A Menorah of Spears?

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Thoughts for Hanukkah: by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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With their military victory over the Hellenistic Syrians, the Maccabees entered the Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to the worship of God. According to Jewish tradition, they found one jar of pure oil with enough to last for one day. They lit the Menorah and the oil miraculously burnt for eight days, enough time to produce a new batch of pure oil.

When we tell this story year after year, we tend to imagine that the Maccabees found the beautiful gold Menorah of the Temple in its place, and they simply added the pure oil to it.

Yet, this would be truly remarkable. The Syrians had control of the Temple for a long stretch of time and they surely would have plundered all the valuable items within it. It would have been very unlikely for them to have left an impressive gold candelabrum in its place.

A midrash suggests that when the Maccabees entered the Temple, they indeed did not find the Menorah there. It had already been stolen by the enemies of the Jews. So the Maccabees improvised by putting together a make-shift Menorah made of spears. The midrash (Pesikta Rabbati 2:1) surmises that the spears had been left behind by the Syrian soldiers who fled in haste during their defeat.

So the Menorah of the original Hanukkah was made of the spears of our enemies!

This midrash is teaching a profound lesson. The very weapons with which our enemies sought to destroy us—those very weapons were used to spread the light

of Judaism! The Maccabees were demonstrating that their victory was not merely successful in a military sense. Rather, it was also—and pre-eminently—a spiritual victory. The enemy's spears were transformed into branches of the Menorah, bringing light into the Temple, restoring worship of the One true God.

The Haftarah that we read on Shabbat Hanukkah includes the famous words of the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit said the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6).

Not by spears, not by guns, not by missiles, not by terrorism, not by political intimidation: these weapons of our enemies will not prevail. We will transform their weapons into sources of light and peace. We will create a Menorah of righteousness that will inspire the world to a loftier and more spiritual vision.

To quote from the Passover Haggadah, "in each generation they arise to destroy us and the Almighty saves us from their hands." The Jews seem always to have been the conscience of the nations—and many people do not like a conscience, especially a guilty conscience. They attack us because they are afraid of what we symbolize: a nation dedicated to One God, to an elevated morality, to social justice.

But the ongoing flourishing of Jews and Judaism is our unflinching testimony that the spirit of God will ultimately prevail among humanity. The spears of enmity and warfare will one day be transformed into branches of a Menorah, bringing light and hope to all human beings. May it be soon and in our days!