Greeks vs. TORAH

Based on a lecture by Rabbi Nota Schiller
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The Greeks, the Midrash relates, darkened the eyes of the Jews with their decrees, saying to the Jews, “Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel.” What did the Greeks mean by this very cryptic decree? How does this decree epitomize their dark designs against the Jewish People?

Approximately 150 years before the Maccabees, a Hellenistic king in Alexandria ordered the translation of the Written Torah into Greek. In a sense, his need to become appraised of the Jewish world view and endow his massive Alexandrian library with Torah wisdom was a compliment to the Jewish People.

Miraculous events attended the translation: Each of the scholars summoned to Alexandria emerged from his private cubicle with an identical Greek translation.

Nevertheless, the translation of the seventy, the Septuagint, was a tragic moment for the Jewish People, a tragedy our Sages describe as “three days of darkness” which descended upon the world. What was the tragedy?

The Jewish People either exist as a separate entity or cease to exist. Anything mitigating or threatening our monopoly on Torah depreciates our ability to protect our uniqueness as a people. As soon as we share that monopoly with others, the Torah becomes merely another source of wisdom, another culture, another subject in the university catalogue. Ultimately we are to impact the world community, but only through maintaining the integrity of uniqueness will that impact come about.

One thing diminished the tragedy: Only the Written Torah was shared. The Oral Torah remained the exclusive property of the Jewish People, its transmission still necessitating the Teacher-Student relationship.

When I was in yeshiva in Baltimore, many of the boys took courses at Johns Hopkins University. The Semitic Studies Department was then headed by William F. Albright. Clutching a photocopied page of the Talmud, the frustrated Albright once approached one of the yeshiva boys and said: “I’ve translated the text and correctly identified the etymology of every single word on this page; but I can’t for the life of me understand what it’s saying!”

Albright’s problem was not accidental. It was anticipated and orchestrated by our Sages. They knew that if an Albright could understand the Oral Torah, then Torah as a product of transmission from scholar to disciple, with the particular approach and perspective of the Jewish People, would end. We would not need a Chaim Berlin, a Torah Vodaas, or a Ponevezh. If we are no longer the sole guardians of the Torah, our uniqueness and purpose as a people are eclipsed. To mitigate the quality and specialness of our purpose is counter-productive for the nations of the world.

When, 150 years after the Septuagint, the Greeks said “Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel” they were in effect saying “Give us the Oral Torah! Just as you translated the Bible, now write down Torah she’beal peh and grant us access to it as well. As long as that part of the Torah remains oral, no one else can approach it!”
The roots of conflict between the Greek world view and the Torah world view can be seen in the Book of Genesis: Emerging from the ark, Noah became drunk and compromised himself. Shem and Yefes, seeing their father’s shame, took a garment, walked backwards to avoid gazing on Noah, and covered him. The Sages explain that it was Shem who initiated this action; but, walking backwards with a blanket draped over his shoulder was a tricky business, and when Yefes saw that Shem could not take action alone, he helped. At select times in history Shem and Yefes cooperate. For most of history the relationship is defined by conflict. The ideal situation is expressed in the blessing awarded to Yefes — “Yishkon B’ohaley Shem” — “He shall dwell in the tents of Shem.” The aesthetic should be in the service of the true.

Yefes is the progenitor of the Greeks. Yefes perceived his father’s indignation on the aesthetic level, as something distasteful and aesthetically base. The action he took to correct the situation was merely cosmetic. He did not see the violation as essentially evil, his action was optional; if necessary, he was available to participate. But he wasn’t the one to initiate the action because it just wasn’t that important to him.

Shem, on the other hand, is the progenitor of Abraham. Shem experienced his father’s indignity as evil, and a suffering to be assuaged through an elementally good act, an act which — in and of itself — positively effects his own soul. Shem wanted the mitzvah, the very execution of which has a nourishing consequence. Hence, he initiated the action.

From ancient Greece through the age of chivalry, and even in the cowboy/hero movies of our generation, you find the following scene: two protagonists meet in the middle of the street or town square at high noon to duel. As long as one gives the other a fair chance to draw, he may shoot him down. Whether the opponent is evil is irrelevant; a fair chance is all that counts.

The Jew, however, rejects the “fair chance” ideal. Rather, if you face an evil opponent, a Stalin or a Hitler, you shoot him in the back. Whereas, when facing a man who is not essentially evil, you have no right to kill him just because you give him a fair chance.

If man is created in the image of G-d, then life has essential value. If man was not created in the image of G-d, however, man must reduce the gnawing emptiness, the absence of Right and Wrong, by instead turning life into a game, a showdown where “fair chance” resembles truth. Some people play checkers, others chess. Some people play poker, others bridge. The more involved the game the deeper man can engage his intellect — but only to focus less upon life’s meaningless because life in the godless Greek mind is essentially a game. We simulate a kind of dignity by honoring the rules of the game.

All the world is reduced to aesthetics and a game in this Greek world view. But the Jew says no, that when G-d encountered man through the medium of prophecy, man was charged with the mission to fulfill a universal role, the performance of which is judged at the individual, communal, and national level.

Historically, at Chanukah, the Jews warred with the Greeks, yet there is no megillah, no written work chronicling that battle. Why? Because it is a story that must be transmitted orally, for at the center of this battle was the Greeks’ attempt to destroy the Oral Torah. Instead of being conquered, we persevered and created a new holiday that could only have been orchestrated through the mechanism of the Oral Torah.

The blessing we say when lighting the Chanukah lights is “… Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to light the flame of Chanukah.” Where are we commanded? Which verse in the Torah mandates such? The oblique origin of this mitzvah is its very strength: Because the Torah endows our Sages with the initiative in each generation to legislate for the Jewish People, a mitzvah such as Chanukah symbolizes the power of the Oral Torah. That which the Greeks sought to extinguish is symbolized in the light that illuminates the darkness of exile.

Each holiday that Jews approach is like a way station along the turnpike of history. The largest distance on the highway had been between Succos and Pesach, between which there was no holiday to stop off and refuel. In the darkness of exile, G-d in His wisdom provided us with two more fueling stations, Chanukah and Purim. When we celebrate Chanukah, we celebrate a holiday that reminds us that it is the wisdom and genius of the Jew, expressed and refined through the Oral Torah, that makes us Jewish.

Sources:
• Haemek Davar, Parshas Shmos
• Maurice Samuel, The Gentleman and the Jew