than having power and might to ensure we use our power and might well.

The Jews during the Antiochan persecutions had good reason to fear. The *Second Book of the Maccabees*, written shortly after the rebellion, writes about the scores of Jewish women who, despite the decree outlawing circumcision, still circumcised their sons. They were caught and killed in such a tragic way, their children tied around their necks by a rope as they were pushed off the walls of Jerusalem. The Book of Maccabees recounts how whole families were cut down for refusing to sacrifice to the Hellenistic gods. How the Seleucid army engaged in atrocities, slaughtering a thousand Jews who refused to fight on the Sabbath until Mattityahu, the

founder of the Maccabees, ruled that, yes, we are allowed to defend ourselves, even on the Sabbath. Though they had no might nor power, these martyrs believed in God's spirit, knowing that the Judge of the world was looking down upon them and would hold to account those who did wrong. Their sacrifice, their being brave enough to stand up, inspired courage in others, ultimately resulting in the open rebellion of the Maccabees. The rebellion was initiated by Mattityahu, a priest who could have easily gone along but chose to stand up and fight instead. And that is why we have Hanukkah today.

It took backbone and courage to stand up to the Hellenistic army, for the martyrs and for the Maccabees who fought that army against overwhelming odds. It has always taken backbone and courage to stand up to lies and injustice, to stand up to intimidation by people who have power over us, especially when such lies and injustice are backed up by others' silence that even further empowers those who are wielding power unjustly. It takes tremendous courage and backbone to stand up against someone, or many someones, who wield not just a threat to one's life or that of one's family, but also to one's success or ability to hold on to one's position in life.

It also takes faith in God's spirit to have that kind of courage, faith in the sense of knowing that there is a Higher Moral Authority, a higher calling and value, that holds a greater demand on us than any earthly authority and will ultimately call us to account for our actions or our inactions in the face of lies, injustice and intimidation.

I think that is the lesson behind our verse of Zechariah that we heard so beautifully today: *not by might, not by power but by My spirit says the Lord of Hosts*. It doesn't mean that power and might are irrelevant. It means that they are not sufficient. That they are dangerous if not accompanied by a sense of humility, on one hand, recognizing that we don't make the rules because there is a higher power above us that holds us to account, and the power of audacity, on the other, holy audacity, that enables each of us, empowers each of us, charges each of us with a moral responsibility to stand up and gives us the courage to stand up against lies and injustice even in the face of threat or overwhelming odds, as the Maccabees did.

The Maccabees did not just give us a wonderful winter holiday that is so much fun. They bequeathed us a serious and substantial legacy of ethics, to keep our heads, think critically in difficult situations, and have the courage to stand up for God's values, Jewish values and teachings, even and especially when the world is scary. May we truly be worthy of being the descendants of the Maccabees and act in accord with their courage and wisdom even when we face scary times. And let us say Amen.

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