

Chanukah:
A Battle for Freedom of Religion?

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Chanukah is often presented as a celebration of the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greeks who tried to prevent the observance of Torah amongst the Jews. Within the generic view of our modern communities, the Maccabees, who responded militarily, fighting for their right to practice Torah, are seen as great heroes in the centuries-old battle for freedom of religion. Yet, is this necessarily a correct portrayal of the ancient battle of Chanukah and the motivation of the Maccabees? Freedom of religion argues for the right of individuals to practice the faith in which they believe regardless of the attitudes and values of others, specifically practitioners of a dominant faith. Is that what the Maccabees fought for? It would seem that their goal was much more limited and narrow – they simply fought for their right to practice Torah.

The initial act which began the revolution may, actually, be very telling. The Greek-Syrians, to initiate their imposition of idolatry upon the Jewish population, were inviting individuals to step forward and, publicly, worship one of their idols. A Jew from the crowd came forward to bow down to this idol. It was at this precise instant that Mattisyahu, the father of the Maccabee brothers, attacked the Jew who was worshipping this idol, practicing idolatry. Is that an act of one who believes in a value of freedom of religion? It would seem not. In fact, the battle of Chanukah would seem to be not a battle for freedom of religion but, rather, a battle between religions. The Syrian-Greeks wanted their religion to be dominant. Actually, the conflict began with Jews, who wanted to become more Hellenized and desired Hellenism to dominate the culture of the Jewish land, attempting to impose their will on the populace of Israel. (The Syrian-Greeks actually were only called upon by these Hellenized Jews for help as these Jews portrayed the traditional, Torah-abiding Jews as political enemies of the State who wanted independence. The Syrian-Greeks thus really only responded to what they believed to be a nationalistic uprising, not to a foreign

religious belief.) The Maccabees, though, still did not simply want the right to practice their faith as well, but also wished for their religion to be dominant, specifically amongst *klal Yisrael*. They wanted to stop the inroads of Hellenism amongst the Jews. Thus, the battle ensued. Which faith would be dominant? The question would seem actually seem to be: which faith would be able to impose itself upon the entire society? This would not seem to be a story of the battle of freedom of religion.

Viewed in this manner, the story of Chanukah takes on a different complexion. Our view of the Maccabees also changes. Yet does it not raise an issue within our modern Western perspective that values freedom of religion? Can we value anyone that attempts to impose their religious beliefs and practices upon another? A corollary of this question, though, that we may first wish to address is: can we always value freedom of religion? Is this modern Western value of freedom of religion a Torah value? And if the answer is no, how do we then balance when we apply this value and when we do not? More significantly, how do we live with this conflict in values between what we believe the Torah is mandating and what we have integrated into our very beings from Western thought? In addition, have we, the Jewish people, not benefited from the advancement of freedom of religion in the Western world? Does **Rav Moshe Feinstein** not refer to the United States as a *medina of chesed*, a land of lovingkindness, because of the way it has treated the Jews, which is based, to a large extent, upon a value of freedom of religion? Does this not imply that there must be some value, from a Torah perspective, in freedom of religion?

The question must emerge: what is the basis of the value of freedom of religion? If it is built upon a concept of relative morality, that the acquisition of any real truth is beyond the capabilities of human beings, then there is a problem with this concept. Indeed the general Western expression of freedom of religion does pose somewhat of a problem within the Torah perspective. To most people, differences in religious beliefs are simply differences in methodology, how we wish to express our “spiritual” side. Freedom of religion is, thus, seen as a call for everyone to respect another’s methodology. It would be comparable to, for example, different ways of exercising. One may argue for squash, another for rowing – which one is the best form of exercise? In the end, we may call for peace amongst these

combatants by stating that the key, mutual point is that they are both forms of exercise, and so both are actually accomplishing their real, underlying goal. That is what most people really think is also the basis for freedom of religion. The distinction between religions is seen in how people wish to do their spirituality – but we should see beyond the differences to recognize that, really, all religious people are just trying to do the same thing – experience spirituality. So why fight? You can have little disagreements the same way proponents of squash and proponents of rowing may argue over which exercise is the best but, bottom line, they both recognize that the mutual point is that they are both exercising. The same is the call made to the religious through one advocating for freedom of religion. Recognize that you are really both the same – simply promoting spirituality. This understanding of freedom of religion clearly cannot be accepted within a Torah perspective.

To a Torah Jew, religion is not about methodology but rather is about reality. What is true? Does God exist and then Who is He? The Torah has clear responses and while there is some area of divergence with Torah, there are parameters of what ideas are accepted within Torah and which ones are not. Freedom of religion as a concept that permits someone to maintain an incorrect perception of God, of truth, cannot be accepted. It would thus seem to imply that the Torah cannot accept this concept. Yet, there is an aspect of the tolerance of freedom of religion within Torah but built upon a different perspective. The Torah recognizes the limitations of human beings and the difficulty in acquiring the truth. This is behind the concept of *tinok she'nishba*, colloquially understood to be someone not brought up within a world of Torah concepts. It is also behind the idea that before a court can officially punish someone, the person had to be warned that the criminal action that which he/she was going to undertake was indeed forbidden and this person had to acknowledge it as so. This idea can also explain why, throughout the centuries, great *gedolei Torah* attempted to view non-Jews who adopted some form of monotheism in a positive way, albeit that these non-Jewish faiths still deviated, in some way, from the view of Torah. They were involved in the search. They were struggling to know the truth. Their doubts and resultant misperceptions were understandable.

Rashi, T.B. Shabbat 31a seems to make a similar point. Human beings can have doubts. Human beings, with good intentions, can find difficulty in comprehending the truths of reality. Herein lies the value of freedom of religion within a Torah perspective. People in search of the truth can still be mistaken. The Torah understands this and responds accordingly with compassion. That is the Torah call of freedom of religion – tolerance for people who, in good faith, may still arrive at incorrect understandings of reality. Yet the Maccabees did not respond this way to the Syrian-Greeks. This, in fact, is ultimately a significant question for our times? How do we apply the value of freedom of religion to a religion that rejects this value – and even declares a propriety in attacking members of other faiths?

It is upon reflection of this question that we can truly understand the Maccabees. The case when Mattisyahu attacked the Jew who was worshipping the idol only occurred after the Syrian-Greeks attempted to thwart the practice, by Torah abiding Jews, of their belief. What was the message the Mattisyahu was, thereby, attempting to convey? We do not oppose those who deny us our rights simply to prevent them from imposing their will upon us. A faith that preaches such an attitude, in itself, must be continuously confronted. The value of freedom of religion reflects an understanding of the great challenge a human being faces in attempting to approach and gain knowledge of the Divine. We are limited. Our doubts are understandable. Freedom of religion must be built upon a mutual sense of humility within humanity. A religion that rejects this value of freedom of religion, whose followers are so sure about their beliefs that they have no problem in denouncing or even killing members of other faiths, is itself not deserving of the benefit of the expression of another's value of freedom of religion. To do so would be a defamation of the very foundation of this very value for it would be applauding conceit, which is the very negation of the humility that we should have. That religion in itself cannot be tolerated.

That is what Mattisyahu was expressing. This religion that showed no respect for others who practiced another faith – in this case Torah – cannot be tolerated in any manner, not only in their acts of oppression. Abiding by a value of freedom of religion cannot mean that we should allow anyone to believe what they do. Religions that stand for arrogance and the

total negation, not only of the other who may be following another faith but, also, of another's journey of faith cannot be tolerated. That would inherently attack the very value – human humility of thought -- that we are advocating. The value of freedom of religion simply should not be, and cannot be, applied.

There are people who, in attempting to understand militant Moslems, try to declare that, because of their behaviour, they really cannot be religious. In this manner, such people are able to maintain a value of freedom of religion by averting the problem, by declaring that a negative view of these militants has nothing really to do with religion. The truth is that these militants are religious. They believe in their faith and that their behaviour, which we find abhorrent, is mandated by their faith. The problem is that they have a lack of doubt – in themselves. An aspect of tolerance is a recognition that we may be wrong. Those who do not have the ability to doubt themselves, who cannot say that they may be wrong, are able to do the most heinous of crimes because they are so sure. Any faith that promotes such a self-perception cannot be tolerated. We are not denouncing their faith *per se* – we understand the problem of attempting to see the truth. We are, though, rejecting their narrow-mindedness and their conceit.

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