

THE SCROLL OF THE HASMONEANS

The Greek monarch Antiochus was a powerful ruler; all the kings heeded him. He subdued many provinces and mighty sovereigns; he destroyed their castles, burned their palaces and imprisoned their men. Since he reign of Alexander there had never been a king like him beyond the Euphrates. He erected a large city on the seacoast to serve as his royal residence, and called it Antioch after his own name. Opposite it his governor Bagris founded another city, and called it City of Bagris after himself. Such are their names to this day.

In the twenty-third year of his reign, the two hundred and thirteenth year after the Temple had been rebuilt, Antiochus determined to march on Jerusalem. He said to his officers: "You are aware that the Jews of Jerusalem are in our midst. They neither offer sacrifices to our gods nor observe our laws; they abandon the king's laws to practise their own. They hope moreover for the day when kings and tyrants shall be crushed, saying: 'O that our own king might reign over us, that we might rule the sea and the land, so that the entire world would be ours.' It is indeed a disgrace for the royal government to let them remain on the face of the earth. Come now, let us attack them and abolish the covenant made with them: sabbath, new moon festivals and circumcision." The proposal pleased his officers and all his host.

Aramaic original which was composed probably in the seventh century. During the Middle Ages this *Megillath* was read in the Italian synagogues on *Hanukkah* as the Book of Esther is read on *Purim*. It still forms part of the liturgy of the Yemenite Jews. Saadyah Gaon attributed its authorship to the five sons of Mattathias.

Immediately king Antiochus dispatched his governor Nicanor with a large body of troops. He came to the Jewish city of Jerusalem and massacred many people; he set up a heathen altar in the Temple, concerning which the God of Israel had said to his faithful prophets: "There will I establish my residence forever." In that very place they slaughtered a swine and brought its blood into the holy court. When Yohanan ben Mattathias heard of this deed, he was filled with rage and his face changed color. In his heart he drew a plan of action. Whereupon he made himself a dagger, two spans long and one span wide, and concealed it under his clothes. He came to Jerusalem and stood at the royal gate, calling to the gate-keepers: "I am Yohanan ben Mattathias; I have come to appear before Nicanor." The guards informed Nicanor that the high priest of the Jews was standing at the door. "Let him enter!" Nicanor said.

Yohanan was admitted to Nicanor, who said: "You are one of the rebels who rebel against the king and do not care for the welfare of his government!" Yohanan replied: "My lord, I have come to you; whatever you demand I will do." "If you wish to do as I please," said Nicanor, "then take a swine and sacrifice it upon the altar. You shall wear royal clothes and ride the king's own horse; you shall be counted among the king's close friends." To this, Yohanan answered: "My lord, I am afraid of the Israelites; if they hear that I have done such a thing they will stone me. Let everyone leave your presence, so as not to inform them." Immediately Nicanor ordered everybody out.

At that moment Yohanan ben Mattathias raised his eyes to heaven and prayed: "My God and God of my fathers Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob, do not hand me over to this heathen; for if he kills me, he will boast in the temple of Dagon that his god has handed me over to him." He advanced three steps toward Nicanor, thrust the dagger into his heart, and flung him fatally wounded into the court of the Temple. "My God," Yohanan prayed, "do not count it a sin that I killed this heathen in the sanctuary; punish thus all the foes who came with him to persecute Judea and Jerusalem." On that day Yohanan set out and fought the enemy, inflicting heavy slaughter on them. The number of those who were slain by him on that day totaled seven thousand. Upon returning, he erected a column with the inscription: "Maccabee, Destroyer of Tyrants."

When king Antiochus heard that his governor Nicanor had been slain, he was bitterly distressed. He sent for wicked Bagris, the deceiver of his people, and told him: "Do you not know, have you not heard, what the Israelites did to me? They massacred my troops and ransacked my camps! Can you now be sure of your wealth? Will your homes remain yours? Come, let us move against them and abolish the covenant which their God made with them: sabbath, new moon festivals and circumcision." Thereupon wicked Bagris and his hosts invaded Jerusalem, murdering the population and proclaiming an absolute decree against sabbath, new moon festivals and circumcision. So drastic was the king's edict that when a man was discovered to have circumcised his son, he and his wife were hanged along with the child. A woman gave birth to a son after her husband's death and had him circumcised when he was eight days old. With the child in her arms, she went up on top

of the wall of Jerusalem and cried out: "We say to you, wicked Bagris: This covenant of our fathers which you intend to destroy shall never cease from us nor from our children's children." She cast her son down to the ground and flung herself after him so that they died together. Many Israelites of that period did the same, refusing to renounce the covenant of their fathers.

Some of the Jews said to one another: "Come, let us keep the Sabbath in a cave lest we violate it." When they were betrayed to Bagris, he dispatched armed men who sat down at the entrance of the cave and said: "You Jews, surrender to us! Eat of our bread, drink of our wine, and do what we do!" But the Jews said to one another: "We remember what we were commanded on Mount Sinai: 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work; on the seventh day you shall rest.' It is better for us to die than to desecrate the Sabbath." When the Jews failed to come out, wood was brought and set on fire at the entrance of the cave. About a thousand men and women died there. Later the five sons of Mattathias, Yohanan and his four brothers, set out and routed the hostile forces, whom they drove to the coast; for they trusted in the God of heaven.

Wicked Bagris, accompanied by those who had escaped the sword, boarded a ship and fled to king Antiochus. "O king," he said, "you have issued a decree abolishing sabbath, new moon festivals and circumcision in Judea, and now there is complete rebellion there. The five sons of Mattathias cannot be defeated unless they are attacked by all the combined forces; they are stronger than lions, swifter than eagles, braver than bears. Be

pleased to accept my advice, and do not fight them with this small army lest you be disgraced in the sight of all the kings. Send letters to all your royal provinces; let all the army officers without exception come with armored elephants." This pleased king Antiochus. He sent letters to all his royal domains, and the chieftains of various clans arrived with armored elephants. Wicked Bagris invaded Jerusalem for the second time. He broke through the wall, shattered the gateway, made thirteen breaches in the Temple, and ground the stones to dust. He thought to himself: "This time they shall not defeat me; my army is numerous, my hand is mighty." However, the God of heaven did not think so.

The five sons of Mattathias went to Mizpeh in Gilead, where the house of Israel had been saved in the days of Samuel the prophet. They fasted, sat in ashes and prayed to the God of heaven for mercy; then a good plan came to their mind. These were their names: Judah, the firstborn; Simeon, the second; Yohanan, the third; Jonathan, the fourth; Elazar, the fifth. Their father blessed them, saying: "Judah my son, I compare you to Judah the son of Jacob who was likened to a lion. Simeon my son, I compare you to Simeon the son of Jacob who slew the men of Shechem. Yohanan my son, I compare you to Abner the son of Ner, general of Israel's army. Jonathan my son, I compare you to Jonathan the son of Saul who defeated the Philistines. Elazar my son, I compare you to Phinehas the son of Elazar, who was zealous for his God and rescued the Israelites." Soon afterwards the five sons of Mattathias attacked the pagan forces, inflicting severe losses upon them. One of the brothers, Judah, was killed.

When the sons of Mattathias discovered that Judah had been slain, they returned to their father who asked: "Why did you come back?" They replied: "Our brother Judah, who alone equaled all of us, has been killed." "I will join you in the battle against the heathen," Mattathias said, "lest they destroy the house of Israel; why be so dismayed over your brother?" He joined his sons that same day and waged war against the enemy. The God of heaven delivered into their hands all swordsmen and archers, army officers and high officials. None of these survived. Others were compelled to seek refuge in the coastal cities. In attacking the elephants, Elazar was engulfed in their dung. His brothers searched for him among the living and the dead and could not find him. Eventually, however, they did find him.

The Jews rejoiced over the defeat of their enemies, some of whom were burned while others were hanged on the gallows. Wicked Bagris was included among those who were burned to death. When king Antiochus heard that his governor Bagris and the army officers had been killed, he boarded a ship and fled to the coastal cities. Wherever he came the people rebelled and called him "The Fugitive," so he drowned himself in the sea.

The Hasmonians entered the sanctuary, rebuilt the gates, closed the breaches, and cleansed the Temple court from the slain and the impurities. They looked for pure olive oil to light the Menorah, and found only one bottle with the seal of the high priest so that they were sure of its purity. Though its quantity seemed sufficient only for one day's lighting, it lasted for eight days owing

to the blessing of the God of heaven who had established his name there. Hence, the Hasmoneans and all the Jews alike instituted these eight days as a time of feasting and rejoicing, like any festival prescribed in the Torah, and of kindling lights to commemorate the victories God had given them. Mourning and fasting are forbidden on Hanukkah, except in the case of an individual's vow which must be discharged. Nevertheless, the Hasmoneans did not prohibit work on this holiday.

From that time on the Greek government was stripped of its renown. The Hasmoneans and their descendants ruled for two hundred and six years, until the destruction of the Temple.

And so the Jews everywhere observe this festival for eight days, beginning on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. These days, instituted by priests, Levites and sages of Temple times, shall be celebrated by their descendants forever.