



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN

RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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Jews Revolting Against Themselves

Throughout history, our people have confronted many enemies who despised us. Some persecuted us, others legislated against our faith, and still others tried to force conversion. *B'chol dor va'dor omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu* — in every age someone has risen to threaten our existence.

Chanukah was no different. The Greek empire had reached unprecedented power, projecting military might and cultural influence throughout the Mediterranean world. No nation dared challenge them. Yet even after they desecrated the Mikdash and subdued Israel, we rose in revolt and, for a time, reclaimed Jewish sovereignty.

The many fell before the few. Wave after wave of Greek armies were turned back by a Maccabean force numbering no more than ten thousand. Though the Maccabees could

not, in the long run, permanently withstand the Greek legions, the miracle of Chanukah restored Jewish self-rule and rekindled our national spirit. In that regard, Chanukah resembled other moments of national resurgence.

THE HELLENIST BREACH

Yet something far deeper had unfolded beneath the surface. What made Chanukah distinct was that it confronted us not only with an external empire but with an internal rupture. Even before the Greeks desecrated the Mikdash or imposed their decrees, a powerful Hellenist faction within our own people sought to remake Judea as a fully Greek polity — and secured the support of the Seleucid monarch to advance their vision.

How did this internal fracture take shape? In the years leading up to the revolt, notorious Hellenist activists agitated against our people. Some bribed Antiochus for political office, while others secured Greek support by pledging to refashion Jerusalem as a Greek city, complete with a gymnasium and the institutions that accompanied it. Attendance at Greek athletic events — themselves intertwined with pagan worship — became a marker of loyalty to the new agenda. Other figures promoted reforms designed to erode traditional observance. Many Jews, whether under pressure or by choice,



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submitted to the painful act of reversing their circumcision long before circumcision was officially banned by the Greeks.

Matters reached a breaking point when these corrupt Hellenists — the *bnei bliya'al* described in Sefer HaMaccabim — forced their way into the Mikdash and installed a pagan idol. They defiled the *klei sharet* and pressed them into the service of foreign rites, turning the holiest place on earth into a stage for pagan worship. This horrific crime occurred about three years before the rededication of the Mikdash on Chanukah.

THE ME'ILAH OF THE HELLENISTS

A painful Gemara in Avodah Zarah (52b) highlights their crime. The Gemara wonders how the stones of the mizbei'ach could have lost their sanctity. Normally, *me'ilah* — the misuse of consecrated property — removes *kedushah*. Once someone unlawfully derives benefit from *hekdes*, the object's sanctity departs. But halachah states that Gentiles cannot commit *me'ilah*. Their misuse of sacred items does not dissolve the holiness embedded within them.

If so, how did the stones of the mizbei'ach lose their *kedushah*? The Ba'al HaMa'or (Rav Zerachya HaLevi, a twelfth-century commentator on the Ri"ף) explains that it was not the Gentiles who stripped the mizbei'ach of its sanctity, but the Jewish Hellenists themselves. They erected the idol and employed the mizbei'ach-stones for pagan rites. As Jews, their profanation constituted an act of *me'ilah*, and through their hands the stones were rendered desecrated.

The broader tragedy of Chanukah was not only that foreigners violated the Mikdash, but that Jews enabled and enacted its defilement. It was the Hellenized Jews who first set the

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This is what made Chanukah so different from other struggles. We were threatened not only by a foreign empire but by members of our own nation who turned against their people and against the sanctity of the Mikdash. For the most part, Greek rulers respected the Jews and safeguarded our religious practice. It was the agenda of the Hellenist faction that manipulated the Greek authorities and steered them toward confrontation. Only after the Maccabees rose in revolt did the Seleucid regime respond with overwhelming force. Though Antiochus eventually dispatched wave after wave of soldiers, it was Jews who first invited the Greeks into this conflict and granted them their opening.

THE CULTURAL SPELL

Why, then, did Hellenism wield such power

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over their imagination?

Hellenism offered a rare fusion: a rigorous intellectual framework paired with a vibrant and expressive cultural life. Greek thought provided tools for mapping the cosmos through logic, mathematics, and disciplined inquiry; its thinkers pursued order in everything from ethics to astronomy. Yet this seriousness of mind was matched by an emotional and aesthetic world that was equally compelling. Its sculpture idealized the human form, and its theater explored the tensions of fate and moral choice.

For many across the Mediterranean, this combination — intellectual structure alongside artistic vitality — created a way of life that felt expansive, ordered, and deeply civilized. In modern language, we might say that Hellenism became the cultural narrative of its age, shaping how people imagined their place in the world.

Many Jews were drawn to this worldview. Much of Hellenistic culture did not initially seem to directly conflict with Jewish religious life. The progress of Greece could even be viewed through the lens of Noach's blessing — that Yefet would develop aesthetic gifts that could find a natural place “in the tents of Shem.” Under that reading, the intellectual

and artistic strengths of the Greek world could enrich Jewish life rather than undermine it.

ENCOUNTER OR INSULARITY

Throughout history, we have wrestled with the question of cultural and ideological openness. Should we remain insulated, drawing all meaningful wisdom solely from Torah? Or can we enrich our religious lives by engaging with broader cultural achievements that do not compromise our identity?

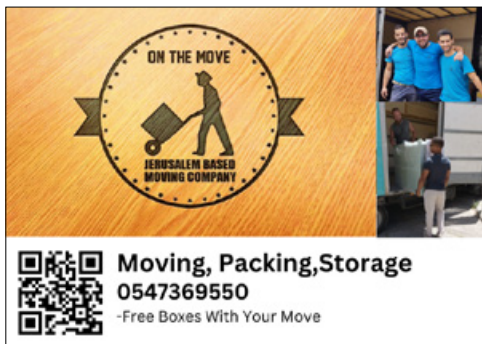
The encounter with Greece brought this debate into sharp focus. For the first time, the Jewish world confronted a sophisticated civilization whose accomplishments shaped law, ethics, and civic life. Some Jews resisted any Greek influence, fearing that even measured exposure would erode our distinctiveness. Others believed that selected elements of Greek achievement could be channeled through the tents of Shem.

UNIVERSALISM DEVOURS PARTICULARISM

However, the hope of enriching Judaism through non-Jewish influence carries real danger. Sometimes the outside culture begins to feel more compelling than our own covenantal experience. A desire for universal belonging can overshadow the pride we are meant to feel toward our particular destiny as *am ha-nivchar*.

History shows that when people bring external ideas into their Jewish lives without grounding, they can abandon Jewish commitments altogether. And when Jewish particularism seems to clash with universalist ideals, they may turn against their own heritage in an effort to fashion a more “universal” identity.

This is precisely what unfolded in the years leading up to Chanukah. What began



as curiosity became admiration; admiration became attachment; attachment became preference. Over time, Hellenism felt more compelling than Judaism itself.

As that attraction deepened, the boundaries that marked Jewish identity began to feel restrictive. In their eagerness to align with Greek ideals, some Jews attempted to dissolve those boundaries altogether. And once cultural loyalties eclipsed covenantal commitments, they turned against the Mikdash and actively participated in its desecration.

A band of Hellenist opportunists — driven by financial ambition, political aspiration, or ideological passion — fomented against their own people. They became the true villains of Chanukah, a portrait of what occurs when universalist desires overshadow the Brit Avot.

HELLENISM IN NEW CLOTHING

Strikingly, the same dynamic has resurfaced. Over the past two centuries Jews were welcomed into broader society and invited to help shape the emerging modern world. Some resisted these overtures, while others opened themselves to selected influences. Neither path is inherently more or less religious, so long as Jewish identity and halachic integrity remain rooted.

However, over time, a tilt toward a more open stance can slide into a universalist ideology that comes at the expense of internal national commitments. To those who adopt this worldview, the particularism of Jewish life — its covenantal identity, its history, its collective mission — can begin to feel overly tribal or uncomfortably ethnic.

Sadly, this drift has led some Jews to turn against their own people. Many who now openly express anti-Zionist positions are, in

spirit, walking the same path as the criminal Hellenists of old. Just as the cultural narratives of Hellenism bred hostility toward Judaism, so the dominant cultural narratives of our own age have corroded the commitments of many of our brothers and sisters.

They have absorbed the claim that we are building an ethnic state rooted in racism and discrimination, and this conviction has led them to oppose the State of Israel during one of the most critical periods in its history. It feels like the same tragedy once again: Jews embracing a broader cultural narrative, viewing their own heritage as tribal and outdated, and turning against their people.

Thousands of years ago they turned against our Mikdash; today, many turn against our prophecies and the unfolding story of our return.

Yet just as then, this moment will pass. Our Brit Avot and our Masorah have outlasted every attempt to erode them, and they will outlast this one as well. ■



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