

# The Chanukah Controversy and its Relevance Today

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## The One Who Experiences a Miracle Does Not Recognize It

Hindsight is 20/20. We are all familiar with this pithy aphorism which expresses a salient truism of life – when we look back at events with the benefit of the passage of time and the gift of perspective, we tend to see things with a clarity that cannot be seen during the course of the experience itself. We may experience in our personal or collective lives potentially life-changing events, but we are often unable to appreciate the enormity and significance of their future consequences. It is often only time, perspective and historical context that redeem us from our myopic vision. Our Sages capture this succinctly when they say, "אפילו בעל הנס אינו מכיר בנסו" – even one who experiences a miracle does not acknowledge it (Talmud, *Niddah* 31a). It seems to me that this phenomenon is evident today regarding our perspective of the modern State of Israel.

We are living in an era where we have had the privilege of experiencing monumental miracles of literally Biblical proportions. The enormity of the remarkable achievements of modern day Israel seems blatantly obvious. The establishment of an independent State only three years after the ovens of Auschwitz; the creation of a place of refuge to gather millions of Jewish exiles from

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over one hundred countries speaking more than eighty languages after two thousand years of wandering; transforming the Land of Israel from an arid and barren backwater into a flourishing oasis of agriculture and ecological marvel; reviving Hebrew from an ancient and static language of textual study into the living lingua franca of Jewish society; building a thriving and sustainable economy from the bankrupt and starving old Yishuv; a handful of young pioneers and Holocaust survivors overcoming political and military odds to defeat much larger and better trained national armies, thus “*delivering the many into the hands of the few*,” the rebuilding of the Torah world with arguably more Torah learners than any time in history – all come together to create modern day sovereign Israel which stands at the center of Jewish religious, cultural and political life. This is undoubtedly one of the great crowning successes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More than anything, Israel has revived the spirit of a broken people so soon after the devastation of the Holocaust, reinvented hope in place of despair, faith in place of tragedy, life in the face of death and the belief in a bright future over the reality of a devastating past.

Despite this seemingly undeniable reality, there are many who are unable to see Israel in such a light. The reason, of course, is that Zionism and Israel were born in a very complex spiritual, cultural and political context. Many elements of the Zionist endeavor seem to be less than ideal. Significant numbers of both the original and current protagonists in the story of Israel were and are distant from traditional Torah values and some at times even antagonistic. In many ways, Zionism was one of the ideological “isms” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, growing out of Western romantic nationalism and the era of the emancipation and *haskala*. Much of the cultural milieu both then and now is at times challenging to reconcile with Torah and Halachah. One example is the judicial system in Israel which was established on many tenets of Ottoman civil law and British common law and is governed by the Supreme Court as opposed to the rule of Torah law of the Sanhedrin.

This dichotomy and complexity causes confusion for many and creates significant doubt as to the appropriate spiritual context within which to place these events. Our ability to appreciate the enormity of our times is clouded by the context in which they transpired. There is no doubt in my mind that, in the not too distant future, we will all be able to appreciate fully the miracle of Israel. As previously mentioned, such is the nature of epoch changing events that the one who lives through such events, is often unable to recognize and fully acknowledge their significance during the experience itself.

## Back to the Future

The essential thesis of this article is to argue that both stories of Chanukah and Purim, the only two festivals which have survived from Second Temple times, can shed tremendous light on our modern era. This fundamental thesis consists of three tiers. First, to prove that both the Purim and Chanukah miracles transpired in circumstances which were fraught with great spiritual and halachic controversy and complexity - no less controversial than the circumstances around the birth of modern day Israel. They therefore provide an ideal historical case study to assist us in forging an appropriate spiritual perspective of Yom Ha'atzmaut and the establishment of the State of Israel. Second, I wish to highlight that these original complexities of Purim and Chanukah have in no way prevented Klal Yisrael from adopting and accepting, without

reservation, these events as joyous occasions and opportunities to thank Hashem for posterity. Third, to contend that it is the passage of time and benefit of historical context that have allowed us to embrace wholeheartedly these events without being clouded by the complexity in which they were wrought. The distance of time has allowed us to see Chanukah and Purim for what they truly are in the Divine order – their indispensable role in ensuring the survival of the Jewish people and the fulfillment of her spiritual destiny. The perspective of hindsight allows us to discern between the crucial and the circumstantial, thereby stripping the husk from the kernel, the essential from the external - providing an opportunity to appreciate and celebrate Chanukah and Purim's eternal lessons.

## Purim at a Glance

Is it so simple to us that a young Jewish girl should be halachically permitted to enter a beauty pageant in order to marry a gentile king? From a halachic perspective, can one assume that once she wins the contest, she is permitted to live with this king and not give up her life? The Sages of the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74b) were troubled by the fact that Ester seems to have transgressed one of the three cardinal sins. These sins which the Jewish People are called upon to give up their lives rather than transgress – יהרג ועל יעבור – are the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. Furthermore, points out the Talmud, the fact that Ester's marriage to the king was known to all, added an additional halachic problem of committing a sin in public. While the Talmud finds halachic justifications for her actions, there is no doubt that this remains an area of great controversy.<sup>2</sup> To give this a contemporary spin – how would it be received today if a pure and pious *bat Yisrael* was taken to be the wife of the President of the United States of America in order to attempt to bring about some type of salvation for the Jewish People? There is no doubt that no matter how noble the cause, this would become an issue of great halachic contentiousness within the Jewish community. What is even more remarkable is that once the Megillah is concluded and there is no longer any imminent danger to the Jewish People, Ester continues to live with Achashverosh and chooses not to give up her life.

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<sup>2</sup> The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 74b), offers two explanations as to Ester's behaviour. Abaye mentions the reason as Ester *karka olam* – i.e. that her role in the sexual act was a passive one therefore exempting her from these transgressions. Rava mentions the reason of *hana'at atzman* - meaning that the motivation of Achashverosh was to fulfil his own personal desires rather than deliberately cause her to transgress the Torah, once again exempting her from the above prohibitions. Tosafot (D.H. *Ve'ah Ester Farhesya Havai*) quoting the Talmud (*Megillah* 13a) deduces that Ester was not Mordechai's cousin as the verse implies (Ester 2:7) but indeed she was his wife whom he did not divorce. This means that at the time that she was taken to Achashverosh, he was still married to her thus further complicating the matter. The above answers are based on the assumption that Ester was an *anusa* – coerced against her will to be with Achashverosh. This is most certainly implied in Ester (2:16). Her status as 'coerced' changes though according to the Talmud (*Megillah* 15a) when Mordechai commands Ester to initiate contact with Achashverosh even though she has clearly had no contact with him for thirty days (Ester 4:11). The Gemarah points out that by heeding Mordechai's command to enter the king's inner chamber and re-establish the relationship with him, she was no longer an *anusa* – coerced – but was now acting out of her own free will. The *Noda B'Yehudah* (Responsa, second edition, Y.D. 161) notes that by doing so, she was no longer halachically protected by the justifications mentioned by Abaye and Rava in the Gemarah and ostensibly should have given up her life. He continues to state that the reason that she did not do so was because she had the potential to bring salvation to all of Klal Yisrael. In such a case, she was permitted to initiate the relationship in order to save the Jewish People and was not required to give up her life.

Mordechai's actions are not only complex in terms of how he influenced Ester's behavior, but also in terms of his own independent actions. For the purposes of this article we will cite only one example. What is most perplexing is the unbending stance that Mordechai took in not bowing down under any circumstances to Haman. Is it so simple that Mordechai should not have heeded the decree to bow down to Haman thereby endangering the lives of all of the Jewish People? Could Mordechai not have found a less confrontational way to deal with this quagmire? The constant refusal to kneel before Haman was the catalyst of Haman's plan to eradicate all of the Jews.<sup>3</sup> This act, according to our Sages in the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 1054) was contrary to the view of the *dayanim*, the rabbinic judges of the time, who accused Mordechai of unnecessarily and irresponsibly endangering Klal Yisrael. While there are many Midrashim and Rishonim who clearly justify Mordechai's behavior<sup>4</sup> as halachically sound and necessary under the circumstances, we once again highlight the complexity of the decisions taken at the time.

So complex were Mordechai's actions, that the final verse of the Megillah (10:3) concludes with the fact that despite Mordechai's fame and success, he was "רצוי לרוב אחיו" liked by most of his brethren, not all. This implies that a significant minority of Jews did not approve of Mordechai and his actions. The Talmud (*Megillah* 15a) notes that this verse refers to members of the Sanhedrin who distanced themselves from him as an act of protest and disapproval. The 'reward' that he received for saving the Jewish People was, incredibly, a demotion in his standing in the Sanhedrin.<sup>5</sup>

All of the above points to the fact that the times of Ester and Mordechai and the events surrounding the story of Purim were highly complex, at times divisive and contentious in an era which was anything from straightforward, from a Halachic and Torah point of view.

## Ramban's Scathing Critique of the Hasmoneans

If this is true regarding Purim, it is most certainly true regarding Chanukah. Nowhere do we find a more harsh attack of the Hasmoneans and their *modus operandi* than in the Ramban's (Nachamanides) *Commentary on the Torah*. The verse states:

*The sceptre (of leadership) shall not depart from Judah, nor a scholar from among his descendants, until Shiloh arrives and his will be an assemblage of nations.*

**Bereishit (49:10)**

לֹא יִסּוּר שֵׁבֶט מִיְהוּדָה וּמַחֲקֵק מִבֵּיִן רְגְלָיו  
עַד כִּי יָבֹא שִׁילֹה וְלוֹ יִקְהֶת עַמִּים.  
בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרַק מִט פָּסוּק י

<sup>3</sup> See Ester (3:6). Notice that the verse twice emphasizes the fact that Haman's decree is aimed at eradicating "Am Mordechai" – the People of Mordechai. Mordechai's actions elicit in Haman the desire to kill all of Mordechai's people. According to the verse, Haman bases his desire to eradicate the entire Jewish People on Mordechai's perceived impudence.

<sup>4</sup> See the excellent article by Rav Yaakov Meiden, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion in his article in the book "היא אסתר" (published in 2007 in Alon Shevut).

<sup>5</sup> In this source, the Talmud points out that in the Book of Ezra (2:2) he is mentioned in the fifth position of importance, whereas later in the Book of Nehemiah (7:7) he is mentioned in sixth position. The Talmud attributes his demotion to his lack of Torah study while he was fulfilling his communal role. It is quite astounding that while Mordechai is endangering his life to bring salvation to all of Klal Yisrael, he is prejudiced and demoted because of his lack of time to study Torah.

Ramban comments on this verse:

*But this means that the sceptre of leadership should never depart from the Tribe of Judah to any of the other brothers, as Kingship in Israel which rules over them (the Jewish people) should be from Him alone and none of the other brothers ... In my opinion, the Kings who reigned over Israel who came from tribes other than Judah after David, were violating the expressed wishes of their forefather Jacob and were usurping Judah's rightful inheritance... And this was the punishment of the Hasmoneans who ruled as Kings during the Second Temple – for they were righteous lofty people and if not for them, Torah and mitzvot would have been forgotten from the Jewish People. Even so they were punished with great retribution and four of the sons of the elder Hasmonean [Mattityahu] who were the righteous rulers who ruled one after the other died by the sword of the enemy despite their courage and success [Yehuda, Elazar, Yonatan and Yochanan – Shimon the last remaining son did not die in battle]. Their punishment was so severe that our Sages said about them “whoever says that they are a descendant of the Hasmonean house, is surely a slave” [Masechet Baba Batra (3b) and Masechet Kiddushin (70a)]. All descendants were killed off because of this sin. Even though there was of the seed of Shimon those who were punished because of their affiliation to the Sadducees, all the descendants of Mattityahu, the righteous Hasmonean perished because of the sin that they ruled over Israel while not being descendants of the tribe of Judah and from the house of David. And they removed the sceptre of leadership totally from the Tribe of Judah and therefore their punishment was measure for measure– that Hashem caused their slaves to rule over them and those slaves to destroy them...*

**Ramban's Commentary, Bereishit 49:10**

אבל ענינו שלא יסור שבט מיהודה אל אחד מאחיו, כי מלכות ישראל המושל עליהם ממנו יהיה, ולא ימשול אחד מאחיו עליו... ולפי דעתי היו המלכים המולכים על ישראל משאר השבטים אחרי דוד עוברים על דעת אביהם ומעבירים נחלה... וזה היה עונש החשמונאים שמלכו בבית שני, כי היו חסידי עליון, ואלמלא הם נשתכחו התורה והמצות מיישראל, ואף על פי כן נענשו עונש גדול, כי ארבעת בני חשמונאי הזקן החסידים המולכים זה אחר זה עם כל גבורתם והצלחתם נפלו ביד אויביהם בחרב. והגיע העונש בסוף למה שאמרו רז"ל כל מאן דאמר מבית חשמונאי קאתינא עבדא הוא, שנכרתו כלם בעון הזה. ואף על פי שהיה בזרע שמעון עונש מן הצדוקים, אבל כל זרע מתתיה חשמונאי הצדיק לא עברו אלא בעבור זה שמלכו ולא היו מזרע יהודה ומבית דוד, והסירו השבט והמחוקק לגמרי, והיה עונשם מדה כנגד מדה, שהמשיל הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את עבדיהם והם הכריתום ... רמב"ן בראשית מט:י

The verse that the Ramban discusses is part of our forefather Jacob's final will and prophetic testament that he bequeaths to his children. The Ramban learns out from this verse that kingship, i.e. political leadership, is the sole right of the Tribe of Judah. Deviating from this principle contravenes the natural order and is a direct transgression of Jacob's will. This right, to the exclusion of the other tribes, took effect from the time of King David's reign. The Hasmoneans, who lived long after David, during the time of the Second Temple, were not from the tribe of Judah but rather a family of kohanim – priests - from the Tribe of Levi. Their assuming political leadership was therefore directly compromising Jacob's final will. Over and above this verse, Ramban, in the paragraph following the cited text above, finds an additional source in the Talmud Yerushalmi in a *beraita* in *Masechet Horayot* (3:2) which directly forbids kohanim to be appointed as priests. While Rabbi Yehudah Antoria sees the source of this

prohibition in the above verse, Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba believes that this is an additional prohibition. In other words, not only are no other tribes allowed to assume the political leadership of the Jewish People from the time of David, but furthermore there is a specific prohibition aimed at the kohanim and the Tribe of Levi from assuming this mantle of leadership. Their domain is that of the Temple and not kingship. By the Hasmoneans assuming the role of political leadership during the course of the Chanukah events, they transgressed an explicit Torah law. Ramban acknowledges, as is the consensus, that the Hasmoneans were exceptionally pious and noble people who felt that they had no choice but to initiate this rebellion against the harsh decrees of the Seleucid Greeks purely for the sake of Hashem and His Torah. However, since these actions contravened Jacob's last will and an explicit law, they were severely punished. Four of the five sons of Mattityahu, the great protagonist and initiator of the Chanukah rebellion and miracle, were killed prematurely in the course of battle. Incredibly, so harsh was their punishment – as the Ramban explains – that it was barely 150 years after the rededication of the Temple that the entire Hasmonean dynasty was wiped out. Every last one was killed off.<sup>6</sup> The Ramban sees a clear causal relationship between the inappropriate reality of kohanim – priests of Hashem – assuming political and military leadership and the horrific consequences which befell their descendants – the premature death of the Chanukah heroes and their short lived dynasty.

## Yochanan and Yanai – From Bad to Worse

The last surviving son of Mattityahu was Shimon whose descendants became the heirs to the Hasmonean dynasty. Not only was this dynasty short lived, but it is astounding how quickly it descended into spiritual decay. Shimon's pious son who became known as Yochanan Kohain Gadol became, according to our Sages, a heretic towards the end of his days. This is evident in the following Talmudic source.

*But we learned in a Mishnah – Do not believe in yourself, i.e. do not trust that you are safe from the evil inclination, until the day that you die – for Yochanan the Kohain Gadol served in this capacity for 80 years, and in the end became a Sadducee.*

**Masechet Berachot 29a**

והא תנן: אל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך, שהרי יוחנן כהן גדול שמש בכהונה גדולה שמנים שנה ולבסוף נעשה צדוקי!  
**מסכת ברכות כט.**

Remarkably, it was not two generations after Mattityahu that his descendants had given up on Rabbinic Judaism and had become heretics. Perhaps the worst of all Hasmoneans was Alexander Yannai, known as King Yannai. He was so evil that he decided to murder the entire rabbinic establishment of his generation. By the grace of G-d, the only one who survived was his brother-in-law, Shimon ben Shatach who was saved by Yannai's wife, his sister. As a result of this horrific act, ignorance of Torah life and law was rife. So much so that there was not even one person in the entire kingdom other than Shimon ben Shatach who knew how to recite Grace after Meals. This appears in the source below.

<sup>6</sup> The only Hasmonean who survived was Herod, who was a great pretender to the Hasmonean throne. He was a gentile slave, a doubtful convert, who assumed the kingship and killed off every last Hasmonean descendant. Anyone who claimed thereafter to be a Hasmonean was in fact a descendant of slaves i.e. Herod's family (*Baba Batra* 3b)

King Yannai and the Queen were eating bread together, in the company of members of Yannai's court - and since, (Yannai) had massacred the rabbis, he did not have anyone to recite Grace after Meals for them. He said to his wife "If only there were someone who could give us a person who would be able to recite Grace after Meals for us?" She said to him – "Swear to me that if I bring you such a person you will not persecute him." He swore to her. She then brought Shimon ben Shatach, her brother.

#### Masechet Berachot 48a

ינאי מלכא ומלכתא כריכו ריפתא  
 בהדי הדדי, ומדקטל להו לרבנן -  
 לא הוה ליה איניש לברוכי להו.  
 אמר לה לדביתהו: מאן יהיב לן  
 גברא דמברך לן? אמרה ליה:  
 אשתבע לי דאי מייתינא לך גברא  
 - דלא מצערת ליה. אשתבע לה.  
 אייתיניה לשמעון בן שטח אחוה.  
 מסכת ברכות דף מה.

From the above analysis of the Hasmoneans and the Chanukah miracle, we once again observe how spiritually complex and halachically controversial these events were. On the one hand, the Hasmoneans uplifted the spirit of the Jewish people, revealed heroism and courage against impossible odds, reversed the harsh Hellenistic decrees of Antiochus which threatened to destroy the spiritual and cultural fibre of the Jewish people, removed pagan idolatry from the Land in general and the Temple specifically, rededicating it's service to Hashem and ensuring that the light of Torah continue to shine. Notwithstanding these enormous achievements and the fact that we will still celebrate Chanukah today over 2000 years later – the entire process was initiated on shaky halachic grounds. The spiritual order was upset, Jacob's prophetic will contravened, and Jewish law compromised from the very moment the kohanim assumed the political and military leadership of their people. The result, maintains the Ramban, was the tragic, at times wicked, and ultimately short-lived dynasty.

## Mordechai, Ester & the Hasmoneans – Remembering Things the Way they Were Not

It seems perplexing to me how all the complicated controversies and complexities of both Purim and Chanukah have not in any way found their way into the consciousness of later generations. We celebrate Chanukah and Purim today without any trace of the contentious, divisive and controversial elements we described above. We dress our young daughters as the pious and pure Queen Ester oblivious to the compromised and immodest circumstances that she had to face in the inner chambers of a gentile king. We laud Mordechai as the fearless hero of the Purim saga, once again oblivious to his disputes and arguments with the *dayanim* and members of the Sanhedrin over his decision making. We dress up for the reading of the Megillah often wearing costumes in a sometimes frivolous mood as we sound our *grager* (noisemaker), not in tune with the raging controversy with which their actions were met.

What is true for Purim is equally true for Chanukah. We light candles for 8 days, indulge in Chanukah parties, say the *Al Hanissim* prayer 3 times a day during the silent prayer for 8 days (4 times on Shabbat) thanking Hashem for the miracles that He did "*during the time of Mattitياهو, the Hasmonean, and his sons*". We say Hallel every day for 8 days, thanking G-d for the political

and military victory over the Greeks.<sup>7</sup> We sing *Maoz Tzur* and marvel at the heroic and courageous acts of our Hasmoneans, while totally unmindful and unaware of the stormy polemics and halachic morass in which these events transpired.

Hindsight is indeed 20/20. We who look back are blessed with the unique gift of historical perspective and context. This allows us to experience past events in a totally different fashion from those who lived through the experience itself. Their reality was fraught with complexity and controversy while ours is filled with clarity and precision. The passage of time allows us to distinguish between the eternal core of these events and their confusing external wrapping. We are able to embrace wholeheartedly and celebrate unequivocally the role that these events played and continue to play in our survival and destiny.

## Life Is Understood Backwards But Must Be Lived Forwards

While it is true that hindsight affords us the ability to understand the past, our lives are not lived backwards, in retrospect, but rather lived in the present while moving forward. The benefit of hindsight of past events must enlighten us to a greater understanding of the events of our current era.

I believe, in light of all that we have clarified in this article, that the challenges surrounding the birth of Zionism and the State of Israel are inherently no more complex than those of Chanukah and Purim. It seems that a definitive trait of epoch changing times such as Chanukah, Purim and modern Israel is spiritual complexity and halachic controversy. The salient difference, therefore, between Purim/Chanukah as opposed to modern day Israel is not in the degree of complexity around the circumstances in which they transpired, but rather in the timing of the experience. We view Purim and Chanukah with clarity because we look back on them. We sometimes have a clouded view of Israel because it is our current reality. Indeed, as we clarified at the outset, our Sages have taught us that so often the one who experiences a miracle is not able to appreciate and acknowledge it. Understanding this truth is the key to a deeper grasp of the spiritual nature and value of our generation.

Before concluding, I would like to highlight what I believe is a major stumbling block which prevents us from expressing genuine appreciation for what we have. I am referring to a particular mind-set which I think can best be described as 'the ordeal of the ideal.' It seems that we have a visceral need to judge our current life situation in relation to a perceived ideal. One of the ways that we do this is by comparing our contemporary reality to the distant memory of previous times. This sets us up for failure, as we have shown that the way we remember and celebrate the past does not capture the complexity of the first-hand experience. Our challenge is that life in the present is hardly ever lived in the ideal state. This is the reality of the human condition. We often

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<sup>7</sup> The Maharal of Prague in *Ner Mitzvah* notes that the Hallel prayer could not have been instituted on the miracle of the oil. He clarifies that the purpose of Hallel on festivals is to give thanks to Hashem for the miracle of saving the Jewish People from imminent destruction and not for a miracle which affords us the opportunity to fulfil a mitzvah. The Hallel we say on Chanukah is therefore a praise to Hashem for the military and political victory of the Hasmoneans over the Seleucid Greek empire.



tend to compare our present reality not only to the distant memory of the past, but also to an idyllic expectation of the future. The truth, though, is that the ideal is something we constantly strive for but are unable to achieve in full in our current circumstances. Indeed, life began in the ideal of the Garden of Eden and does culminate, we believe, in the Messianic era and beyond where the ideal will once again be our natural experience. However, in between the idyllic past and future, there exists a gap known as the present. It is here, and only here, that we battle to bridge the schism between the real and the ideal, between the way things ought to be and how they are in reality, between the perfect vision for a world that was or is not yet and the imperfect reality in which we find ourselves. Life in the present is never straightforward and so often deeply complex and controversial. It is here that we must confront the complexity of life. Halacha, our great and sacred mechanism through which we encounter practical life reflects this reality succinctly. In halachic terminology - we are always striving to live life in the *l'chatchila* – the ideal, however, so much of real life turns out to be the *bediavad*, the less than ideal and sometimes even the *sha'at hadechak* – the extenuating circumstance. When we attempt to try and assess our current lives with the mind-set of the ideal, the way in which we tend to view the past and future, we are unfortunately bound never to appreciate in full what we have now in the present.

A concluding comment and a fervent prayer. When we light our Chanukah candles and chant the *berachot*, we thank Hashem for the miracles which He did for our forefathers “*bayamim haheim bazman hazeh*” - in those days and at this time. Perhaps the deeper meaning of this blessing is that it is a yearning and a prayer that when we reflect on the miracles of the distance past - in those days – we are indeed able to appreciate fully the miracles of our current era – at this time. May we be able to express wholeheartedly and unconditionally our gratitude to Hashem for the enormity of our generation, the continual miracle of the State of Israel and appreciate the ongoing and crucial role that it plays in the drama of Jewish survival and destiny.