



GEULAS YISRAEL

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The Two Pistons of Torah

Despite granting a miraculous military victory and restoring our lost sovereignty, Chanukah had absolutely no long-lasting political impact. The roughly two hundred-year period between the Chanukah miracle and the destruction of the second Mikdash was one of the most pathetic periods in Jewish history. We faced constant military threats, often even paying financial tribute to foreign governments. After two hundred years marred by civil strife and social disunity, the Romans marched into Jerusalem, burnt it to the ground and renamed our city of Yerushalayim “Aelia Capitolina”. The miracle of Chanukah had no long-lasting political impact, and was merely a blip on the radar of history. Chanukah was quickly erased from the annals of political history.

Though Chanukah provided no permanent political legacy, it did deliver an outstanding intellectual legacy. In the aftermath of the miracles, an enormous intellectual supernova erupted, forever changing the course of Torah. For the next 500 years, remarkable Talmudic scholars achieved a mastery of Torah which hasn't

ever been duplicated. Two centuries earlier prophecy had halted, yet these Torah scholars achieved a surpassing command of Torah which bordered upon para-prophetic knowledge. Due to their extraordinary mastery of Torah, their authority forms the foundation of our masorah. The oral traditions of Torah sheba'al peh had always existed, but our Tana'im and Amora'im distilled them, codified them and ultimately committed them to writing, assuring their perpetual study.

This intellectual outburst would not have occurred without the moral energy and national pride of Chanukah. Whenever Jews experience boosted national identity, one of the ways we express it is through rededication to Torah study. Chanukah provided the spiritual energy which galvanized this Torah surge.

Jewish Pride and Matan Torah

National pride as a catalyst for Torah excellence was also the model for our first advance in Torah. Our miraculous departure from Egypt wasn't just designed to achieve political freedom. As we departed a former prison, we were showered with gifts from our former taskmasters. Additionally, Moshe became a national celebrity, roundly heralded by the Egyptian population. From a purely practical standpoint, our newfound social status wasn't necessary for liberation. It was necessary, however, to rehabilitate our broken spirit

and reconstitute social hierarchies. This reordering of our social status from slave to celebrity empowered us with the national pride necessary to accept Torah at Sinai.

In seven magical weeks we morphed from a pitiable and demoralized collection of slaves into an aristocratic **ממלכת כהנים** or a kingdom of priests, capable of grasping the sophisticated will of an unseen G-d. Marching triumphantly from Egypt, passing through a dried-out ocean bed, and receiving our daily bread from heaven, all restored our national pride, preparing us for that great moment at Sinai. Yetziat mitzrayim and Matan Torah encapsulated the model of Torah growth whereby amplified Jewish pride serves as the basis for Torah excellence.

The Golden Era of Spain

This model resurfaced thousands of years later, in Spain. Beginning as early as the 8th century, Jews living in the Spanish peninsula enjoyed a golden age of prosperity and security. In the North, Jews living in Christian Spain enjoyed general prosperity as late as the 14th century, when antisemitism began to emerge. This golden era produced some of the most important Torah scholarship of the entire medieval period, highlighted by the Torah of the Rambam

and the Ramban. Once again Jewish pride and national esteem manifested in a grand expansion of Torah study and scholarship.

Defiant Torah Study

There is a second and very different model to the history of Torah study. Sometimes Torah grows in defiance of a dark world which appears to be crashing down around us. Torah is eternal and its study offers us an autonomous and timeless world, unaffected by our surrounding reality. It offers a virtual reality, G-d given and perfect.

During the period that Jews in Spain enjoyed prosperity, German and French Jews faced the full brunt of antisemitic violence. With the launch of the first Crusades in 1096, Jews in these areas faced torture, forced conversion, and bloody massacre. Yet, stunningly, during this intolerable suffering, the Tosafists revolutionized Torah by introducing new methodologies to its study. They lived under depressing conditions and were constantly facing the wrath of the Crusaders and of violent and hateful monarchs. Yet their Torah scholarship flourished *despite* the crushing conditions under which they lived.

This advance of Torah study was very different from the post-Chanukah Torah expansion which was fueled by national



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pride and restored Jewish sovereignty. This growth of Torah was fueled by self-sacrifice and the belief of the eternity of Torah. It was a Torah in *protest*, not a Torah driven by national *pride*.

The Yeshiva World

A modern additional example of Torah flourishing under siege is the phenomenal growth of Torah in White Russia and Poland during the latter half of the 19th century and early part of the twentieth century. Jews lived under deplorable financial conditions, faced terrible pogroms, and lived under political instability which always affected the Jews far worse than any other nation. Yet, even under these harsh conditions the Yeshiva movement galvanized remarkable Torah excellence which has so dramatically shaped our modern Torah environment. The outside world was difficult to live in, but Torah scholars inhabited a more perfect and insulated world of the infinite will of Hashem. The world was dark, but Torah is always radiant.

Evidently, there are two historical models for Torah excellence. The Chanukah model catalyzes Torah growth in the wake of national triumph and in the aftermath of Jewish prosperity. The alternate model witnesses Torah expansion in defiance of a sunken Jewish experience. It is a Torah of *protest*, against a world which doesn't celebrate Jewish identity. Sometimes Torah flourishes *because* of Jewish history and



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sometimes it grows *despite* Jewish history, and despite the beleaguered state of our people.

The Modern Expansion of Torah

Modern levels of Torah study have far exceeded levels of any period since the first Beit Hamikdash. Interestingly *each* of these two historical Torah models is driving this phenomenal growth.

Many view the expansion of Torah based upon the Chanukah model. We have returned to our Homeland, rebuilt our historical narrative, and have restored national pride. Our קוממיות surfaces in many different aspects of renewed Jewish life and culture, but it is undoubtedly fueling the modern growth of Torah excellence. At a material level the State of Israel finances Torah study, but it also provides a Jewish cultural backdrop which facilitates an intense and an immersive experience of Torah study. Additionally, Jewish pride isn't limited to the boundaries of Israel, but is felt across the globe. The phenomenal growth of worldwide Torah can be attributed to the State of Israel, its financial support and the restored Jewish pride it has created. We are living through the Chanukah model of Torah. Many believe there would not be a Lakewood without the State of Israel.

Others view the growth of Torah study as unrelated to the State of Israel. If anything, modern Torah growth is in defiance of the recent tragic Jewish history, rather than being driven by history. The Holocaust ravaged a rich and deep Torah world, and Charedi culture seeks to preserve that world and its Torah accomplishments. If anything, the resurgence of Torah study after the Holocaust indicates how immune Torah is to the violence of history. The modern expansion of Torah has little to do with the State of Israel and more to do with a pre-war European Torah experience which defied the Holocaust and outlasted efforts to crush it. It is a Torah being driven by protest to history not by Jewish triumph in history.

Which is true? Of course, as this is Torah which exists beyond one dimensional human experience, both of these models are in play. Torah soars above history but is also driven by Jewish history. Without the State of Israel, Torah would not be spreading. Without valiant efforts to preserve a lost pre-war world of Torah study, it would not have expanded.

At the end of history both models of Torah excellence are converging. Convergence is one of the signs of redemption. ■



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