

Here we stand again on Chanukah, several thousands years after the Maccabees' military victory over the Greek Empire, the purification of the temple and the restoration of religious freedom for the Jews. And we again have a free Israel, an Israel that is militarily mighty. And again Jews are free to practice their religion.

Ironically, the danger to Jewish religious freedom comes not from outside forces that are hostile to Judaism and to the existence of the Jewish people but from inside. Instead of welcoming all Jews with open arms, the Orthodox authorities in Israel who through political means have a monopoly on religious life, have erected barriers to reject those who do not meet all of their criteria or who challenge their mode of religious practice. The question of "Who is a Jew?" – a question that Hitler and other enemies have used to single us out for discrimination and extermination, is now being asked by Orthodox rabbis using rigid and outdated standards.

The Orthodox authorities in Israel hold on to their absolute power giving no recognition to changes in the Jewish people and Jewish religious observance. The only method of Jewish practice that is officially recognized in Israel is the Orthodox practice. The Conservative and Reform streams are not recognized although they are practiced by the majority of Jews worldwide.

Even among the Orthodox community, there are multiple divisions with regards to what constitutes "true" religious practice. These divisions are deep and result in hostility and physical violence.

This state of affairs has become more entrenched since the establishment of the State of Israel. It is a blot, a dark mark on Israel.

So here I stand, on Chanukah after 2,200 years of the victory of Yehuda Ha'Mackabi and say a prayer for Jewish religious freedom in Israel and everywhere Jews live.

In the spirit of Chanukah and Yehuda Ha'Mackabi I pray for religious tolerance among all Jews; orthodox, conservative, reform and any variation of the above in Israel and worldwide.

I pray that we open our hearts and our arms and welcome all who consider themselves Jews.

I pray that we show respect for all types of Jewish religious practice.

I pray that all representatives of Jewish religious practice share equally in power and authority.

And I hope and pray that it will not take a miracle to achieve true religious freedom.

Composed by: Ester Smith
Blessing Theme: Chanukah Prayer for Religious Freedom

Eloheinu velohey avotenu, Our god and god of our fathers.

As we approach the upcoming festival of Chanukah, we ask you to help us recognize the true meaning of this holiday: that faith in god, and in ourselves, can give us the courage to take action against the *existential threats* to our community. This is what happened 2-1/4 millennia ago, bayamim haheyman baz'man hazeh, and it also applies today, bayamim ha'eleh.

Give us the wisdom to recognize, and to overcome, the challenges of *assimilation* that are especially dangerous at this holiday season, when we and our families are exposed to cultural temptations that challenge our Jewish identities.

Give us religious and political leadership with the determination to bridge the *religious divisions* - in Israel and the diaspora - that divide and weaken us.

Grant us the courage to combat the rising *anti-Semitism* that threatens our brethren in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere.

And give us political leaders who understand the *external threats against our homeland* and who have the wisdom and determination to prevail against our enemies.

May our lighting of the Chanukah candles this year renew our faith in you, and inspire us to take action to confront these threats.

V'nomar, amen!

Composed by: Larry Smith
Blessing Theme: Chanukah Prayer for Religious Freedom

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