

Who Can Remember?

by Sandy Brusin

(Editor's Note: Sandy Brusin explains her motivation for writing this most beautiful story in the following way, "I wrote the story because I don't like any of the children's stories about Hanukah I've seen. They fall into one of two categories: schmaltz or baloney. The schmaltz stories usually have latkes sizzling in a pan - with mommy, of course, doing all the sizzling; and the baloney stories make a big deal out of the oil burning for eight days. I wanted to present the wonder of the story. I wanted the children to feel proud." She recommends having children act out the parts of the story while, or after, they read it, to keep their interest high and attention fresh.)

Judah lived in a faraway country surrounded by golden hills. At night, the hills turned violet and stared down at a huge, silent desert.

As a young boy, Judah Maccabee used to climb the stony desert mountains and look towards Jerusalem where he imagined he climbed the Temple Mount and stood with the priests wrapped in their soft, white robes. He dreamed about the merchants in the market spreading their rainbow-colored woven rugs and heavy clay pots.

Judah was fascinated by the soldiers from Syria who stomped in rigid columns into his village one day. They wore heavy metal shirts and seemed to stand taller and talk louder than others he had known. Pointed silver helmets covered their heads and came down over their eyes and they held wide, shining swords in their hands. They said, "This land now belongs to Syria."

"Syria," Judah thought. "That's beyond Jerusalem, isn't it? How foolish. The mountains and desert belong only to God. Could God be living in Syria?"

After a time, the soldiers returned and said, "Now, Antiochus, King of Syria, is King-God. Now you must bow down to Antioch for he is God."

"If a man calls himself God, does that make him God?" Judah asked his father, Mattathias.

His father answered, "God has told us, 'I am that I am.' God¹ didn't say, "I am² Antiochus, King of Syria."

Mattathias took his sons to live in the mountains and many people followed.

"We don't have to live here."

"Antiochus, King-God, is afraid of the mountains. He doesn't send his soldiers there."

"In the mountains, Mattathias is forming an army."

"We will not bow down to Antiochus. He is not God."

"We will follow Mattathias."

And they did follow Mattathias for a long time. But even before the Syrian soldiers had come, Mattathias was an old man and life in the mountains was difficult. At night, a black cold cloud clung to the rough stones. In the morning, Mattathias still shivered. When he became sick, he asked all those who followed him to follow Judah, the bravest of his sons, who had grown from a boy to a young man.

Judah's shepherd army beat down the mighty Syrians again and again like a hammer driving a nail into a wall. But a hammer can hit only one nail at a time and the Syrian army kept growing and growing. The shepherds knew the soldiers had seized the great Temple. They knew the soldiers placed statues of Antiochus in their Temple.

The shepherds grumbled in the camp at night. After three years of fighting and living in the mountains, they were tired, and they wanted to return to their homes and the quiet life they had known before Antiochus decided he was God.

"Judah, lead us now into Jerusalem."

¹ This line reads, "He didn't say" in the original.

² This line reads, "He was" in the original.

“We will follow you, Judah. Let us go to Jerusalem.”

Judah had led his people in many battles and had wept over all the suffering he had seen. Alone, he walked up a mountain path that led to a top-most peak and looked toward Jerusalem. He could see the lights of the city nestled among the hills. They sparkled and glittered beneath the cold winter moon.

“God does not live in Syria,” he thought. “God lives in Jerusalem and God waits there for me to reclaim the city.”³

That night ‘a great miracle happened there.’ Judah’s small army climbed down from the mountain and struck down the mighty Syrian army. The holy Temple was stained by the blood of many soldiers, both Hebrew and Syrian, and Judah cried aloud, “This fighting must end.”

The Shepherds wanted to dance, to sing, to feast - to celebrate their great victory. But Judah did not forget why they had fought for so long. He called to the people, “We are a people small in number, but together we drove out Antiochus. Let us never be afraid to be Jews. Let us cleanse our Temple. Then we will celebrate our victory.”

The statues of Antiochus were crushed. It was cold, so Judah asked the people to light many fires in the Temple. That night, the people gathered in the Temple, warmed by the many fires, and sang songs together.

“Who can retell the things that befell us?”

“Who can count them?”

Every year as we gather around the Hanukah lights that warm our homes, we remember Judah, Jerusalem and the Temple. We remember and we are not afraid.

“Who can remember the things that befell them?”

We can.

³ In the original this line reads, “He lives in Jerusalem and waits there for me to return His city to Him.”