

Geulas Yisrael #127

Cultural Insularity

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Every miracle in Jewish history creates a template for the future. No major event is limited to its own historical context. *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים* means that stories in Bereishit, as well as major Jewish milestones, set the molds for our future. In particular, the epic miracles of Purim and Chanukah carved out patterns for Jewish survival throughout exile. While the three major chagim of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot provided blueprints for "redeemed" Jewish history the two Rabbinic yomim tovim of Chanukah and Purim set the tone for Jewish survival in exile.

The enduring message of Purim was clear. Even though we had been evicted from Israel and appeared to be cast aside by Hashem, our covenant remained firm. As Hashem's children, we would not be annihilated. Purim announced to all future generations that, as bleak as our condition appeared to be and as distant as we were from our homeland, we were still privileged to Hashem's love and to His focused hashgacha. We were not, as Haman wagered, just an ordinary scattered nation, but remained *בנים אתם לה' אלוקיכם*.

The lasting messages of Chanukah are less obvious. The entire episode of Chanukah feels extremely "temporary": though we bravely fended off Greek persecution and restored Jewish sovereignty it was very short-lived. Two hundred years later the Romans marched into Yerushalayim, crushed our state and set fire to our Mikdash. What are the long-term messages of Chanukah?

In part, Chanukah set in motion the single greatest intellectual supernova in the history of Mankind. The immediate aftermath of Chanukah launched Torah sheba'al peh, an avenue of torah which preserved collective Jewish identity throughout exile. It is hard to imagine Jewish survival over the past 2000 years without our secret common language called torah sheba'al peh.

Additionally, Chanukah marked the first time that a group of people voluntarily sacrificed their lives on behalf of Hashem's presence in our world. Without our

willingness to defend our belief with our lives we would have collapsed under the weight of the religious persecution of exile.

Cultural insularity

Additionally, Chanukah introduced a communal "orientation" crucial for continued survival in Exile. Chanukah lessoned us about the value of cultural insularity.

Though the Torah repeatedly warns against excessive assimilation into the surrounding cultures, these admonitions are predominantly concerned with the theological danger of immersing in pagan cultures. Surrounded by idol worshippers, we could easily sink into betrayal of Hashem and loss of faith. Sadly, we didn't heed the Torah's caution, consistently betraying Hashem for foreign kings and pagan gods, thereby shipwrecking the first Beit HaMikdash.

Absent the threat of defection to paganism, though, cultural assimilation *per se* was never a primary concern. When we lived amongst backward and savage cultures there was little reason to worry that Jews would abandon a life of dignity, nobility and moral literacy for a violent life of savagery and voodoo. The Torah's sole concern was religious erosion caused by assimilating too intimately with the surrounding pagan cultures.

Daniel's Stand

After the destruction of the first Mikdash we faced our first purely cultural challenge. Attempting to acculturate the captured Jews to Babylonian society, Nevuchadnezar subjected a cadre of Jewish youth to cultural retraining. Placing them in his palace and schooling them in the ways of Babylonia, he hoped to form a young leadership unit to help segue the Jewish immigrants into local Babylonian culture.

Daniel Hanavi grasped the danger. If Jewish cultural identity recedes Jewish religion soon vanishes. Defying this plan, Daniel refused his palace food instead, smuggling in lentils and beans for nutrition. His act of resistance was, arguably, the first recorded instance of Jewish cultural insularity.

The Ugly Side of Persia

Unfortunately, not all Jews stood the test. A few decades later many were invited to Achashverosh's decadent party, a 180-day celebration of hedonism and ostentation. The gemara in Megillah indicts the partygoers as the reason for Haman's genocidal threat. After Haman was defeated, we quickly realized that the Persian culture of hedonism and paid-for-genocide was not worth acculturating to. We had uncovered the ugly side of Persian culture.

Hellenism

About two hundred years later a very different cultural challenge emerged. The rise of the Greek empire marked the first time that Judaism was challenged by a competing "civilization". In the past, we had encountered barbaric cultures of cannibals and blood drinkers who worshipped molten images. These crude cultures provided minimal challenge to our Torah-inspired life of meaning, human dignity, and social welfare.

By contrast, Greek society radically improved our world, creating the first society of civility and democracy. This was the first time that Judaism faced off against a different "civilization", one which offered an alternate "dignified" human experience.

We now faced the challenge of responding to an enlightened and educated culture. Hellenism was an intellectual, rather than religious movement. With enough creativity many of its features were reconcilable with halachik observance. The Greeks banned milah, Shabbat observance, and Rosh Chodesh but did not seek to completely eradicate our religion. We now encountered a purely cultural challenge.

The heroic stand taken by the Chashmonaim shaped Jewish history. Chanukah taught us that even when core religious values aren't directly threatened, full cultural adaptation must be resisted. For our people to survive throughout the dark night of exile it was not sufficient to maintain different dietary laws and different marital rules. To preserve Jewish identity and Jewish spirit our cultural norms must also be different. Chanukah taught us the value of cultural insularity.

Throughout history, each community calibrated cultural insularity differently. Some adopted more of the surrounding culture while some staunchly banned any cultural influences. Either way, we always recognized the necessity to carve out distinct cultural spaces and uniquely Jewish lifestyle habits to prevent the loss of Jewish identity.

Leaving the Ghetto

Throughout much of our history insulation was provided, involuntarily. The ghetto experience assured a natural barrier between Jewish and Gentile culture, regulating where we could live and which educations and professions we could pursue, thereby limiting our social interactions. In the 19th century everything changed. Gentile society threw its doors open to Jews, offering them full membership as citizens of the newly formed states. In most cases freedom of religion accompanied this invitation. Many found this open cultural invitation too enticing to resist.

Not only did the broader society beckon us but society itself was evolving. The 19th century witnessed dynamic political changes, rapid industrialization, as well as major advances in psychology, philosophy, and the arts. Jews weren't just eager to break down centuries-old cultural barriers but were euphoric at the prospects of becoming architects of the new world. Western European Jews spearheaded scientific discoveries, economic growth, the evolution of art and culture and the emergence of modern psychology. Further east, Russian Jews almost single-handedly engineered the new Communist state. In the USA Jews eagerly took advantage of open horizons, entering the newly emergent fields of entertainment, industry, and finance. Cultural insularity was replaced by full immersion. As the doors swung open the allure of modern society tantalized the Jewish imagination.

Sadly, millions of Jews lost their religion. Among them, many even abandoned their Jewish identity. They failed to heed the lessons of Chanukah.

Tragically, the 20th century dealt exposed the ugly side of the cultures we eagerly embraced. WWII exposed the underbelly of a supposedly enlightened cosmopolitan Europe. Stalin's brutal purges and executions displayed the moral rot of the Communist state which Jews eagerly built.

We may be standing at a similar historical juncture. The current war is showcasing the moral decay of the progressive liberal culture which Jews across the world devotedly constructed. Will the horrors of Oct 7. and the violent backlash against our moral war, reaffirm the lessons of Chanukah. Will we be more adept at cultural insularity. Will we better learn to borrow the knowledge, progress, and values which modernity offers without abdicating Jewish culture and identity?

This is our Chanukah moment. Not just on the military arena, but on the cultural battlefield as well.