

Maoz Tzur: More than "Rock of Ages"

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1. Adam Sandler, Introduction to his original "Hanukkah Song"

When I was a kid, this time of year always made me feel a little left out, because in school there were so many Xmas songs, and all us Jewish kids had was the song "Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel," so I wrote a brand new Hanukkah songs for you Jewish kids to sing, and I hope you like it.

2. Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe (15th century Bavaria), Leket Yosher I 36:3, regarding Rabbi Yisrael Isserlein

ובליל שבת אמר כל מקדש שביעי ומה ידידות מנוחתך, לפעמים מה יפית. לפעמים זמר אחר השייך לענינו של יום, כגון מעוז צור ישועתי בחנוכה. And on Friday night he sang *Kol mekadesh* and *Mah yedidut menuchateich*, and sometimes *Mah yafit*. Sometimes [he sang] another song related to the day, like *Maoz tzur yeshuati* on Chanukah.

3. History of the tune (Rabbi Bernard Beer) <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/726201/>

4. Rock of Ages, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maoz_Tzur

Rock of Ages, let our song, praise Thy saving power;
Thou, amidst the raging foes, wast our sheltering tower.
Furious they assailed us, but Thine arm availed us,
And Thy Word broke their sword, when our own strength failed us. (2x)

Kindling new the holy lamps, priests, approved in suffering,
Purified the nation's shrine, brought to Gd their offering.
And His courts surrounding, hear, in joy abounding,
Happy throngs, singing songs with a mighty sounding. (2x)

Children of the martyr race, whether free or fettered,
Wake the echoes of the songs where ye may be scattered.
Yours the message cheering that the time is nearing
Which will see, all men free, tyrants disappearing. (2x)

The Music of Chanukah

5. Talmud, Shabbat 21b

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון, שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

What is Chanukah? Our sages taught: On the 25th of Kislev, there are eight days of Chanukah, when we neither eulogize nor fast. For when the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they contaminated all of the oil in the Sanctuary, and when the monarchy of the house of the Chashmonaim mustered strength and defeated them, they searched and could find only one jug of oil marked with the seal of the kohen gadol. There was only enough to kindle for one day, but a miracle occurred and they kindled from it for eight days. The next year, they established them and made them Yamim Tovim, with Hallel and thanks.

6. Talmud, Arachin 10b

והא חנוכה דלא הכי ולא הכי וקאמר! משום ניסא.

But Chanukah has neither a prohibition against work nor a special korban, yet we say Hallel! Because of the miracle.

7. Rabbi Aharon Kotler (20th century USA), Mishnat Rebbe Aharon, Pesach, pg. 3

אף מה שהאדם רואה בעיניו, מהצורך לבאר לעצמו מה שהוא רואה ולקבוע בהכרתו.

Even that which a person sees with his own eyes, he needs to interpret for himself that which he sees, and to establish it in his mind.

8. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th century Cracow), Code of Jewish Law, Orach Chaim 670:2

ונוהגין לומר זמירות ושבחות בסעודות שמרבים בהם, ואז הוי סעודת מצוה (מנהגים).

And the custom is to say songs and praises at the meals we add for these days, converting them into mitzvah meals.

Maoz Tzur: Capturing the Essence

9. Maoz Tzur, Artscroll tr.

○ mighty Rock of my salvation, to praise You is a delight.

Restore my House of Prayer and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.

When You will have prepared the slaughter for the blaspheming foe,

Then I shall complete with a song of hymn the dedication of the Altar.

My soul had been sated with troubles, my strength has been consumed with grief.

They had embittered my life with hardship, with the calf-like kingdom's bondage.

But with His great power He brought forth the treasured ones,

Pharaoh's army and all his offspring Went down like a stone into the deep.

To the holy abode of His Word He brought me. But there, too, I had no rest

And an oppressor came and exiled me. For I had served aliens,

And had drunk numbing wine. Scarcely had I departed [my land]

When at Babylon's end Zerubabel came. At the end of seventy years I was saved.

To sever the towering cypress sought the Aggagite, son of Hammedatha,

But it became a snare and a stumbling block to him and his arrogance was stilled.

The head of the Benjaminite You lifted and the enemy, his name You obliterated

His numerous progeny - his possessions - on the gallows You hanged.

Greeks gathered against me then in Hasmonean days.

They breached the walls of my towers and they defiled all the oils;

And from the one remnant of the flasks a miracle was wrought for the roses.

Men of insight - eight days established for song and jubilation.

Bare Your holy arm and hasten the End for salvation –

Avenge the vengeance of Your servants' blood from the wicked nation.

For the triumph is too long delayed for us, and there is no end to days of evil,

Repel the Red One in the nethermost shadow and establish for us the seven shepherds.

10. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany), Collected Writings II pg. 230

It had been erected by a politically dependent nation, by enslaved hands, on captive soil. It was not only a monument for the loyal Jew under foreign domination, but also a testimony of the respect and reverence accorded by foreign rulers to the Jewish Law...

11. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany), Collected Writings II pp. 196-197

One single pure spark, loyally treasured in but one single Jewish heart, is sufficient for Gd to set aflame once more the whole spirit of Judaism. And if all the oil, if all the forces that were to have preserved the light of Gd in Israel, were to be misused for the light of paganism – even then, one little crucible of oil, one heart which in a forgotten hidden corner, imprinted with the High Priest's seal, has faithfully remained untouched and undefiled, this one crucible is sufficient to become the salvation of the entire sanctuary when the right time and hour has come.

12. Review questions

- 1) How long have Jews been singing Maoz Tzur on Chanukah?
- 2) What are the two kinds of causes for Hallel?
- 3) From which persecutors were we rescued in each paragraph of Maoz Tzur?
- 4) What are three lessons we can learn from Maoz Tzur, in processing the miracle of Chanukah?

13. Dr. Michael Orlan, Source texts of Maoz Tzur <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/752789>