

The Music of Chanukah

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

In the yearly cycle of the Jewish holidays the music of Chanukah occupies a unique position. Unlike *Pesach*, Shavuot and *Sukkot*, it does not demand that a Megillah be read in the Synagogue. Unlike Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the shofar is not blown and there are no specific prayer modes (*nuschaot*). There is an abundance of music for each of the other holidays throughout the year, whereas for Chanukah there is little. It is possible that since Chanukah is basically observed in the home, there was not much place for music to develop. Furthermore, Chanukah is a post-biblical festival in the Jewish calendar and its fairly extensive regulations are purely of rabbinic origin. The music, which heightens a festive event, was deliberately repressed in order to be able to observe the holiday with domestic calm and family quietude. In the Synagogue, too, the supplementary prayers *Al Hanissim*, *Hallel*, as well as the Torah portion did not take on any new prayer or cantillation modes.

The essential feature of Chanukah is lighting the candles, using the now traditional melodies for the *Brachot*.

In each period the festival of Chanukah took on a renewed meaning: the Chanukah light symbolizing the national renaissance of the Jewish people. The "representative theme" which has become associated with this national renaissance is the West European Ashkenazi tune linked with the hymn, *Ma 'oz Tzur*. Although other melodies were sung to the text of *Ma 'oz Tzur* and in spite of its "non-Jewish" character, this tune has prevailed. It has been said that next to *Hatikvah*, *Ma 'oz Tzur* is probably the best known melody among Jews the world over.

According to one opinion, the entire melodic life of *Ma'oz Tzur* corresponds to the church melody "Patrem omnipotentem." The opening bars of this folk-melody were used by Martin Luther for the opening of his chorale, "*Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*" (Now rejoice all you dear Christians together). And yet, this melody has become the "traditional" melody for *Ma 'oz Tzur*.

Folk songs relating the spirit of the Hasmoneans, the special foods eaten on Chanukah such as latkes and doughnuts (known as *sufganiyot* in Israel), Chanukah games, and the *Chanukkiyah* (lamp) found expression in each successive generation. Numerous songs were created in the Diaspora as well as in modern Israel. Among the best known are *Oy Chanukah*, a 19th century Yiddish folk song of East European origin, *Mi Yemalel* by Pua Greenspoon and *Chanukah* by Emanuel Amiran.

The story of Chanukah also penetrated the general musical world. Musical works that became part of the art music performed on the concert stage are George Frederick Handel's oratorio "Judas Maccabaeus," Anton Rubenstein's opera "The Maccabees" and Abraham Binder's "Judas Maccabaeus," an oratorio for children. Just as the truths proclaimed by the flickering lights of *Chanukah* will never be extinguished, so will our Jewish musical heritage endure forever. Our hymns, folk songs and art music will continue to voice our gratitude to the Almighty for the heroic spirit of *Mattityahu* and his sons.