

CHANUKAH - When World Views Collide

By Rabbi Simcha Barnett

LET'S GET BIBLICAL

The holiday of Chanukah actually has biblical roots though it happened much later. After the Flood, Noah left the Ark with his three sons, Shem, Cham and Yafes, and their families to repopulate the world. After an unfortunate incident which leaves Cham cursed, Shem and Yafes are given a brachah by their father Noah. Shem is the father of the Jewish People, while Yafes is the father of the Greeks. Interesting fact about the etymology of the word Yafes, is that it comes from the root word yofi- beauty, which is just so Greek!

SOURCE #1 BEREISHIS (GENESIS) 9:26-27

And he said, blessed is Hashem, the G-d of Shem. "May G-d expand Yefes, but he will dwell in the tents of Shem." Let Canaan be their slave!

ויאמר ברוך ה' אלהי שם ויהי, כנען עבד למו. יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם ויהי כנען עבד למו:

Q: From the verse, what seems to be the ideal relationship between Yefes (Greece) and Shem (Israel)? And what does the Torah mean to add by emphasizing the "tents of shem"?

SOURCE #2 COLLECTED WRITINGS OF RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH

In Bereishis (9:27), the Torah says, "The Lord has given Yefes beauty; let him reside in the Tents of Shem." In Yefes, come together reason and the desire for the spiritual ...Yefes reaches his peak in the culture of Yavan, Greece, and till today these two remain, Israel and Yavan, representing "Sinai" and humanism, respectively. Yefes beautified the world from an aesthetic point of view, while Shem enlightened the world from an ethical-moral perspective ... Yefes prepares the ground for the mission of Shem. First, let a person be imbued with the ideas of the beautiful and the good in the spirit of the Greeks; afterwards, let him proceed to be imbued with that which is still more beautiful and elevated and harmonious - the G-dly.

The Culture of Yavan (Greece) and the Culture of Israel were meant to complement one another in a joint mission. Yet we see a very different picture in the following source:

SOURCE #3 BEREISHIS RABBAH 2:4

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse, "And the Earth was desolate and void and darkness was on the face of the deep"... "And darkness" refers to the Greek Exile which darkened the eyes of the Jews through its decrees ...

ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות והארץ היתה תהו... וחושך זה גלות יון שהחשיכה עיניהם של ישראל בגזירותיהן...

Q: It's true that the Greeks promulgated decrees against the Jews. However, why is that called specifically "darkening" the eyes of Israel? Doesn't Greece represent light, reason and culture?

SOURCE #4 RAMBAN, VAYIKRA (LEVITICUS) 16:8

Scientists go in the way of the Greek [i.e. Aristotle] who denied the reality of anything that he could not experience with his senses. He and his wicked students were arrogant enough to believe that anything which they did not understand could not possibly be true. (Real)

המתחכמים בטבע הנמשכים אחרי היוני אשר הכחיש כל דבר זולתי המורגש לו, והגיס דעתו לחשוב הוא ותלמידיו הרשעים, כי כל ענין שלא השיג אליו הוא בסברתו איננו אמת.

The Greeks denied the reality of anything that was beyond human reason.

SOURCE #5 RABBI CHAIM FRIEDLANDER, SIFSEI CHAIM, VOL. II, P. 56

Greek wisdom is the wisdom of the human intellect, dealing much with the sciences; they explored the laws of nature and became accomplished in this field in order to rule over nature... One who is master over nature becomes master over the world and its inhabitants...

Although it is permissible for man to utilize nature for his needs, it becomes forbidden when he comes to feel that he can rely on his understanding and prowess alone without needing the kindness of G-d, leading him to disconnect from G-d and forget Him.

חכמת יוון היא חכמת השכל האנושי, שעסקה הרבה במדעי הטבע, הם חקרו את חוקי הטבע והחכימו בזה, כדי להשתלט על הטבע, ומי שנעשה בעל הבית על הטבע הוא אדון על עולם ומלואו.

אכן מותר לאדם לנצל את הטבע ולהשתמש בו לצרכיו, אך הדבר פסול ואסור כאשר מגיע להרגשה שיכול לסמוך על שכלו, ומסתדר בכל דבר לבד, ואיננו זקוק לחסדי הבורא, ומתנתק ממנו ושוכח אותו ח"ו.

Q: What is the greatest problem with a philosophy that is bounded by the limitations of human reason?

A.It precludes a connection to G-d, who is above rationality.

B.It actually limits human greatness in a counterintuitive way. See next source:

SOURCE #6 RABBI YITZCHAK BERKOVITS, ROSH HAYESHIVA AISH HATORAH

The Greeks were “humanists.” Humanism places man at the center of the universe. Were they so far off? Judaism also believes that the world is created for man. There are those who claim that the failing of Greece is that they made too much of the human being. No, that’s not our claim. Greece made too little of the human being! They limited the human being’s capabilities and accomplishments to the realm of what man can comprehend. Judaism does not. We maintain that we can accomplish more than we understand – we can reach worlds that we know nothing about. What is Greek wisdom? Worship of the human mind, human body, aesthetic sense, and values that speak to the human being.

What is the aspect that G-d gave the human being that sets him apart? Kedushah – holiness – there is nothing more powerful, nothing more beautiful, nothing deeper. Through kedushah we affect worlds, transcending physical existence by way of our own actions and intentions. The universe is a lot bigger than what Greece thought it was.

Q: Consider for a minute what “holiness” adds to the human experience?

Share your thoughts with your partner.

THE GREEK WAR AGAINST THE JEWS: WHAT DID THEY ATTACK?

SOURCE #7 OTZAR HAMIDRASHIM, CHANUKAH, P. 189 –

THE GREEKS DECREED AGAINST MITZVOT THAT SYMBOLIZE THE JEWISH COVENANT WITH G-D

At that time the Greeks arose over the Jewish people and nullified the covenant which the Jews made with their G-d: Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh [the Jewish calendar system] and Bris Milah.

עתה באו ונעלה עליהם ונבטל מהם את הברית אשר כרת להם אלהיהם שבת ראש חדש ומילה.

Both the Mitzvos of Shabbos and Circumcision are central to Judaism, and among other ideas they express the partnership that we have with G-d in perfecting His world. Consider the following source regarding Bris Mila:

SOURCE #8 MIDRASH TANCHUMA, TAZRIA 5

The wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "Whose actions are more beautiful, those of God or of man?" He replied, "Those of man are more beautiful." Turnus Rufus said, "Can man create something similar to the heavens and the earth?" Rabbi Akiva responded, "Do not ask me about something which is beyond the capability of man ... rather ask me something which is within the capability of man."

He asked, "Why do you circumcise yourselves?" Rabbi Akiva said, "I knew that it was this topic that you meant earlier and therefore stated that the actions of man are more beautiful than those of God." Rabbi Akiva brought him raw wheat and some cakes. He said, "This [wheat] is the work of God and these [cakes] are the work of man. Aren't the cakes better than the wheat?"

מעשה ששאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים, של הקב"ה או של בשר ודם. א"ל של בשר ודם נאים א"ל טורנוסרופוס הרי השמים והארץ יכול אדם לעשות כיוצא בהם א"ל ר"ע לא תאמר לי בדבר שהוא למעלה מן הבריות שאין שולטין עליו אלא אמור דברים שהם מצויין בבני אדם.

א"ל למה אתם מולין? א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרתי לך שמעשה בני אדם נאים משל הקב"ה. הביא לו ר"ע שבליים וגלוסקאות. א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם. א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים.

Q: It's understandable why the Greeks outlawed the key mitzvos of Shabbos and Bris Mila in their war against us, but why did they attack Rosh Chodesh? Most of us wouldn't have put that on our top 10 list of important Jewish observances.

SOURCE #9 RABBI GEDALIAH SCHORR, OHR GEDALIYAHU, P. 78

The Greeks wanted to nullify Rosh Chodesh, Shabbat, and circumcision. We need to understand why the Greeks were opposed to the mitzvah of sanctifying the new month, as this only includes arranging the order of the months. The explanation is that the Greeks wanted to destroy the power of renewal inherent within the Jew and the ability to release himself from habit and rote. This power of renewal is related to Rosh Chodesh and to sanctifying the new moon, as is hinted in the words we say when we sanctify the new month: "That in the future they (the Jewish people) will be renewed like her (the new moon)." On Rosh Chodesh a person is given the power to renew himself like the moon that is renewed each month. We see there is a power of renewal in the world.

היונים רצו לבטל חודש שבת ומילה, וצריכין להבין למה התנגדו היונים למצות קידוש החודש, שיש בה רק ענין של סידור סדר החדשים, אלא כבר ביארנו שהיונים רצו לבטל הכח ביד היהודי לחדש את עצמו, ולצאת מתוך ההרגל וההתישנות, והכח הזה של חידוש שייך לר"ח ולקידוש הלבנה וכמרומוז במה שאומרים בנוסח של קידוש לבנה, "שעתידין להתחדש כמותה", כי בראש חודש ניתן הכח באדם לחדש את עצמו, דוגמת הלבנה שנתחדש בכל ר"ח, כי אם אנו רואים שהלבנה מתחדשת, רואים אנו שיש השפעה של התחדשות אז להעולם

Renewal is certainly a major theme in Judaism and on a personal level we need to know we can always reinvent ourselves, bringing light out of our personal struggles (darkness), much like the Chanukah candles, burning bright at the darkest time of the year.

SOURCE 10: RABBI SIMCHA BARNETT - CHANUKAH CLASS

Perhaps there is a deeper symbolism in the sanctification of the new moon that captures the essence of the struggle between Greece and Israel that continues until this very day. The moon is often likened to Israel while the sun is compared to G-d. Though the moon appears to have its own light, it's merely reflecting the light of the sun. So too, the Jewish Nation is tasked with bringing the light of G-d into this world. He gives us brilliance, the power of reason and creativity, to partner with Him in illuminating the world. If, however, we use this creativity to produce "our own light", untethered from its divine source, we take the world away from its Creator. (like the Greeks) Though we may appear to dazzle humanity with our brilliance, we are inexorably leading the world back to the dark ages. Yafes must "dwell in the tents of shem"- use her incredible gifts to enhance the holy mission of the Jewish People to introduce the world to its Creator.

LIGHTING CANDLES AS A RESPONSE TO THIS STRUGGLE BETWEEN GREECE AND ISRAEL?

Q: Lighting our little menorah's is certainly a quaint custom that we have been practicing for centuries, but is it really dealing with the onslaught of Greek culture and philosophy that to this day is taking Jews away from our tradition? What are your thoughts?

SOURCE #11 RABBI AHARON KOTLER, MISHNAS RABBI AHARON, VOL. III, P. 68

...נס חנוכה בא להורות לכל ישראל לדורות, לפני הגלות הארוך, ... שהמנורה והנרות רומזים לתורה...
(משלי ו:כג) "ותורה אור"...

*The miracle of Chanukah came to instruct the Jews for all generations before the start of the long exile ... for **the Menorah and the candles symbolize Torah, as it says, "... and Torah is light."** (spirituality)*

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

We do not light the menorah for the physical light that it produces. In fact, we are prohibited from using its lights for personal use. Our candles make a statement that our man-made lights are really the lights of miracle, derived from a divine source. The open miracle of the oil burning for 8 days proved this to all. However, the deeper hidden miracle within is the very fact that light(something spiritual) comes out of oil/wax (something physical). And not only that, but no matter how you hold the candle (the physical) the light rises above it- since its source is the One Above.

Happy Chanukah!