



**RABBI YAACOV**

**HABER**

Rav Kehillat Shivtei Yeshurun,  
Ramat Beit Shemesh

## What Side Are We On?

The Chanukah story took place 2190 years ago in the year 176 BCE. At that time the Jews lived in Israel in relative peace. Yet, while we were living a traditional Jewish lifestyle in Jerusalem a world revolution was going on. The Syrian-Greeks who were the strongest nation in the known world had set out on a mission to culture the world. Their preferred method was by enlightenment and education; not by force. They traveled wherever they could, from Athens across the Mediterranean deep into North Africa to spread the virtues and truth they were so excited about.

What were these truths?

1. Structure for Government, the Greeks developed the parliamentary system and a system of enforcement which would remove the archaic, chaotic and sometimes barbaric systems which ran the world.
2. Architecture, Gothic architecture influences the environment of the world until today.
3. Geometry, algebra, calculus, and

physics have advanced and continue to advance the development of the sciences and are on the curriculum of almost every advanced institute of learning (including some of the holiest Yeshivot.)

4. Sport, of course the Greeks founded the Olympics, the forerunner to the World Series, Cup Day, the Grand Finals and almost every physical competition that entertains us today.
5. Plato and Aristotle. Much of Maimonides great work in the “Guide for the Perplexed?” is based on Aristotelian thought.

The list goes on and on with astronomy, medicine and so much more. The Greeks traveled from society to society to teach that which they have discovered in order to make the world a better place to live in.

Along the way they came to the Land of Israel. They met an ancient people and they began to teach of a new world order. They conveyed to the Jews that civilization was undergoing a great advancement and that the entire civilized world was participating. There was no longer any need to ponder ancient texts and teachings to find truth; current science encompassed all and answered every pertinent question.

They challenged the Jews to come out of the dark ages.

The Greeks were exceedingly effective and influential in Israel. According to historical record one third of all Jews became Misyavnim or Hellenists who decided that they must get current and state-of-the-art in order to participate and take their part in the cultural advancement of civilization. So the Jews adopted Greek culture, imitated Greek customs, and abandoned their Jewish Heritage. Some of them even went so far as to attempt to remove the marks of their circumcision.

At that time the office of High Priest was the most powerful position in Judea at that time. When Antiochus IV came to power in 175 B.C.E., the reigning High Priest Onias III, offered the king the opportunity to establish within Jerusalem a city-state called Antiochia. The High Priest erected a gymnasium in Jerusalem, and other Greek institutions. His agenda, to strengthen Hellenistic Culture, led to a spiraling of traditional Jewish life and religious worship.

Three years later, another Jewish leader of the Hellenists, offered Antiochus even greater tribute and even more Hellenizing measures. In order to keep his promises to King Antiochus, he plundered the Holy Jewish Temple of its gold vessels and gave them to the Greeks.

Against the tide of the times rose the Maccabees; a group of Priests who decided to wage war in order to preserve the integrity and history of the Jews against Greek influence. They drew a line in the sand and as Moses did before them at the

episode of the Golden Calf, the Maccabees challenged the population to take a position – “Mi LeHashem Aloy” Are you on the side of G-d or not? If you are we must fight against the Greeks and even more so against our brothers who have embraced their campaign.

Antiochus IV brutally suppressed this rebellion, and began an official persecution of the Jewish religion in Judea, outlawing the Sabbath, Torah studies, and circumcision. He went so far as to institute pagan idolatry in the Holy Temple. All this he did with the advice and connivance of his supporters, the Jewish Hellenists.

What would have been our position in this battle? What side are we on?

It seems we have the greatest respect for the Greek contribution. As Jews we don't abhor mathematics or decline to admire a beautifully designed building: the science of military strategy was formalized by the Greeks and is used today in the modern State of Israel to ward off our enemies. The Sanhedrin, according to many commentaries is a Greek word and in many ways a Greek concept.

There is a mitzvah for each one of us to write a Torah scroll.

The Mishnah teaches us that when writing a Sefer Torah one must use only the Hebrew fonts. Russian or Arabic letters, even if they produce a phonetically correct result are not permissible. The only exception to the rule is Greek letters. It is permissible to write a Torah in Greek letters and use it as a Torah in the Synagogue! Could

anyone imagine writing a Torah in the alphabet of the enemy!?

Let us trace the history of civilization. In the 600th year of Noah's life, 1656 years after creating Adam, God sent a great flood that destroyed all of the world's population. Immediately following the devastating flood, Noah and his three sons emerged from their ark. The entire future population of the world stems from those that emerged from that ark. Noah called together his three sons Shem, Cham and Yefet and he blessed them.

The words Noah uttered to his sons were to shape the entire future of the world. To Yefet he said, "May G-d give you beauty?". To Cham he said (because he had sinned immediately upon emerging from the ark) "You shall be slaves and slaves of slaves?". To Shem he said you shall be scholars and priests. From Cham came the African nations, from Yefet came the Greeks (this thread can be followed explicitly in the Torah) and from Shem came our father Abraham.

The Talmud comments on the interdependence of the three brothers based on the nuance of the verses. "When is Yefet beautiful??" explain the Rabbis, "When their beauty serves as a housing for the holiness of Shem.?"

From this Talmudic analysis we can arrive at an entirely new perspective on the interrelationship between Shem and Yefet or more importantly between the Jews and the Greeks.

Jews do not abhor Greeks or their wisdom

any more than the soul abhors the body; we appreciate their aesthetics, make use of their wisdom and enjoy their physical competitions. The Greeks are the masters of beauty, aesthetics and adornment. The Jews are the masters of spirituality and substance.

The Synagogue building may be designed with Greek architecture but inside it must contain the Torah and its teachings. Even the very letters that the Torah is written can be considered adornment hence be written in Greek but the substance or the message must be Jewish. The writing of the Torah represents the physical aspect of the Torah, manifesting the Torah into this world. The message comes from the world of G-d. Outside can be Yefet but inside must be Shem.

Let's take a closer look at the Chanukah struggle. The Jews really had no problem with the Greeks being Greeks. They didn't even have a problem with the Greeks decorating the Jews. This was in fact their function and unique blessing; to beautify the world. It was for this purpose that they survived the flood.

The problem that the Maccabees had was with Jews becoming Greeks! The Greeks had a great mission but Jews had an even greater one. But because of the intangible nature of the Jewish contribution it was nowhere near as glamorous as the Greek world of philosophy, healing the sick, space programs. So Jews began to cross over. Assimilation takes place when the border begins to blur.

What is the Jewish contribution, not only

for the Maccabees but for us?

Mark Twain in a famous letter to an American Jewish lawyer asked his correspondent whether he had ever heard of the plan of a journalist named Herzl. "He wishes to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine with a government of their own? Twain went on to write that he has no personal objection to the idea but he doubts that the world would ever allow "that concentration of the cunningest brains? he wondered what would happen if "that race finds out its strength. If the horse knew theirs, we should not ride any more.?" (Mark Twain, Concerning the Jews)

Twain didn't know our strength either – and we Jews don't know our strength. Our strength does not lie in our cunning brains but rather in our ability to be a light onto the nations. Brains are only part of the package.

We have given the world the Ten Commandments; we have taught the world Monotheism; the Greek gods have become comic book characters while all the major religions of the world have accepted the God of Abraham. Even the cultures that have persecuted us have in time adapted our thinking. The light we shed has affected the most profound darkness. It is when the light needs packaging that we look to the Greeks.

As we light the Chanukah Menorah we remember the struggle of the Maccabees to remind their fellow Jews of their unique mandate in this world. It is for us to shed a radiant light wherever we are. If we can do this, then our purpose will be served. ■

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