

WHAT THE MENORAH SAID TO THE XMAS TREE

1967

A sermon for young people, prepared for Temple Beth Am, Miami, Fla., 1967

(Xmas comes one day before Chanukah this year)

Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, D.H.L.
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida

THE MENORAH AND THE CHRISTMAS TREE STOOD SIDE BY SIDE IN THE STORE WINDOW. IT WAS THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, AND THE TREE LOOKED LOVELY WITH ALL OF ITS DECORATIONS. THE MENORAH SEEMED VERY BARE • INDEED, BESIDE THE TREE. IT DIDN'T EVEN HAVE ANY CANDLES IN IT, FOR IT WAS NOT YET TIME FOR CHANUKAH WHICH DID NOT COME THIS YEAR UNTIL THE NIGHT OF DECEMBER 26th.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE HAD THE RIGHT TO BE PROUD OF ITSELF. IT WAS FULL OF FLASHING TINSEL AND BRIGHT RED BALLS, AND AT THE VERY TOP, IT HAD A LARGE SILVER STAR. UNTIL THIS NIGHT, THE MENORAH HAD BEEN KEPT SEPARATE FROM THE TREE, BUT NOW THEY HAD BEEN BROUGHT TOGETHER, SINCE CHANUKAH WOULD COME IN A FEW HOURS. THE MENORAH LOOKED UP AT THE TREE AND STARTED A CONVERSATION. "I KNOW YOUR NAME," SAID THE MENORAH, "BUT WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?". "I COME FROM NEW ENGLAND," REPLIED THE TREE, "FROM THE STATE OF MAINE; BUT MY GRANDPARENTS CAME FROM NORTHERN EUROPE". "HOW INTERESTING," SAID THE MENORAH, "MY GRANDPARENTS CAME FROM EUROPE TOO; BUT THEIR GRANDPARENTS CAME FROM THE LAND OF ISRAEL, FROM THE HOLY LAND."

"OH, ITS TOO WARM IN THE HOLY LAND FOR XMAS TREES," SAID THE TREE. "MY GRANDPARENTS COULD NEVER HAVE LIVED THERE. IT MUST BE COLD FOR OUR KIND OF TREE TO GET ALONG." THEN, THE XMAS TREE SAID SOMETHING THAT THE MENORAH HAD NEVER KNOWN BEFORE. "YOU KNOW," SAID THE TREE, "I WAS NOT ALWAYS CALLED A 'XMAS TREE'." "REALLY," REPLIED THE MENORAH, SOMEWHAT SURPRISED. "OH, NO," SAID THE TREE. "MY GRANDPARENTS HAD THE NAME OF YULE TREE. ACTUALLY, WE WERE NEVER PART OF THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY UNTIL RECENT TIMES. HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, WE WERE PART OF THE HOLIDAY OF THE PAGANS."

"THE PAGANS," ASKED THE MENORAH, "WHO WERE THEY"? "OH, THEY WERE PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN NORTHERN EUROPE," ANSWERED THE TREE. "THEY WORSHIPPED MANY GODS. AT LEAST, THEY THOUGHT THERE WERE MANY GODS. AT THIS WINTER SEASON IN THE COLD COUNTRY," SAID THE TREE, "WHEN THE DAYS BEGAN TO GET A LITTLE LONGER, THE PAGANS USED TO HAVE A HOLIDAY. THEY WOULD TAKE A WHEEL, LIGHT IT WITH FIRE, AND SEND IT ROLLING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN. SOME OF THE PAGANS WOULD CUT DOWN A TREE LIKE ME AND PUT IT IN THEIR HOUSE. IT WASN'T UNTIL RECENTLY," SAID THE TREE, "THAT I CAME TO BE CALLED A 'CHRISTMAS TREE' INSTEAD OF A 'YULE TREE'."

"THAT'S VERY INTERESTING," SAID THE MENORAH THOUGHTFULLY, "BUT I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN MY FAMILY EVER HAD A NAME OTHER THAN 'MENORAH'. OUR NAME GOES ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE BIBLE. WHY, THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON HAD A MENORAH IN IT AND THE MACCABEES MADE A SPECIAL KIND OF MENORAH 2200 YEARS AGO BY PUTTING CANDLES ON THE SPEARS THEY CAPTURED FROM THE SYRIANS OF THAT DAY. EVER SINCE THAT TIME LONG AGO IN THE LAND THAT IS NOW CALLED ISRAEL, WE MENORAHS HAVE BEEN PART OF THE HOLIDAY CALLED CHANUKAH."

THE MENORAH GOT SOME SATISFACTION FROM THE FACT THAT HIS NAME WAS OLDER THAN THE CHRISTMAS TREE. EVEN THOUGH THE MENORAH DIDN'T LOOK SO PRETTY WITHOUT HIS CANDLES, HE SUDDENLY FELT VERY PROUD AS HE THOUGHT OF THE FIRST TIME CHANUKAH WAS CELEBRATED. HIS GRANDFATHER HAD TOLD HIM THE STORY OF THE FIRST CHANUKAH. HE ASKED THE XMAS TREE IF HE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR THE STORY. THE TREE REPLIED THAT HE WOULD BE DELIGHTED. THE MENORAH BEGAN IN THIS WAY. "2200 YEARS AGO," HE SAID, "THE KING OF THE SYRIANS TOLD THE JEWS THAT THEY COULDN'T WORSHIP THEIR GOD IN THEIR VERY OWN TEMPLE. HE WANTED THE JEWS TO BOW DOWN TO HIM AND TO WORSHIP HIM AS GOD. THE JEWS REFUSED TO DO SO, FOR THEY BELIEVED THAT NO ONE MAN COULD BE GOD. EVEN THOUGH THEY DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO FIGHT WITH, THEY QUICKLY GOT TOGETHER A SMALL BAND OF SOLDIERS LED BY JUDAH THE MACABBE. THERE WERE MANY MORE SYRIAN SOLDIERS THAN THERE WERE JEWISH SOLDIERS. THE SYRIANS EVEN HAD ELEPHANTS TO USE LIKE SOLDIERS USE TANKS TODAY. SOMEHOW, THE JEWISH SOLDIERS WERE ABLE TO WIN. EVERYONE THOUGHT IT WAS A GREAT MIRACLE. THE JEWS TOOK BACK THEIR TEMPLE. THEY MADE A NEW MENORAH TO STAND IN THE TEMPLE, AND THE JEWS WORSHIPPED THEIR GOD IN FREEDOM ONCE AGAIN." THE MENORAH GREW MORE AND MORE EXCITED AS HE TOLD THE STORY. "MY GRANDFATHER TOLD ME," THE MENORAH CONTINUED, "THAT CANDLES ARE KINDLED IN THE MENORAH AT CHANUKAH TIME TO REMIND THE JEWS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM."

"GEE," SAID THE CHRISTMAS TREE, "YOU CERTAINLY HAVE A WONDERFUL STORY TO TELL. I THOUGHT I WAS OLD UNTIL YOU TOLD ME YOUR STORY. I GUESS YOU'D HAVE TO SAY THAT I'M A MODERN INVENTION, AND YOU'RE A REAL OLD-TIMER. SAY, WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU, NOW?"

AT THIS POINT IN THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE BEAUTIFULLY DECORATED TREE AND THE LITTLE MENORAH, SOMETHING DRAMATIC HAPPENED. IT WAS SUNDOWN ON THE DAY OF DECEMBER 26th, 1967 (OR THE YEAR 5728 BY THE JEWISH CALENDAR.) THE CHANUKAH HOLIDAY WAS BEGINNING, AND ONE OF THE JEWISH SALES-GIRLS IN THE STORE PLACED SOME BEAUTIFUL CANDLES IN THE CUPS OF THE MENORAH. SHE PLACED, FIRST, AN ORANGE CANDLE IN THE MIDDLE CUP, THEN, A GREEN CANDLE NEXT TO IT, AND THEN, A BLUE ONE THEN, A RED ONE, THEN, A GOLD ONE, AND SO ON, UNTIL THERE WERE EIGHT CANDLES IN ALL. SUDDENLY, THE MENORAH, WHICH HAD SEEMED SO PLAIN STANDING THERE BESIDE THE TREE, BECAME SOMETHING OF OUTSTANDING BEAUTY. THE YOUNG LADY PICKED UP THE MENORAH, PLACED IT ON A HIGH TABLE, AND PROCEEDED TO LIGHT THE CENTER CANDLE, AS SHE SANG A LITTLE BLESSING. THE CANDLE BURST INTO FLAME, AND THE LIGHT REFLECTED OVER TO THE METAL OF THE MENORAH, WHICH NOW SEEMED TO BE SHINING ALL OVER. THE YOUNG LADY BEGAN TO SING A SONG THAT BEGAN WITH THE WORDS, "ROCK OF AGES". IT WAS A SONG ADDRESSED TO THE ONE, LIVING GOD. IT WAS A SONG ABOUT A GLORIOUS FIGHT FOR FREEDOM THAT TOOK PLACE LONG AGO; BUT WHEN THE LADY SANG THE SONG, SHE SEEMED TO BE THINKING, ALSO, ABOUT A BATTLE THAT TOOK PLACE ONLY YESTERDAY.

AS THE YOUNG LADY SANG HER SONG, THE MENORAH BEAMED WITH HAPPINESS. HE THOUGHT OF ALL THE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF MENORAHS THAT WERE BEING LIT IN JEWISH HOMES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD THAT EVENING, IN MEXICO AND IN CHILE, IN FRANCE AND IN ISRAEL. HE THOUGHT OF ALL THE LIGHTS BEING LIT AROUND THE WORLD AND OF MAN'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM THAT GOES ON AT ALL TIMES. RAYS OF JOY SHONE FROM THE FACE OF THE MENORAH AND TEARS COULD BE SEEN THERE, TOO.; TEARS FOR HUMAN SUFFERING, FOR THE PAIN THAT MEN CAUSE ONE ANOTHER, TEARS FOR THE SOLDIERS WHO HAVE TO DIE IN WARS THAT NEED NOT BE FOUGHT IF

MEN WOULD LOVE EACH OTHER A LITTLE MORE. THE MENORAH WAS BOTH SAD AND JOYFUL, BUT MOST OF ALL, HE WAS JOYFUL, FOR THE HOLIDAY OF CHANUKAH WAS BEGINNING, AND HE KNEW THAT JUST AS ONE OF HIS CANDLES WAS LIT TONIGHT, SO TWO CANDLES WOULD BE LIT TOMORROW, THREE CANDLES ON THE NEXT DAY, AND SO ON, UNTIL ALL OF HIS EIGHT CANDLES WERE LIT. THE MENORAH FELT WONDERFUL ALREADY, BUT HE KNEW THAT HE WOULD FEEL EVEN BETTER WITH EACH NEW DAY OF THE HOLIDAY. HE COULD ALREADY IMAGINE THE EIGHTH DAY WHEN ALL OF HIS BODY WOULD BE AGLOW WITH MANY COLORED CANDLES AND DANCING LIGHTS.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE WATCHED AS THE FIRST CANDLE WAS BEING LIT AND THOUGHT TO ITSELF, "HOW BEAUTIFUL, AND HOW MUCH ALIVE IS THAT CANDLE." THE TREE THOUGHT ALSO THAT IN JUST A FEW DAYS, HE, THE TREE, WOULD BE THROWN AWAY TO DIE IN THE TRASH HEAP. BUT HE KNEW THE MENORAH WOULD GO ON LIVING AND TELLING HIS STORY. MANY CHRISTMAS TREES WOULD COME AND GO, BUT THIS MENORAH WOULD GO ON FOREVER, AT LEAST, HE WOULD GO ON LIVING SO LONG AS THERE WERE PEOPLE TO LIGHT ITS CANDLES AND TO SING A SONG OF FREEDOM OVER IT.