A Beautiful Jew

“Excuse me, do you know where Jake lives?”

“Jake? The name is not familiar. I don’t think I have ever seen him at the country club.”

“You may have seen him around. He wears a skullcap.”

“Oh, yes. Jake! Go past the colonial mansion and the Frank Lloyd Wright house. You will see a small brick house. No Jaguar in the driveway; I think he has a station wagon (of all things!).”

“Yes. Jake! A beautiful Jew. No designer house, no fancy car, no membership at the club. His essence is beautiful.”

Darkness

“The earth was Empty and Desolate, and Darkness on the Face of the Vast Deep ... “

(Genesis 1:2)

Emptiness and Desolation don’t stay empty and desolate forever: “Nature abhors a vacuum,” an Ancient Greek might say.

The Babylonians, the Persians, like so many oppressors, tried to create a vacuum where the Jewish people stood. But those nations eventually disappeared into the very emptiness of their own design. Darkness, though, seeks ‘the face of the Vast Deep.’ Darkness seeks endless expansion across the vast breadth and depth of history.

Our sages identify this primeval darkness as a foreshadowing of the Greek culture. The Greeks - more than destruction - sought expansion. More than annihilation, infiltration. They didn’t torch the Temple, they redecorated. They didn’t spill the oil, they ‘touched’ it. For the Greeks, a ruined Israel was an imperfect victory. A Judeo-Grecian Israel - Now that was something to brag about.

The Greeks sought expansion into the infinite immortal soul of the Jew, ‘darkening our eyes’ with anti-Torah decrees. Their decrees against Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh disoriented us. Decrees against chastity and circumcision cast a shadow upon us. And by forbidding Torah study, they nearly blinded us.

“Darkness on the face of the deep” describes the Greek facade of beauty and skin-deep philosophy. ‘On the face’ they had culture ... ‘On the face’ they had enlightenment; Yet these served as mere veils hiding vast emptiness beneath.
Ode on a Grecian Urn

“Beauty is truth, Truth Beauty, - that is all Ye know on earth, and all Ye need to know.”

(John Keats ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’)

Architecture. Sculpture. Athletics. Mathematics. Music. Philosophy. Was ever a culture so obsessed with beauty and enlightenment as Greek culture? Yet, as great as was their obsession, so was their superficiality.

Greek wisdom asks us to look no deeper than the surface. “Look at the flask,” say the Greeks “for there is no oil. This world is an empty shell, a Grecian urn; beautiful, but ultimately of no essence.”

Towers, Flasks and Roses

“They breached my Tower Walls
And defiled all the Oils.
But from the Remaining Flasks
A miracle was wrought for the Roses.”

(from “Ma’oz Tzur”)

The Greeks ‘breached my tower walls’ waging war on the Jewish soul. Entering the ‘Holy of Holies’ - the heart of a Jew - they contaminated it with a ‘foreign touch.’ They ‘defiled all the oils,’ besmirching the fuel that lights our way: the Torah.

“But from the Remaining flasks, a miracle was wrought for the Roses.” Hashem never lets that last glimmer of holiness die; a tiny flask of oil remains hidden in the heart of every Jew. For the remaining flask was itself a miracle: Not only was it intact, but it remained in its purity. So too, the spark in every Jew not only survives, it remains pure. However far a Jew may stray, a spark of Torah remains, and a pure spark at that.

Roses. If you get a skewed view of the most beautiful rosebush, you might see only thorns. If you see G-d’s People in exile, you might not recognize them all.

But the Chanukah flame illuminates the very essence of our beauty. It shows us who we are, and who we can become. Remember Jake? Jake is beautiful. Why? Because his essence is beautiful. Jake is a Torah Jew.