

And he trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15:6)

Avraham Avinu was *rishon v'rosh l'maaminim*, first and foremost of the believers in Hashem. Discovering on his own that this world did not just happen and that every moment of its existence – and the existence of every creation – is providentially guided by Hashem, he devoted his life to spreading this concept to a world to whom this idea was foreign. His descendants, the Jewish People, have maintained his teachings with *emunah* in Hashem, the pre-emanate foundation of our dogma. Throughout (what presented themselves as) the worst moments in our tumultuous history, we have continued and maintained our faith in Hashem – against all odds and under all conditions. Even when the Jew was alone in an inhospitable world, surrounded by hostile people who viewed him with an eye of disdain, the Jew proudly held his head high, buttressed by his commitment to *Yiddishkeit* and his faith in Hashem.

Not all stories need be about a tragedy if they are to inspire the heart and impact the mind. The following story is well-known to some and probably comes as a surprise to others. It demonstrates the passion and commitment a Jew had in trying times, when he was alone, surrounded by thousands of non-Jews, who, at best, did not understand him, his laws and lifestyle! Nonetheless, he openly displayed zeal and devotion to Hashem – a commitment that was acknowledged by the most powerful man in America.

The winter of 1777 was very harsh. Bitter cold, treacherous biting wind and heavy snow was what the soldiers fighting for America's freedom from England began to expect as daily fare. Coupled with the freezing cold, which took a toll on their bodies, was the emotional turmoil, the loneliness and separation from family and friends, that made their battle even more difficult. If this was true for the thousands of soldiers who, as far as anyone knew, were gentile by birth, one can only begin to imagine the terrible depression that should have (but did not) overwhelm the lone, observant Jew.

While many of the soldiers would secretly curse their lot and the man (George Washington) who was their commander-in-chief, the lone Jew respected him and offered daily prayers for General Washington's triumphant emergence from the battlefield. The Jew had memories of his home, his family in Poland and the suffering to which they were subjected by the cruel anti-Semites who ruled the country. The miserable landowners took every advantage of the hapless Jews. It took place everywhere that the Jew called home. The wicked gentiles, cruel barbarians who enjoyed nothing more than exerting their power over the weak and downtrodden, victimized him. What kept these broken souls alive, committed to a higher ideal? Their *emunah* in Hashem that this was all part of a Divine Plan. Whether it was in Poland or Valley Forge, the Jew's devotion to Hashem withstood all external pressures to sever his relationship with the Almighty. After all, he shared Avraham Avinu's DNA of faith.

The soldiers in Valley Forge had no sense of the reason for their battle against the English. They

had no inkling why they were in Valley Forge in middle of a fierce winter, fighting against whom they were told was the enemy. In their midst was a lone Jewish soldier fighting for his life, the lives of his compatriots in arms, and the future of (what was to become the) United States. He rarely called attention to himself, but tonight was different. It was the first night of *Chanukah*, and he was prepared to light the *Menorah*.

When all the soldiers had drifted off to sleep, the young man took out his *Menorah* and lit one candle. He sat there mesmerized, watching the small flame dance merrily as it cast its shadow on the wall. Watching the flame brought back memories of better times, his parents, siblings, the small *shul* they attended, and the scholarly *Rav*, who was more father to the community than mentor. He was everyone's friend, in whom they confided. These memories opened up the reservoir of tears that he had controlled. After all, soldiers did not cry. As he wept, a tall distinguished man came over, looked at him, and gently asked, "Why are you weeping? Are you cold, my friend?" The Jewish soldier immediately jumped to his feet and saluted.

Then the Jewish soldier said, "I am weeping to my Father in Heaven, in whose hands lie the fate of all mankind. I was praying for your success, General Washington. I believe in your mission. I came to America to flee the tyranny and persecution that oppressed my family, my town's people, and my nation. The despots will fall! You, sir, will emerge victorious!"

"Thank you soldier," General Washington responded. "What do you have here? What are you lighting?" "This is a *Menorah*, a candelabra. Jews throughout the world are lighting their candelabra in honor of the festival of *Chanukah*, when my people recall the miracles that were wrought on behalf of our ancestors. They were only a handful of dedicated men committed to the ideal of belief in G-d. Thanks to this faith, they miraculously triumphed over the massive armies that sought to obliterate them. We maintained our faith in G-d and, as a result, we were the beneficiaries of Heavenly miracles."

The bright flame of the *Chanukah* candle ignited a flame of hope in the fatigued general's eyes. He declared joyfully, "You are a Jew? Then you are a descendant of the people of the Prophets. If you say that we will win this war – then I am certain we will win." General Washington shook his hand and left to rejoin the troops, armed with renewed vigor and hope. He asked the soldier for his name and address and went out into the night.

One year later, on the first night of *Chanukah*, the Jewish veteran, having returned home, sat in his home on Broome Street (Lower East Side of New York). He had already lit the first *Chanukah licht*. Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door. His wife rose to open the door. How shocked she was to come face-to-face with the new first commander-in-chief of the United States, President George Washington.

"I see that incredible light – the light of hope. That flame kindles a light in my heart. It, together with your words of encouragement and hope, inspired me that cold, bitter night. It spurred me on to

renewed hope and faith that we will overcome our enemies.

“As a result, you will soon be awarded the Medal of Honor for your bravery in Valley Forge.

Tonight, however, you will receive a personal gift from me in gratitude for your support and

inspiration.” With these words, he placed on the table a gold medal upon which was engraved a *Chanukah Menorah* with one light burning. Upon this medal was inscribed: “As a sign of thanks for the light of your candle. George Washington.”

When one’s faith is sincere, it garners the respect of others.