

Note to members: Our Chanukah party is December 24, 2011 at 6:00 pm at Miller Park!

From Les Kushner: Firstly I wish all of you a joyous and meaningful Thanksgiving.

For Judaism, Sukkot is the harvest festival which is also considered a festival of thanksgiving, thanking God for a good harvest and praying to God for rain for the next harvest. There is a debate as to whether or not Chanukah was a victory of the Maccabees of the Assyrians, or was it also a late Sukkot as signified by eight days of Chanukah, as there are eight days of Sukkot. Chanukah is not one of the three festivals commanded in the Torah, and yet the prayer to observe Chanukah is the same formula as that of the three festivals. Here is what I would like each of you to do. Print the information I am giving you regarding the origins of the Ma'oz Tzur, for a meaningful discussion focusing on the theme song Chanukah.

The hymn is named for the first two words in Hebrew, which mean "Stronghold of Rock" as a name for God.

"Ma'oz Tzur" is thought to have been written in the 13th century, during the Crusades. The first letters of the first five stanzas form an acrostic of the composers name, Modechai, (the five Hebrew letters; mem, reish, dalet, chaf, and yod.) He may have been the Mordechai ben Isaac ha-Levi, or even the scholar referred to in the Tosafot to Talmud (Bavli) Niddah 36a. Or, to judge from appeal in the closing verse, he may have been the Mordechai whose father-in-law was martyred at Mayence (now Mainz, Germany) in 1096. As we can see his origin is unclear.

The hymn retells Jewish history in poetic form and celebrates deliverance from four ancient enemies, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezer, Haman, and Antiochus. Like much Jewish liturgical poetry, it is full of allusions to Biblical literature and rabbinic interpretation. Thus, "malcut eglah" denotes Egypt (Jeremiah 46:2); "noges" is Nebuchadnezzar; "y'mini" is Mordechai (Esther 2:5); "y'vanim" is Antiochus; "shoshanim" is the Jewish people (Shir HaShirim 2:2); "b'nei vinah" are the rabbinic sages and "shir" refers to the Hallel psalms.

A second acrostic is found in the first letters of the opening words of the final stanza, the acrostic contains the word chazak, meaning be strong.

The poem recalls the many times the Jewish communities were saved from the people around them. The second stanza tells of the Exodus from Egypt. The third stanza tells of the end of Babylonian captivity. The fourth stanza retells the miracle of the holiday of Purim. Only the fifth tells of the Hasmonean victory that is commemorated by Chanukah. Ah some of you thought there were only two?

The first and last stanzas are written in the present tense. The first expresses the hope of rebuilding the Temple and for the defeat of enemies, who are metaphorically referred to as barking (menabe'ach). The final stanza once again calls for divine retribution against the enemies of the Jewish people. The term "Admon", meaning the red one was understood by some to refer to the emperor, Frierich Barbarossa, whose name means Frederick Redbeard, but this reading is inaccurate, since the last stanza is generally believed to be composed around the turn of the 16th century, some three hundred years after Frederick I died or together with the other five verses. therefore it refers to Christianity in general, which in traditional Jewish sources is viewed as being born of Rome, which is called Edom, the root of the word "Admon" because of the original nation of Rome is considered to be the descendants of Esau, who were known as Edom. The stanza was dropped from many printings of the poem, perhaps from fear of a Christian reaction against it, as well as in countries under communist rule, for reasons more obvious.

The bright and stirring tune now so generally associated with "Ma'oz Tzur" serves as the "representative theme" in musical references to the feast (compare Addir Hu, Akdamut, Hallel). It is sung universally by Jews on this festival (although there are many other traditional melodies). It has come to be regarded as the only Chanukah melody, four other Hebrew hymns being sung to it. It was originally sung for "Shene Zetim" (Olives Twain), the "Me'orah" or piyut, preceding the

Shema of shacharit of the first Shabbat of Chanukah. Curiously enough the, Shene Zetim alone is now sometimes sung to a melody which two centuries ago was associated with Ma'oz Tzur. The latter is a Jewish-sounding air in the minor mode, and is found in Benedetto Marcello's "Estro Postico Armonico", or Parafasi Sopra li Salmi" (Venice), 1724 quoted as a melody of the German Jews, and utilized by Marcello as the theme for his Psalm 15. This air has been transcribed by Cantor Birinbaum of Koenigsberg. The most popular melody for Chanukah has been identified by Birinbaum as an adaptation of an old German folk song which was widely spread among German Jews as early as 1450. Coincidentally, the folk melody was the first used by Luthe for his German chorales. The earliest transcription of the Jewish form of the tune is by Isaac Nathan who set it to the poem "On Jordan's Banks" It was modified to the form now favored by the British Jews by Julian Lazarus Mombach. In more recent history the piyut inspired Israeli song writer Naomi Shemmer to write the song Shivchei Ma'oz, meaning praises of the fortress, as performed by the band Pikud Darom in 1969. In this song Shemmer drew a connection between the Jewish hymn and the military positions that were attacked in the war of attrition of the time.

I have given you the background, but the discussion may well focus on the text, of which many of you are only partially familiar with. I will not use the Hebrew as we can sing that together, rather I will give you the translation of the German version, the English version which needs no translation and the Shivchei Ma'oz translation.

1) Pharaoh, 2) follower of heretical teaching, 3) Nebuchadnezzar, 4) Haman, 5) Mordechai, 6) Antiochus, 7) Literally the Lily, an affectionate name for Israel, 8) Literally the Red One referring to Esau Edom, 9) who will deliver Israel from oppression, Micah 5:4

German:

Verse 1:

My refuge my rock of salvation! 'Tis pleasant to sing to you your praises. Let our house of prayer be restored. and there will we will offer You our thanks.

When You will have utterly silenced the loud-mouthed foe. Then we will celebrate with song and psalm the altar's dedication.

Verse 2: My soul was sated with misery, My strength was spent with grief. they embittered my life with hardship, When enslaved under the rule of Egypt. (1)

But God with His mighty power Brought out His people; While Pharaoh's host and his followers sank like a stone in the deep.

Verse 3: He brought me to His holy abode; Even there I found no rest. The oppressor came and exiled me, Because I served strange gods, and drank poisonous wine. (2) Yet I scarcely had I gone into exile, When Babylon fell and Zerubabel took charge; (3) Within seventy years I was saved.

Verse 4: The Agagite (4), son of Hammedatha, Plotted to cut down the lofty fir tree (5); But is proved to snare to him, And his insolence was silenced.

You raised the head of the Benjamite (5), But the enemy's name You blotted out. His numerous sons and his household, You hanged upon the gallows.

Verse 5: The Greeks (6) gathered against me, in the days of the Hasmoneans. they broke down the walls of my towers, And defiled all the oils.

But from the last remaining flask A miracle was wrought for the Jews (Hebrew Shoshanim) (7) Therefore the sages of the day ordained these eight days for songs of praise.

Verse 6: O bare Your Holy arm, And hasten the time of salvation. Wreak vengeance upon the wicked nation, On behalf of your faithful servants.

For deliverance has too long been delayed; and the evil days are endless. O thrust the enemy (8) into the shadows of death, And set up for us the seven Shepherds.

English Version 1: Rock of strength! Great Aid of yore! 'Tis sweet due praise to sig thee; Rear our House of Prayer once more! thank-off'rings there we'll bring thee;
When dread immolation, Checks the foe's elation, I'll complete with paeans meet, the altar's consecration.

2: Evils sore my soul oppressed, Grief consumed my vigor; Bitter bondage life distressed, Thro' proud Egypt's rigor;

But, whilst Heaven's devotion, Led us forth from Goshen, Pharoah's race, Sank apace, Like pebbles in the ocean.

3: Scarce led unto Hashem's holy fane, From duty's path I swerved there, By harsh oppressor captive taken, Because strange gods I served there.

The madd'ning cup I tasted, the foe mans race was ended, when kith and kin, Were, for his sin, On gallows-tree suspended.

4: When Maccabees with Syrian foe, the mastery disputed, My forts were crushed, my walls laid low, My Temple-oil polluted;

One curse, to Heaven's pure nation, Sufficed for dedication; Whence sages mine Eight days assign, To song and jubilation.

5: Bare Your holy arm once more, and hasten the End for salvation. Avenge the vengeance of servants Your, from the wicked nation.

Our salvation's toolong delayed, and there is no end to the evil days, Repel edam in the shadow deep, and bring seven shepherds without delay.

Another popular version for children in Hebrew school is perhaps more familiar.

Rock of ages, let our song, Praise Your saving power. You amid the raging foes, were our sheltering tower. Furiously they assailed us, but Your arm availed us. And Your word, Broke their sword, When our own strength failed us.

Children of the wanderers, Whether free or fettered, Wake the echoes of the songs, Where you may be scattered. Yours the message cheering, that the time is nearing, Which will see, all men free, Tyrants disappearing.

Finally Shivche Ma'oz

Fortress, rock of my salvation, How fitting to give praise, far away beside my house, the orchards waft their scent. I shall come through tunnels, citadels and caves, Clefts in rocks and dusty cavities.

Somewhere in the heart of the night, tense and silent, Someone who seeks my life is looking at me.

Fortress, rock of my salvation, Tough and stubborn fastness, the almond trees near my house Are white with blossom.

I shall come through tunnels, citadels and caves, Clefts in rocks and dusty cavities. somewhere in the heart of the night, tense and silent, Someone who seeks my life is looking at me.

Fortress rock of my salvation, In stubborn battle you will triumph, and my gentle sister, will through me a weary smile.

I will come through tunnels, citadels and caves. Clefts and rocks and dusty cavities. Somewhere in the heart of the night, tense and silent, Lies in ambush the seeker of my life.

Let him beware my sting and let him beware my honey, Let who seeks my left, beware!