

## **Maoz Tzur — Chanukah's Song**

The most famous *Chanukah* song is Maoz Tzur. I personally love the song and when I hear it my heart is stirred with emotion. Here are the words in Hebrew and English

Ma'oz Tzur Yeshu'ati, lekha na'eh leshabe'ach.  
Tikon beit tefilati, v'sham toda nezabe'ach.  
Le'et takhin matbe'ach mitzar hamnabe'ach.  
Az egmor beshir mizmor chanukat hamizbe'ach.

Which is literally

My Refuge, my Rock of Salvation! 'Tis pleasant to sing Your praises.  
Let our house of prayer be restored. And there we will offer You our thanks.  
When You will have slaughtered the barking foe.  
Then we will celebrate with song and psalm the altar's dedication.

But the words that are sung in English are not these words. Instead we hear this popular non-literal translation, called *Rock of Ages*, which is based on the German version by Leopold Stein (1810–1882), and was written by Talmudic linguist Marcus Jastrow and Gustav Gottheil.

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.

So the song we attribute to Chanukah is NOT the English Translation of the Hebrew. It is nice and it moves me, but it is not what the verse says.

There is a hint to this in the song *Maoz Tzur*—*Rock of Ages*. The hymn begins with triumph, praising God as the Fortress who saves Israel. But the final line shifts our attention:

אַז אֶגְמֹר בְּשִׁיר מִזְמוֹר תְּנַכֵּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ

*Az egmor b'shir mizmor, chanukat ha-mizbeach. "Then I shall complete with a song of praise the dedication of the altar."*

The altar. Not the menorah.

Even the Torah readings during Chanukah revolve around the dedication of the Mishkan, the Temple, and its altar by Moses and the tribal leaders. Our liturgy has been quietly reminding us every year that Chanukah is, at its core, about *rededication*—not of the lampstand—but of the place of sacrifice.

How easily do we get distracted from the real emphasis of *Chanukah* — *Yah Adonai's Altar*!