

Arthur Szyk and the modern Maccabees

By Irvin Ungar

WITH HANUKKAH now behind us but the war with Hamas still ahead, can we not call the men and women of Israel—who fight for the right to Jewish survival—our “modern Maccabees”? Indeed, in the context of Arab terror attacks in the Land of Israel in 1920 and again in 1936, artist and book illustrator Arthur Szyk created a master artwork of heroic Jews destined to be called *The Modern Maccabees*.

It was one year after the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws were enacted in Germany that Szyk, in Łódź, Poland, painted *Trumpeldor's Defense of Tel Hai*. This illumination encouraged Jews in 1936 Palestine to defend themselves against Arab marauders in the same spirit and with the same courage and heroism as did the Jews of the Galilean Tel Hai settlement in 1920, led by the legendary captain Joseph Trumpeldor. The timing of this painting was simultaneously directed toward the Jews of Germany and Poland, calling upon them to respond heroically toward the antisemitic mobs and chants in their respective countries. The artwork was renamed *The Modern Maccabees* a few years later.

Today, we know what those chants and actions of Arab terror groups of the 1920s and '30s have morphed into – the Hamas massacre of October 7. We know where the seeds of German nationalism of the 1920s and '30s led – to the single most traumatic event in Jewish history. It hardly seems surprising, then, that the Mufti of Jerusalem and Adolph Hitler would adopt each other as friends, as comrades of evil, who had Jew-hatred and mass murder as their shared goal. Hatred of Jews, antisemitism, and its physical assault on the integrity of Jewish lives, now as then, has re-invaded our planet. It has forcefully spread as an ancient, medieval, and modern disease throughout our global sphere among different cultures, peoples, and lands, united in a common cause. Against this backdrop, Jews and their friends worldwide can look to the modern Israeli Maccabees of our day – the Israel Defense Forces – for inspiration to act Maccabean-like in their own way. By speaking out in defense of their actions and by lending larger-than-life financial support to organizations that do likewise, we prevent ourselves from becoming merely bystanders to history rather than active participants in shaping it.

By mid-July 1942, with more than one million of his fellow Polish people murdered by the Nazis, and two and a half million Jews being starved to death in ghettos while millions more awaited the German extermination camps, Arthur Szyk reinforced his themes of Jewish self-defense and heroism by symbolically renaming his Trumpeldor piece *The Modern Maccabees*. It coincided with the mission of the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews (a group that advocated the formation of a Jewish fighting force recruited from refugees of Hitler Germany and young Jews from Palestine) who would fight beside the allies of America, the United Kingdom, and free Europe. In a broader sense, Szyk's work of art also called upon these nations directly,



Arthur Szyk. 'Trumpeldor's Defense of Tel Hai.' Łódź, 1936.

led by America, his adopted home, to courageously sustain their mission in defeating the Axis of Evil and thereby rescue Jewish lives.

A single enlarged blowup of this painting, in black and white, was presented to the Committee for a Jewish Army and hung in its New York offices. To mark the occasion, Szyk unveiled his call to arms by lifting an American flag covering it. The artist-warrior understood the symbolism, the strength of the United States, and the unique role it could play in defeating the enemies of the Jewish people. Today, its warships stationed in the Mediterranean do not go unnoticed, shedding light on America's military standing with Israel and its people amid the sea of raging waters in the Middle East.

In the bottom center of Szyk's painting, he has calligraphed the Hebrew words attributed to first century sage Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Surely, the soldiers of the IDF stand on the front lines of self-defense, but which nations and peoples will project moral clarity and physical strength in joining America to stand beside Israel in its fight? Who are the leaders and members of that committee today?

At this hour, the descendants of Szyk's modern Maccabees, like those Maccabees of the first Hanukkah of old, are prepared to echo the dying words of Joseph Trumpeldor: "It is good to die for our land." To this we may well add: "It is good to live safely in our land." ■

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Szyk unveiling 'The Modern Maccabees' in the office of the Committee for a Jewish Army. New York, July 1942.