

Hanukkah Light from Today's Maccabees

This Hanukkah, as we light the flames that commemorate an ancient miracle, I find myself thinking not of the past, but of the present—of a 19-year-old girl who finished high school, packed her bags, and chose to put on the fatigues of the Israeli army—my daughter.

With two passports, she could have gone anywhere in the world. As a young woman from a religious family, she could have chosen to complete two years of national service by volunteering instead of enlisting. No one would have questioned that choice. But she didn't. She decided to join the Israel Defense Forces to defend this land, her neighbors, and her nation's future.

I thought about this choice even more intently on the day she completed her basic training, the first day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, when Hanukkah takes place. I stood there watching her and hundreds of other 18- and 19-year-olds, kids who only months ago were worrying about exams and friendships, now standing in formation as soldiers. Each was given a gun in one hand and a Bible — a Tanakh — in the other. And the message was clear: *this gun exists to defend the book's values. And we pray you will spend your life studying the Bible, never needing to use the gun.*

Then, one after another, they raised their right hands and said the words "Ani nishba"—"I swear." I swear to defend these values, this land and this people.

For my daughter, it was not an easy choice. After October 7th, she watched friends be wounded and killed. She saw, up close, the cost of service in a way no teenager should. And yet she chose to join the military with complete, unwavering confidence. Watching her, I felt the echo of a story we tell every Hanukkah, the story of the Maccabees.

The Maccabees were a small group of ordinary people who looked at the danger facing Israel and stepped forward anyway. They knew the odds were against them. They understood the risks. Yet they rose up with pride and faith, fighting not for conquest but for the right to live freely as Jews, guided by the values of God and the Torah.

Standing there that day, watching my daughter and all those young soldiers declare their oath on the very month the Maccabees went to battle, I realized we are living in a generation of modern Maccabees.

They are not only teenagers in fresh uniforms. They are also people like my neighbor, a 55-year-old man who volunteered to return to reserve duty because Israel needs as many soldiers as possible. A tiny country the size of New Jersey, Israel has to defend itself on seven fronts. From the young to the old, we are a nation once again standing against overwhelming numbers, holding firm to the belief that the small can defeat the mighty when fighting for what is right.

And for me, the sight of my daughter wearing the uniform, with the Star of David stitched on her shoulder, is one of the most powerful experiences of my life. My father, who passed away nearly seven years ago, always said he fulfilled every dream he ever had except one: he never had the honor of wearing the uniform of the Israeli army. He moved to Israel too late in life to serve. Seeing his granddaughter fulfill that dream is something I don't take lightly.

When she came home for Shabbat after taking her oath, the

house felt whole in a way only a parent can understand. And when I drove her back to the bus early Sunday morning, as the sun lifted over the horizon, we arrived at a station overflowing with hundreds of soldiers waiting to return to base. I realized then that it isn't just my daughter who carries the spirit of the Maccabees. It is an entire people. A nation standing up for its values, its survival and its light.

This Hanukkah, as we light each candle, we honor that spirit. The spirit that says: Hineni. Here I am. I will show up. I will do what I can, wherever I am, to bring strength, to bring spirituality, and to bring more light into a world that desperately needs it.

Because the miracle of Hanukkah was never only that the oil lasted, it was someone who lit the flame in the first place. And today, our children still help light it.

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