

# SOME OF THOSE WHO ALSO REMEMBERED

## YEHUDA MACCABEE

By Tibor Schatteles

We know the story, but it is good to periodically call back its teachings, also when they reach us from rather unusual sources, i.e. others than within the Hebrew tradition. There are not many such *sources*, but they are always worth to be remembered. The story's lessons are not very comfortable to everyone, especially to those who, purportedly in the name of "peace", want to give us different instructions.

It is a great poet, yes, one of the greatest ever, Dante Alighieri, who found a few words which ought to be remembered and repeated by us. We know, of course, that he stuffed in the *Inferno* quite a few popes and priests of the religion the teachings of which have only too often been distorted to justify the burning alive of "unbelievers". Yet he, Dante, an honest follower of his religion, treated with respect those to whom many of the "burned ones" belonged. And though he kept out of his *Paradiso* many of those of the earlier Covenant, he also protected them from the Hell's flames in a place where they were supposed to wait in safety for a "Second Coming". But there were exceptions. Thus, when guided by an ancestor of his, Cacciaguida by name, in the fifth circle of the *Paradiso*, a place where worthy warriors found their rest, they arrived to a point of which we read the following:

*In questa quinta soglia  
de l'albero che vive de la cima  
e frutta sempre e mai non perde foglia  
spirit sombeaty, che giú, prima  
che venissero, el ciel, fuor di gran voce,  
si que ogne musa ne sarebbe opima.*

[*Paradiso, XVIII, 28 ff.*]

Or, in Longfellow's rendition:

Upon the tree that liveth by its top,  
And aye bears fruit, and never loseth  
leaf,

In the fifth resting place  
Are blessed spirits that below, ere yet  
They came to Heaven, were of such great renown  
That every Muse therewith would affluent be.

And the Muse could be enriched indeed at least by some of those names whose bearers, if called by Cacciaguida, appeared shortly in a flash of flame so that the

wandering poet could see them. First it was Joshua, the one who lead the Israelites in the conquest of the Land which God promised them. Then, when Cacciaguida called again, came the one who's fame comes from defending that very same Land against a vicious conqueror. And so:

*E al nome de l'alto Macabeo  
vidi moversi un altro roteando  
e letizia era ferza del paleo*  
[Paradiso XXVIII, 400 ff.]

Or, once again as rendered by Longfellow:

And at the name of the great Maccabee  
I saw another [flame column] move itself revolving,  
And gladness was the whip unto the top.

In Dante's Paradise, in the fifth circle, those who defended the Land of their people led the procession. Hermeneutical "interpretations" could not talk away their role in history as rendered by the *litera* of the chronicler, and thus Dante celebrates, as we do now, the *alto Macabeo*.

And so does Dante's translator, Longfellow, in his drama *Judas Maccabaeus*, a play in which the beautiful lines of the great American poet convey valuable teachings also about the difference between Peace and "peace". So we read Antiochus bragging:

Have I not sacked thee Temple, and the altar  
Set up the statue of Olympian Zeus?  
[Act I, Sc.I]

These were the words addressed to a "peace loving" Hebrew priest, formerly called Joshua, then Jason by his Graecized name, who was supposed to offer also an example:

So shall the Hebrew nation be translated,  
Their very nature and their names be changed. [ibid.]

When in his chambers, the king was quite open. Butt less so in politics. Thus, that very same Antiochus sent his general, Nicanor, on a "peace mission" to Judas Maccabaeus with the following message:

*Nic.* Thou hast the nobler virtues of thy race,  
Without the failings that attend to those virtues.

Thou canst be strong, and yet not tyrannous,  
Canst righteous be and not intolerant.  
Let there be peace between us. [Act III, Sc. III]

Most flattering, considering that it comes from the general of him who has bragged with annihilating the Hebrew people.

Are there also in our days some who would yield to such deceiving adulation, especially in exchange for some ephemeral worldly advantages promised by the followers of those who already had a place in the *Inferno* [XXVIII, 30 ff.] because "*seminator di scandalo e di scisma fuor vivi*" or "sowers of scandal and schism have been while living"? So was in those days with the already mentioned Jason to whom, when captured, Judah Maccabee addressed the following words:

I will spare your life  
To punish thee the longer. Thou shalt wander  
Among strange nations. Thou, that hast cast out  
So many from their native land, shalt perish  
In a strange land. Thou, hast left so many  
Unburied, shalt have none to morn for thee,  
Nor any solemn funeral at all,  
Nor sepulchre with thy fathers. [Act IV, Sc.II]

And the words he addressed to Nicanor reflect the determination of a man who is always ready to face truth:

What peace?  
Is it to bow in silence to our victors?  
Is it to see our cities sacked and pillaged,  
Our people slain, or sold as slaves, or fleeing  
At night-time by the blaze of burning towns;  
Jerusalem laid waste; the Holy Temple  
Polluted with strange gods? Are these things of peace?

And as we celebrate Chanukah, we may also remember and consider this rendition of the words of

IL ALTO MACCABEO