

Chanukah: A Victory of Illumination

- Rabbi Shaul Kagan ZT"L

R' Kagan skillfully explains the essence of the struggle between Hellenism and Judaism. In this brilliant exposition, starting with Alexander the Great, he demonstrates the compatibility (Yafyafuso shel Yafes) and incompatibility of the two cultures, and explains why the Hellenists could not abide the Jewish soul. Excellent for a shiur, or from which to derive a number of brilliant thoughts, any of which could be inspiration for a drasha.

"CHANUKAH: A VICTORY OF ILLUMINATION"
BY RABBI SHAUL KAGAN, ZT" L

"What is Chanuka?" asks the Talmud in its introduction to a discussion of the holiday (Shabbos 21b), and then responds with a retelling of the Miracle of the Lights: "When the Maccabeans entered the Temple they found one cruse of oil, etc."

The holiday and its miracle are surely known to us. In fact, before posing the question "What is Chanuka?", the Talmud completes a discussion of some of the laws of Chanuka. Clearly, as Rashi indicates, the question refers to the significance of Chanuka, its purpose and relevance for all times: What is the significance of Chanuka?

Indeed, many miraculous events occurred during the history of our people. In fact, during the era in which the Chanuka events unfolded, a number of other miracles were recorded. Yet most miraculous events do not merit special commemorative holidays. They are consigned to the history books, where one can surely learn something from them, but they are not particularly relevant to our lives today. Chanuka is.

In truth, we commemorate two miracles on Chanuka: the victory over the Greek Empire -- the most powerful nation of its time, and the miracle of the lights. While we mention the military victory in our prayers, the mitzvah of the day focuses on the latter, with our kindling of the menorah, and it is to the symbol of the menorah that we will devote our primary attention.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To appreciate the miracles of Chanuka, one must begin with Alexander the Great of Macedonia, who ascended the throne in the year 336 B.C.E. In a short span of time, he wrested power from the Persian Empire, and conquered most of the then-known world, including the Land of Israel. The Persian Empire was essentially a political-economic one, not unlike the British Empire of modern times. Except for Haman's attempt to physically destroy the Jewish people, it had no designs to change the face of its occupied countries. By contrast, Alexander's empire was political, ideological, not unlike the Soviet sphere of influence today. Alexander's goal was no less than to unite the entire world under his rule, and to establish a universal culture and religion based on that of Ancient Greece, with allowances for only minor sub-cultures and religious sub-cults.

Alexander began the process of cultural imperialism with his conquests, and in many ways, paved the way for the subsequent ascendancy of Rome; however, Alexander died young, in 323 B.C.E., and did not live to see the fulfillment of his dream of imposing a universal world order. But he did leave an important legacy: The spread of Hellenism (Helen is the ancient name for

Greece) throughout the Mediterranean Basin. His empire broke up into separate, warring factions, each trying to out-do the other in spreading their ideals and religion. The Seleucid Kingdom, centered in Syria, was ruled by Antiochus Epiphanes, who was battling with the Ptolmaic Kingdom of Egypt over control of central Judea. The events of Chanuka unfolded primarily during the Syrian Greek conquests of Judea.

A PRIMEVAL STRUGGLE

The struggle between Greek culture and Judaism has its roots in the very creation of this world, as is alluded to in the Torah's description of the primeval darkness on the face of the abyss (Genesis 1:2). The darkness, say the Sages, refers to the Greek tyranny over Israel. And the subsequent Divine command of Yehi Ohr - "Let there be light," which dispelled the darkness, is an allusion to the victory of Chanuka. Indeed, the [Hebrew] word "yehi" is numerically equal to 25, a reference to the 25th day of [the Jewish month] Kislev, when Chanuka begins.

The "Yehi Ohr" of the Torah is speaking of the original spiritual light of Creation, since hidden until the time of the Messiah, yet symbolized by the miraculous lights of Chanuka. But the ascribing of darkness to Greece and Greek culture is surprising. After all, does not Greece represent wisdom, science, philosophy -- every form of enlightenment? It may well be evil in its excesses -- but darkness?

In the final analysis, however, Greek culture is a celebration of the material world. It focuses on external beauty and the arts, on sports and physical prowess; it is obsessed with science and the immutable laws of nature by which the universe operates. Intellectually involved with surface and function, it has beauty of form -- and it has a supportive mythology populated by humanoid gods that reflect man at his most capricious. But it lacks soul.

In short, Greek culture represents denial of the Divine spark in the guidance of human affairs -- a concealment of God's presence, blanketing His domain with a secular darkness.

In his time, Alexander did not attempt to force Greek ways upon Judea. This was due exclusively to the personality of Shimon HaTzaddik, the High Priest and leader of the Jews who met Alexander and deeply impressed him. Antiochus, for his part, was generally tolerant of the religions of his various vassal states. As often as not, he absorbed them into the dominant religion. But he made an exception with Judaism, in his attempt to totally suppress it.

Apparently, he could deal with a shallow, pagan religion, seeing little significant differences between one idol and the other; for that matter, he would have welcomed the Jewish God, as it were, to join the club, if that were possible. But Jewish moral and ethical values were inimical with Greek culture, for Torah represents an ideology that Antiochus could not live with.

The conflict actually goes much deeper. Greece has a special affinity with Judaism. The beauty of Yefet (Greece) is fulfilled, the Sages tell us, when it is found in the Tents of Shem. This affinity even has an application in halacha -- Jewish law -- in that the Torah may be written in Greek and still retain some sanctity, unlike any other language. The core of this kinship lies in Greek wisdom in apposition with the wisdom of Judaism -- Maimonides himself quotes Greek scholars quite copiously -- but this very affinity creates a greater enmity, when the point of parting is reached. For Greek wisdom, dealing with externals as it does, rejected the wisdom of Judaism, which focuses on the spiritual core of existence, linking everything to its ultimate Divine source.

God is concealed behind the laws of nature, giving man the possibility of free will, while the primeval light reveals God's presence in creation. It is here that Torah wisdom departs from the wisdom of Greece, which is content with a surface understanding, and even denies the spiritual.

The Torah's approach, then, constitutes a threat so fundamental to Hellenism that Antiochus could not ignore it.

THE WAR AGAINST THE RABBIS

This brings us to another distinctive element in the Greek oppression. The Hellenists made a particular effort to destroy the Sages, the Torah scholars who were the transmitters of the Oral Law from Sinai. The written Torah -- the Chumash -- is ambiguous and can be misconstrued sufficiently to be palatable to others. After all, many nations and religions have claimed "the Bible" as their own.

Not so the Oral Law. Given to Moses by God at Sinai, preserved and expounded by the Sages throughout the generations, the Oral Law not only contains the halachic specifics of Jewish life, without which the Written Law cannot stand, it also contains the philosophic and mystical underpinnings of the Torah, and makes it vibrant, alive. The Oral Law, the Talmud, embodies the quintessential Torah wisdom that quickens the spirit of our people and defines for it the spiritual core of reality.

The Oral Law, in short, is the soul of the Written Torah. Like the soul of a person, it is the critical life-giving element hidden within the Written Torah, which is comparable to the body. The Oral Law and the Sages who expounded it stand in clear challenge to Hellenist philosophy, and was thus seen as a direct threat to their culture. The Hellenist oppressors and their Jewish sympathizers thus promulgated harsh decrees against studying the Oral Law and persecuted its teachers.

THE SOUL OF CONTENTION

There is one more element -- in some ways the most relevant one -- in the Greek oppression. As an individual has a soul, so does a nation. This is not meant symbolically but as an objective reality. This is a special spiritual quality that serves as its source of energy, that binds the individuals into a single unit, and defines its identity.

It may be said that the collective soul of the Jewish nation is embodied in the Torah, but specifically, the soul of Israel is the unique bond, the special relationship that exists between Israel and God. In short, the Covenant. The Covenant supersedes race, accepting converts of all hues, and includes the non-observant. Jewishness, in fact, can be defined simply as the state of embracing a unique Covenant with God, which the Jew is either born into, or enters into freely. This Covenant expresses itself in a mission -- not to rule or dominate others, but to carry the Shechina, the Divine Presence, in the world and to reveal the Divine spark in nature.

This, then, is the crux of the contention between Greece and Israel. The Hellenists -- enamored with the externals of nature, seeking to deny any Divine presence, attempting to impose a general world order of their own on mankind -- were pitted politically, ideologically and metaphysically against the concept of the Jewish mission -- be it even moral or religious. They were opposed to a unique Covenant between God and Israel, and especially to the idea of a people chosen to carry the Divine message. This mission challenged all they stood for and undermined all their aspirations, whether indulgence in their hedonistic desires, or engaging in world conquest.

If one wants to separate Jews from their God, he can achieve this by destroying the Jews, as Amalek has attempted throughout history and almost succeeded under Haman: or one can take God away from the Jews, suppressing and even attempting to usurp the Covenant, in the manner of Yavan (Greece). (Interestingly, the [16th century commentator] Maharal says that prior to the advent of the Messiah, the Jews will suffer oppression from both Amalek and Yavan, facing the

threat of physical and spiritual annihilation, God forbid.) The Hellenists enacted specific decrees against the Jews, suppressing Torah scholarship -- particularly the Oral Law -- and banning Sabbath observance, circumcision and the celebration of Rosh Chodesh (establishment of the lunar calendar), by which the dates of the [Jewish] festivals are fixed. These all are either covenantal in nature, or are uniquely tied to the interpretation of the Oral Law by the Sanhedrin. The Greeks also promoted immorality and intermarriage among the Jews, aimed at violating the sanctity of Jewish life. They even forced the Jews to write on the horns of their oxen, "We have no share in the God of Israel" -- not simply "God," but the God of Israel, attacking the special covenantal relationship. When Israel ultimately prevailed over Greece, it was not the people that were saved from destruction, nor even our religious practice as such, but our very soul.

THE SPIRITUAL ANATOMY

Each of the 613 commandments (mitzvot), we are taught, corresponds to a different component of the human anatomy -- each mitzvah, as it were, sanctifying and elevating a specific element of the human makeup -- physical, emotional, and spiritual. There are two basic mitzvot of rabbinic origin -- Purim and Chanuka -- and one should logically surmise that they, too, play a role in enhancing some aspect of the Jew. One might suggest that the mitzvah of Chanuka, which concerns us here, is meant to enhance and elevate the soul itself, for Chanuka is the celebration of the Jewish soul. Chanuka is alluded to in the Torah in several places in a hidden, almost imperceptible manner, like the soul. It celebrates an event that reinforces how we define our purpose as a people, and it nurtures our individual and collective soul, even as the soul defines and nurtures the body.

Moreover, we commemorate Chanuka with the menorah that glows on Kislev's 25th day -- the Yehi of Yehi Ohr - "Let there be light" -- that primeval light whose purpose is to illuminate the Divine in nature, which is the spiritual core that sustains all of creation. As the [12th century commentator] Nachmanides explains, that original light glows in the miraculous light of Chanuka, demonstrating that nature is a tool in the hands of God, to bend and control as He wishes. To engage in this publicizing the miracle, in the propagation of the awareness of God's animating presence, is the essence of our unique mission in the world. So our soul rejoices with this mitzvah.

MENORAH, MIRACLE AND DIVINE PRESENCE

The menorah is an obvious choice for the medium for the miracle of the victory of Chanuka. Beyond the simple equation of the menorah with light, the menorah is representative of Torah, in keeping with [the Talmudic expression], "Whoever seeks wisdom should go southward" -- the menorah was positioned in the southern half of the Temple.

Moreover, the Talmud tells us that there was a constant miracle with the menorah in the Temple, because the western-most light of the menorah always burned longer than its supply of oil warranted. All seven lamps of the menorah contained equal amounts of oil, and even though the western-most lamp was lit first, all went out at the same moment. Those extra moments of fire constituted a miracle. Its purpose? The Talmud says, "That the Divine Presence resides in Israel." "What is Chanuka?" Chanuka was established to commemorate the miracle of the lights... because the miracle of the lights expresses the purpose and the essence of the victory of the Jews over the Greek empire. The mitzvah of the Chanuka lights reinforces our Covenant with God, strengthening our sense of Jewish identity, and making us all more aware of our unique mission, so that indeed, the Divine Presence will rest upon Israel.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman, in loving memory of our cousin, Rav Shaul Kagan zt"l. This "essay" was first published in the magazine of Agudath Yisrael.)