

Chanukah: The Jewish and Pagan World Views

- Nisson Shulman.

Roman culture continuation of Greek culture, so struggle between Greeks against faithful Jews is the same struggle as Rome waged against Jewish culture. The struggle continues today. It is crystallized in the debates between Tineias Rufus the Roman tyrant and Rabbi Akiva, concerning man's role in the world.

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By Nisson Shulman

I would like to suggest that the Roman, Pagan culture, was in many ways a continuation of the Greek culture, and when considering Hanukkah and the struggle between the Greeks and Hellenists on one side, and the faithful Jews on the other, we can see reflections in a later struggle between the Romans and the Jews, and in fact expressed in a famous debate in the Talmud between a Roman tyrant, Tineias Rufus and Rabbi Akiva.

Consider the three mitzvot above all others the Greeks prohibited; Shabbat, Rosh Hodesh, and Milah. The whole struggle of Chanukah was over these three mitzvot. Obviously they stood for much more than meets the eye. They represented the basic difference in philosophy and world view between the Pagan and the Jewish world.

I suggest we can see it far more clearly in the debate, centuries later, between Tineias Rufus, the Roman tyrant, and Rabbi Akiva.

That debate appears in several places in the Talmud and Midrash. It consisted of questions the Tyrant asked the Rabbi and his answers, and took place in the second century of our era.

The tyrant frequently questioned the Rabbi. In fact, the debate must have lasted a long time. But putting the questions together, they coalesce into three basic queries. And all three questions express one idea, one great difference between the pagan and the Jewish approach to man, society, and nature.

The tyrant asked, "If God wanted man circumcised, why didn't he create him so?" To which the rabbi answered, "Because God created man with a symbolic imperfection in order that man should join with the Almighty in perfecting himself. In this way man becomes a partner with God in creation".

The tyrant continued, "If God loves the poor, why doesn't He feed them?" To which the rabbi responded. "Because God wants us to join with him in perfecting society and so become a 'partner with God in creation'".

The tyrant continued, "Which are better, the works of God or the works of man?" The rabbi answered "The works of man". At this point the tyrant is backed into a corner, and must try to

defend the Almighty. "Look at the stars in heaven!" exclaimed the tyrant. The rabbi answered, "Look at the wheat; this is the work of God. Look at the bread; this is the work of man". Because real perfection is achieved when man joins his labour with God's work and in this way becomes a "partner with God in creation".

To the tyrant the status quo was perfect. There is sickness and death, there are slaves and masters; everything natural is good, the unnatural is not. To the rabbi the natural is only half of creation. The perfection of creation lies in the part man is required to complete. God challenges man to join with Him and complete His work in healing sickness and developing his own potential, in caring for society, and in developing nature's resources, provided he guards this world, tends it and preserves it, because he is to be a partner with God in the world's creation and preservation, not in its destruction....

Note that the tyrant's questions were in three areas: the human body, human society and the world of nature. In each of these areas Tanneias Rufus stated that the highest perfection is to be found in the status quo. To the Jew, the highest perfection is in the creative partnership between God who gives the material of this world and man who is commanded to perfect it.

I suggest that the beginnings of this debate are in the Hanukkah struggle between the Hellenizers and the faithful.

Just as the Romans thought the status quo was good, the Greeks thought the good lay in physical beauty. The Jew emphasized kedusha, holiness, and to the Jew true holiness is a constant state of becoming, creating sanctity, helping to perfect, to develop, to change in order to fulfil God's plan. So the issue of Brit was actually an attack against the Jewish view that we must perfect the human body and become a partner with God in creation, and Shabbat was an attack against our view that the human being joins with God in sanctifying time and making it holy, and the attack against Rosh Hodesh was actually an attack against our view of nature, where God requires man to join with him in perfecting it, so that the works of man can be even greater than the works of God, for look at the wheat and the bread...

That was the beginning of the debate and it raged for hundreds of years, and in the time of the Romans the new element was added, that if God loves the poor why doesn't He feed them, and the Jew's insistence that we must perfect society. True, LO YECHDAL EVYON MIKEREV HAARETZ, That's the status quo, but we must never make peace with it, EFES KI LO YIHIYE BECHA EVYON, as far as your own hand reaches eliminate poverty and want.

Thus the holiday of Chanukah is a celebration of the Jewish approach to man, to nature, to society, as in Roman times, And harking back to the story of Chanukah, to the very meaning and sanctity in the passage of time itself. And insofar as the modern world carries any of the Jewish values regarding these matters, they learned them from us.

Perhaps that is why Matthew Arnold once wrote, that every civilized man carries in him three quarters of the Jew and one quarter of the Greek. For from the Jew came the rules of life, [the way we approach life and time and nature], and that is three quarters of life.