
CHANUKAH I

Illuminating an Eternal Confrontation

Chanukah is very much in vogue today, and not just because it provides a convenient excuse to give presents during “the holiday season.” Its celebration of the miraculous Jewish victory over the Greek challenge to Judaism fits the popular mold of beating the odds, the underdog having his day, and religious freedom overriding political tyranny. But there is much more to the holiday than many of us are aware.

Our Sages refer to the brief period of encounter with the ancient Greeks as “the Greek exile” even though the Jewish people were not banished from their land at the time. The exile was of a spiritual nature, as the very legacy of the Jewish people was in threat of being lost forever. Chanukah tells the story of the miraculous recovery of Jewish idealism through the dedication and commitment of our ancestors to our ancient faith.

In this first Morasha class on Chanukah we will explore the history of Chanukah and the eternal ideological conflict that is at its root. Doing so will help us appreciate the lessons of the Chanukah miracles and how we commemorate them today – the subject of the second Morasha class on Chanukah.

This class will address the following questions:

- ✧ What happened on Chanukah that still impacts us today?
- ✧ What is the eternal conflict between the Jews and the Greeks?
- ✧ Ancient Greece is usually seen as the mother of Western Civilization – why did the Jews oppose their advancement?
- ✧ How did the Greeks oppress us?
- ✧ Why did the Jews revolt against the Greeks?

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INTRODUCTION: TOSSING THE HELIUM-FILLED DREIDELS

1. Based on Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, *The Jerusalem Kollel – Who is at the center of the universe?*

The striking aspect of celebrating Chanukah each year is the realization that the very same ideological battles that were fought 2,200 years ago, which prompted the Syrian-Greek offensive against the Jewish people culminating in the Chanukah miracles, are still being waged today and are poignantly relevant to the life of every Jew. How can this be?

The Syrian-Greek war against Israel, replete with tank-like elephants and over 100,000 skilled soldiers, seems like an anomaly to Greek philosophy. The Greeks, home to the schools of Plato and Aristotle, sought to systematically understand and classify knowledge of the world. They were primarily intellectuals, not militants. Why would the Syrian-Greek army attack the Jewish nation? Israel was not a military threat. The Syrian-Greek target was Judaism and Judaism alone; Jews who adopted the Greek worldview (Hellenism) were embraced. Hellenism was certainly a challenge for many Jews attracted to the intellectualism and logic of the Greek culture that postulated that man created religion. Nevertheless, what was so appalling to the Syrian-Greeks that they sought to destroy Judaism and her adherents?

The Greeks taught that man was the center of the universe. There is no God. One does not look beyond the physical world. It is man who has the need to create God. In contrast, Judaism teaches that man is “almost” at the center of the universe; rather the primary focus is God Who created, sustains and guides the universe, creates man with a Divine soul, and empowers us with the ability to impact both this world and eternal spiritual worlds that transcend physical existence. The Greeks could not tolerate that the Jewish people *lived* Judaism as a dynamic reality, which was an affront and threat to Greek thought and culture.

2,200 years later, the Jewish world is still divided – between those influenced by Hellenism, who view Chanukah, and hence Judaism, as “tradition,” something of sentimental value that contributes some meaning to life, but ultimately is not “real”; and in contrast, those who see Judaism as a reality where each action has cosmic implications.

If celebrating Chanukah becomes a commercial response to the “holiday season” and the take-away messages are that helium-filled dreidels make the party, and a Kindle is a *great* gift, we might have missed the point. On the other hand, after tossing the floating dreidel to my friend, I wonder, “Is there something deeper going on?” After some serious, inspirational investigation, one can discover that the Jewish people exist because of the focused, collective determination of generations of Jews upholding a profound way of life, following the bold leadership of our ancestors, as illustrated by the following story:

Not so long ago, the entire Soviet Union was one huge prison. Its citizens were deprived of many freedoms we take for granted, including the right to practice our religion and live anywhere we choose, or even to emigrate to another country if we so desire. Any Russian citizen who wanted to leave the Soviet Union was considered a traitor to his country. In increasing numbers, the Jews of Russia began to openly declare their desire to leave Mother Russia and resettle in the Land of Israel. These fearless Jews were called “prisoners of Zion.” Among them was a young man named Yosef Mendelevich.

Remarkably, not only did Yosef proclaim his intention to live in the Land of Israel, he tried to fulfill his dream in a bold, dramatic move that finally made the plight of Russian Jewry known to the whole world.

The day he attempted to escape to Israel in a stolen airplane, he was arrested by the infamous KGB – the Soviet secret police – and condemned to death. Due to pressure applied by free countries all over the world, his sentence was eventually commuted to a long and harsh prison term in Siberia's dreaded Vladimir Prison.

Vladimir was a terrifying institution devoted to the destruction of the human spirit. Inside the prison compound the living conditions were appalling. Rations varied in caloric content from sub-average to starvation level, exercise and fresh air were minimal, and contact with the outside was also strictly limited and, often suspended. Yosef was denied all religious articles, as well as permission to perform the mitzvot. But for all its unspeakable terror, intimidation, demoralization, and frequent punishments, the KGB couldn't break Yosef's iron will to fulfill God's commandments.

One frigid winter, a single thought managed to warm Yosef's soul: Chanukah was approaching. Yosef dreamed of lighting a Chanukah menorah, a virtual impossibility under the circumstances. Certainly the prison authorities would never permit the performance of this mitzvah and would react harshly to the very notion. Regardless, Yosef put his mind to the mission and developed a clever, viable scheme.

Every day he saved a little of his meager rations, even though this meant subsisting on a starvation diet. When no one was watching, he secretly slipped a crust of bread or a sliver of potato into his pocket. Later on, he carefully stashed these precious scraps on a small ledge in his cell, and prayed that no guard would notice his curious cache. Hoarding food was considered a criminal act, and if discovered, not only would the food be confiscated, but the perpetrator would suffer a cruel punishment as well. As with every other mitzvah he performed in Vladimir Prison, Yosef accepted the risk.

The day before Chanukah, Yosef could scarcely contain his excitement. Now there was only one final, critical detail to be arranged. Trying to attract as little attention as possible, Yosef traded some of his rations with another prisoner for a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches. He had no use for the cigarettes, but the matches were the crucial missing ingredient for his plan. Fingers trembling, Yosef opened the box of matches and found forty-four matches inside, exactly the number he needed, to serve as the Chanukah lights.

And so, late on the first night of Chanukah, when everyone was finally asleep and no guards were in sight, Yosef inserted the matches into his scraps of bread and potato and fashioned a secret Chanukah menorah! The matches burned for only a few seconds, but they provided endless light and inspiration for Yosef Mendelevich in the depths of the Vladimir Prison in Siberia. (From *Light in the Darkness, Best of Storylines*, by Hanoch Teller NYC Publishing, 1991.)

Why was Yosef Mendelevich so determined to light the Chanukah candles? With a little preparation we can understand, as well as gain insight into, the significance and power of Chanukah.

2. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, p. 53 – One should prepare in order to tap into the energy of Chanukah.**

In the prayer of "Al HaNissim" it says: "[For the miracles] that You performed for our fathers in those days at this time." Jewish holidays are not simply days of historical significance commemorating past occurrences. Rather, all that transpired then – the salvation and abundance of spiritual and physical blessings, are re-established annually at the anniversary of the holiday.

However, the unique form of Divine influence and elevation that can be attained during each festival is dependent upon the degree to which

בתפילת על הנסים נאמר: "...שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה". כל המועדים והימים הטובים שיש לנו אינם חגים היסטוריים לזכר העבר שחלף, אלא כל האירועים, הישועות והשפע הרוחני והגשמי שהיה, מתעוררים ומתחדשים מדי שנה בזמניהם....

אך מידת ההשפעה וההתעלות המיוחדת לכל מועד שמקבל כל אחד מהשי"ת, תלויה במידת ההכנה שלו,

one adequately prepares in advance, devoting time to reflect on the essence of the holiday and thus gaining the spiritual strengthening which inevitably follows. Similarly, this is applicable during Chanukah. As such, we need to understand the essence of the Greek exile in order to awaken ourselves to mend its harmful consequences. By doing so, we will be able to take advantage of the spiritual freedom [which is inherent in the holiday] that illuminates [this period] every year.

ההתבוננות במהות היום וההתחזקות הבאה בעקבותיה. וכן הוא בימי החנוכה, א"כ עלינו להבין מה היתה גלות יוון, כדי שנתעורר לתקן את קלקוליה ועי"כ נחזק את שפע גאולתה המאיר בכל שנה.

Let's explore the history and lessons of Chanukah and draw from the immense reservoir of spiritual energy released into the world at this time of year.

SECTION I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHANUKAH

In this first section, we will draw a broad picture of the history of the events leading up to Chanukah and the events of Chanukah themselves. As the class progresses we will delve more deeply into the significance of these events.

PART A. TIME LINE OF THE CHANUKAH ERA

3408 / 353	BCE	Building of Second Temple
319	BCE	Beginning of Greek Era
199	BCE	Antiochus of Seleucids and ruler of Syria controls Israel
175	BCE	Antiochus V reigns
168	BCE	Temple is desecrated by Antiochus IV
165	BCE	Conquest of Temple by Chashmonaim (Hasmoneans) Miracle of Chanukah
140 – 36	BCE	Rule of Chashmonaim
36 – 68	BCE – CE	Rule of Roman Governors and Herodian Dynasty
3862 / 68	CE	Romans destroy Second Temple

(From *Chanukah*, Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, editors, p.90, *ArtScroll*; and *Columbia History of the World*, Garraty and Gay, editors, pp. 176-189.)

PART B. THE STORY OF CHANUKAH

1. The Jewish Study Network, Focus: A Chanukah Reader, Introduction – The Greeks conquered the Holy Land and their cultural influence spread to the Jews.

The story behind the events of Chanukah begins with the Greek conquest of the Kingdom of Judea by the military forces of Alexander the Great in 320 BCE. Not content to be mere military conquerors, the Greeks maintained a vision of conquest that extended beyond just physical subjugation. They wanted their culture to dominate the world and hence always sought to spread its influence within the territories under their control. Long before the actual events of Chanukah took place, Greek culture, known as Hellenism, started to make itself felt within the Jewish population.

As Paul Johnson notes in *The History of the Jews*, “the impact of Hellenization on educated Jews was in many ways similar to the impact of the Enlightenment on the eighteenth-century ghetto ... it was a destabilizing force spiritually and, above all, it was a secularizing, materialistic force.”

In response to Hellenization, internal conflict soon arose within the Jewish people as those who favored the new trend confronted those who did not. Eventually there developed a movement of Jews whose aim it was to force the pace of Hellenization by purging Judaism of those elements that limited the advancement of Greek culture.

In the year 175 BCE, these Jewish Hellenizers gained a powerful ally with the ascendancy of Antiochus IV Epiphanes to the throne of the Seleucid (Syrian-Greek) empire. Like those before him, Antiochus was disturbed to find the Jews still holding on to their own religion and worshiping their own God in blatant disregard of the Greek deities.

To further advance the cause of Hellenization, Antiochus issued decrees banning any religious or cultural practices not in line with Hellenism, particularly the observance of Brit Milah, Shabbat, and Rosh Chodesh. Antiochus was a vicious dictator bent on the destruction of Judaism. Women who circumcised their babies were executed with their dead babies hung around their necks (I Maccabees 1:60-61). A special directive was also sent to stop the sacrificial service in the Temple. The Temple itself, in 168 BCE, was desecrated and turned into a place where non-kosher animals were offered to the pagan gods ...

Faithful Jews found themselves increasingly under the pressure of religious persecution under the Greeks and their sympathizers.

2. Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Chanukah (Laws of Chanukah), 3:1 – The Greeks enforced harsh decrees to eradicate Judaism and Jewish life, until God redeemed the Jews.

During the times of the Second Temple, when the Greeks ruled over the Jewish people, they instituted decrees against them and attempted to destroy their religion. They did not allow the Jews to study Torah or perform mitzvot. They took their money and their daughters, and they entered and defiled the Temple, where they violated its purity. The Greeks subjected the Jews to great hardships and pressured them immensely, until the God of their fathers had pity on them and saved them.

בבית שני כשמלכו יון גזרו גזרות על ישראל ובטלו
דתם ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ובמצוות ופשטו
ידם בממונם ובבנותיהם ונכנסו להיכל ופרצו בו פרצות
וטמאו הטהרות וצר להם לישראל מאד מפניהם
ולחצום לחץ גדול עד שריחם עליהם אלהי אבותינו
והושיעם מידם והצילם.

God saved the Jewish people from the hands of Greek infiltration by blessing the Jews' military resistance with miraculous success.

3. **The Jewish Study Network, Focus: A Chanukah Reader, Introduction – Two miracles occurred: the unlikely military victory and the famous long-lasting oil in the Menorah.**

The efforts to homogenize Judaism with Greek culture met resistance from those Jews opposed to Hellenization. Pious Jews willingly martyred themselves before the face of imposed apostasy. But isolated incidences of resistance eventually developed into outright rebellion.

The initial military revolt was led by one Judah the Maccabee, an epitaph awarded him for his famous battle cry, "Who is like You among the heavenly powers, O God!" (the word "Maccabee" being an acronym formed by the first letters of the above Biblical verse). Judah was joined by his five brothers, all sons of Matityahu, patriarch of the priestly Hasmonean family. Legend has it that a Seleucid general once described these five Jewish heroes as "stronger than lions, lighter than eagles, and quicker than bears" (Scroll of Antiochus 44).

Despite the extraordinary odds stacked against them, the children of Matityahu miraculously succeeded in their battles against the Greeks. Without Divine intervention, the enemy would have swiftly crushed this small band of religious Jews. Instead, after a short period of intense fighting, the Maccabees freed Jerusalem from Seleucid control and isolated the Hellenized Jews to the northern port city of Acre.

Finally, on the 25th day of the month of Kislev in the year 165 BCE, the Maccabees returned to the Temple. As they set about repairing all that had been vandalized, God had a second miracle in store. When the pagan Hellenists invaded, they desecrated the Menorah and sabotaged the oil reserves. When the Maccabees finally regained control, they could find only one jug of oil fit for the lighting of the new Menorah in the Temple hall. The Jews used the little oil they found and something extraordinary happened. It just kept on burning, day after day. It burned for eight days, even though there was only enough oil for one, giving them the time they needed to produce new, pure oil.

The festival of Chanukah was instituted for all generations to commemorate the miracles that had occurred.

4. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 21b – The Chanukah miracle.**

What is Chanukah? ... When the Greeks entered the Holy Sanctuary they defiled all the oil that was there. And when the dynasty of the Hasmoneans grew strong and defeated the Greeks, they searched and found only one flask of oil with the stamp of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) that had been set aside; and there was only enough oil to burn for one day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the Menorah] from this oil for eight days. The following year the Sages established these days for praise and thanksgiving.

מאי חנוכה... שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאו ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ The Story of Chanukah begins with the conquest of the Jewish homeland by Alexander the Great. This conquest initiated the spread of Greek culture to the area, an influence that caused disturbances in the Jewish community.
- ≈ As resistance to the influence of Greek culture grew among a core of Jews dedicated to the Torah and its ways, the Greeks and their allies sought legal means to weaken the influence of the Torah on Jewish life.
- ≈ In response to these decrees the Jews took up arms to fight against the Greek occupiers. Their effort, despite great odds, met with miraculous success.
- ≈ Upon recapturing the Holy Temple another miracle occurred: the small amount of pure oil found for lighting the Menorah lasted for eight days instead of one. Thus Chanukah was born.

SECTION II. A CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

As mentioned above, the conflict between the Jews and the Greeks has its roots in the cultural encounter between the two nations. In this section we shall explore the culture of the Greeks and how it relates to that of the Jewish people.

PART A. BIBLICAL ROOTS

The relationship between Greek and Jewish ancestry is Biblical – going back to Noah (Noah) and his sons. Whereas Avraham (Abraham) and the Jewish people are descended from Noah's son Shem, the Greeks were descended from another son Yefet (Jepheth).

1. Bereishit (Genesis) 9:18-27 – The relationship between Shem and Yefet is related to their joining in to cover their father.

The sons of Noah who emerged from the ark were Shem, Cham (Ham), and Yefet. Cham was the father of Canaan. These three were Noah's sons, and from them the whole world was repopulated. Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, making himself drunk, and uncovered himself in his tent.

Cham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness, and he told his two brothers outside. Shem and Yefet took a cloak and placed it on both their shoulders, and they walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness; they faced away from him and did not see their father's nakedness. Noah awoke from his wine-induced sleep, and he realized what his youngest son

ויהיו בני נח היצאים מן התבה שם וחס ויפת וחס הוא
אבי כנען: שלשה אלה בני נח ומאלה נפצה כל הארץ:
ויחל נח איש האדמה ויטע כרם: וישת מן היין וישכר
ויתגל בתוך אהלה:

וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו ויגד לשני אחיו בחוץ:
ויקח שם ויפת את השמלה וישימו על שכם שניהם
וילכו אחרנית ויכסו את ערות אביהם ופניהם אחרנית
וערות אביהם לא ראו: וייקץ נח מיינו וידע את אשר
עשה לו בנו הקטן: ויאמר ארור כנען עבד עבדים יהיה
לאחיו: ויאמר ברוך ה' אלהי שם ויהי כנען עבד למו:
יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם ויהי כנען עבד למו:

had done to him. He said, "Cursed is Canaan! He shall be a slave's slave to his brothers!" He then said, "Blessed be God, the Lord of Shem! Canaan shall be his slave! May God expand Yefet, but he will dwell in the tents of Shem. Let Canaan be their slave!"

2. **Ibid. 10:2 – Greece was descended from Yefet.**

The sons of Yefet were Gomer, Magog, Madai, Yavan (Greece), Tuval, Meshekh, and Tiras.

בני יפת גמר ומגוג ומדי ויוון ותבל ומשך ותירס:

PART B. THE LANGUAGE OF RESPECT

Based on Noah's blessing to Yefet, our Sages understood that the Greeks were possessed of certain virtues that were worthy of Jewish respect.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 8b-9b – Ancient Greek is the only foreign language with which it is permissible to write a Torah scroll.**

Rav Shimon ben Gamliel said, "The only language [besides Hebrew] that one can write [the Torah, Prophets and Writings] is Greek."

What is the basis for the ruling of Rav Shimon ben Gamliel? The verse states, "May God expand Yefet and he will dwell in the tents of Shem" (Bereishit 9:27). This means the words of Yefet will be in the tents of Shem.

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר אף בספרים לא התירו שיכתבו אלא יוונית.

מאי טעמא דרבן שמעון בן גמליאל אמר קרא יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם דבריו של יפת יהיו באהלי שם.

Indeed, the Greeks were the first culture to request a translation of the Torah into their own language. This occurred in Egypt under the Greek ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the third century BCE.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 9a – The Greeks were the first to request a translation of the Torah.**

King Ptolemy once gathered seventy-two Elders. He placed them in seventy-two chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said, "Write for me the Torah of Moshe, your teacher."

מעשה בתלמי המלך שכנס שבעים ושנים זקנים, והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים, ולא גילה להם על מה כינסן. ונכנס אצל כל אחד ואחד ואמר להם: כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם.

3. **Maharal, Ner Mitzvah – The desire for a translation of the Torah shows the extent of Greek desire for wisdom.**

The central feature of the Greek nation was their desire for wisdom ... That is why they requested the Sages to translate the Torah for them, as

כל ענין המלכות זה שהיו מבקשים החכמה... ולפיכך האומה הזאת בקשו שיכתבו להם חכמים התורה

is explicitly stated in Megillah 9a ... And this is a testament that they were more inclined to wisdom than any other nation.

יונית, כמו שמפורש במגילה (מגילה ט, א) ... וזה מורה שהחכמה שייך להם ביותר מן שאר האומות.

4. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, p. 98 – The Greek language can be a means to help understand the Torah.**

“God shall enlarge Yefet, and he shall live in the tents of Shem – the beauty of Yavan will be in the tents of Shem.” Hence it is permissible and desirable to use the external beauty – the Greek language, which is the beauty of the Greeks – as a helpful tool and as a means for obtaining the essence and inner core, which is the wisdom of the Torah and the mitzvot.

“יפת אלוקים ליפת וישכון באהלי שם (בראשית ט:כז) - יפיתו של יפת יהא באהלי שם”. שהרי מותר ורצוי להשתמש בחיצוניות היפה – השפה היוונית שהיא “יפיתו של יפת” – ככלי עזר וכלבוש חיצוני לתכלית ולפנימיות שהיא חכמת התורה ומצוותיה.

History bears the mark of Greek influence. The legacy of Ancient Greek civilization can be seen by its impact on the development of language, politics, educational systems, philosophy, science, and the arts. As the sources above illustrate, the Jews recognized the intellectual virtue of the Greeks.

PART C. A SHARED MISSION

As the people of the Book, the Jews during Hellenistic times shared the Greek flare for the virtues of the intellect. As the sources below suggest, they may even have seen Greek wisdom and military success as a tool for the advancement of civilization and the realization of the Jewish mission to be “a light unto the nations.”

1. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Culture of Yavan (Greece) and the Culture of Israel – Both the Jews and the Greeks share a mission to educate mankind above its animalistic instincts.**

In Bereishit (9:27), the Torah says, “The Lord has given Yefet beauty; let him reside in the Tents of Shem.” In Yefet, come together reason and the desire for the spiritual ... Yefet reaches his peak in the culture of Yavan, Greece, and till today these two remain, Israel and Yavan, representing “Sinai” and humanism, respectively. Yefet beautified the world from an aesthetic point of view, while Shem enlightened the world from an ethical-moral perspective ... Yefet prepares the ground for the mission of Shem. First, let a person be imbued with the ideas of the beautiful and the good in the spirit of the Greeks; afterwards, let him proceed to be imbued with that which is still more beautiful and elevated and harmonious – the Godly.

... There was a conflict between two perspectives of life, two cultures, which until today are struggling for dominance in the world ... The Greek nation stood at the pinnacle of culture of all the descendants of Yefet; the Greeks taught to all the other nations the beautiful, and explained that that which is beautiful is also good. However, at the pinnacle of the culture of the Children of Shem stood Ever, whose descendants became the Hebrew Nation, which plants its tents according to the Will of Hashem, in order to sanctify His Name; they build the Temple of justice and love. The mission of both cultures is to cover the animalistic nakedness in Man; both were destined to raise Man to the level of the human and the Godly, and to subdue by proper education the influence of “Cham,” the hot-blooded roughneck who desires the animalistic nakedness ... all of the history of the world till our day represents the constant struggle regarding the above prophecy (“The Lord has given beauty ...”).

Until the appearance of the Greeks, the human spirit and human feelings developed only under the influence of necessity and the events of life. Man found no opportunity to develop self-respect; he recognized only fear as a motivation and a means to overcome his desires, but from his essential nature, Man remained mean-spirited, cruel, narrow-minded, and enslaved.

The culture of Greece aroused the desire for logic and enlightenment, a feeling of yearning for great ideas, and the opening of the spiritual life of a person through the contemplation of harmonious and beautiful essences of things, and by means of the control of his overwhelming desires, so did the culture of Greece develop the feeling of self-respect within Man. It could arouse trust in oneself, and give a person responsibility for the conduct of his life ...in short, the spirit of Greece freed Man from the chains which bound him, enlightened him with culture, beautified his spirit and filled him with the joy of life.

The spirit of enlightenment which emanated from Greece, in its pure form, never constituted a danger to the holy ways of Israel, inasmuch as Israel sees it as a contributing cause to the realization of its own destiny; namely, the enlightenment of Man and his improvement; then it was always proper to bring into his tent the truth, and the pure humanity associated with that Spirit.

The concept of a shared mission with Greece found expression in another famous historical incident: the meeting between Alexander the Great and Shimon the Righteous.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Yoma, 69a (also recorded in Josephus Flavius, Antiquities, Book XI, Ch. 8:5) – Alexander bowed to the visage of the Jewish High Priest.**

The twenty-fifth of Tevet is the day of Mount Gerizim, on which no mourning is permitted. It is the day on which the Samaritans demanded the House of our God from Alexander the Macedonian in order to destroy it, and he gave it to them. People came and informed Shimon the Righteous. What did he do? He put on his priestly garments, and robed himself in priestly garments, and some of the noblemen of Israel went with him carrying fiery torches in their hands. They walked all night, some on one side and some on the other, until the dawn rose.

When the dawn rose, Alexander asked the Samaritans, "Who are these people?" They answered, "The Jews who rebelled against you." As he reached Antipatris, the sun rose and they met. When Alexander saw Shimon the Righteous, he descended from his carriage and bowed down before him. They said to him, "A great king like yourself should bow down before this Jew?" He answered, "It is his image that leads me to victory in all my battles."

בעשרים וחמשה [בטבת] יום הר גריזים [הוא],
דלא למספד. יום שבקשו כותיים את בית אלהינו
מאלכסנדרוס מוקדון להחריבו ונתנו להם. באו והודיעו
את שמעון הצדיק. מה עשה? לבש בגדי כהונה, ונתעטף
בבגדי כהונה, ומיקירי ישראל עמו, ואבוקות של אור
בידיהן, וכל הלילה הללו הולכים מצד זה והללו הולכים
מצד זה עד שעלה עמוד השחר.

כיון שעלה עמוד השחר אמר להם: מי הללו? אמרו לו:
יהודים שמרדו בך. כיון שהגיע לאנטיפטריס זרחה חמה,
ופגעו זה בזה. כיון שראה לשמעון הצדיק, ירד ממרכבתו
והשתחוה לפניו. אמרו לו: מלך גדול כמותך ישתחוה
ליהודי זה? אמר להם: דמות דיוקנו של זה מנצחת לפני
בבית מלחמתי. –

He said to them, "What have you come for?" They said, "Is it possible that idol-worshippers should mislead you to destroy the House wherein prayers are said for you and your kingdom that it never be destroyed?!" He said to them, "Who are these people?" They said to him, "These are the Samaritans who stand before you." He said, "They are delivered into your hand."

אמר להם: למה באתם? - אמרו: אפשר בית שמתפללים בו עליך ועל מלכותך שלא תחרב יתעורר עובדי כוכבים להחריבו? - אמר להם: מי הללו? - אמרו לו: כותיים הללו שעומדים לפניך. - אמר להם: הרי הם מסורין בידיכם.

3. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Culture of Yavan (Greece) and the Culture of Israel – The message of Alexander's vision was that Greek culture was to pave the way for Jewish culture.**

It was shown to [Alexander the Great], immediately with his first contact with Israel, that even though he had been sent to bring all the countries of the East under the wings of the culture of Europe, despite this, there dazzled and illuminated his eyes, even in the Near East, on the very shores of the Mediterranean, a culture that was greater and more elevated than his ...

Against his will did Yefet bow to Shem, and the great Greek Conqueror was no more than a scout, who captured and prepared the ground for the Spirit of Israel.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ≈ The Jewish tradition traces the origin of Greece back to Noah's son Yefet, while the Jewish line stems from his other son Shem.
- ≈ Greek culture was appreciated as a fulfillment of Noah's blessings to his sons: that Yefet's beauty would contribute to the Jewish mission.
- ≈ Jewish culture pays homage to the Greek love for wisdom, even as it understands it as secondary to the Torah.

SECTION III. KULTURKAMPF (CULTURAL STRUGGLE)

While the Jews appreciated the Greek love of wisdom, they also recognized the danger inherent in it. The rule of the mind is certainly preferable to the rule of the body, but ultimately Judaism maintains a belief in something more: the soul. Greek intellectualism was anathema to the Jewish understanding of spirituality and the source of enlightenment beyond the human mind, the Torah. In this section we will explore why the Greek love of wisdom was seen by the Jews as a force of spiritual darkness.

PART A. THE DARKNESS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

1. **Bereishit Rabbah 2:4 – Greece is referred to as primordial darkness, a negative spiritual force.**

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse, "And the Earth was desolate and void and

ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות והארץ היתה תהו...

darkness was on the face of the deep"... "And darkness" refers to the Greek Exile which darkened the eyes of the Jews through its decrees ...

וחושך זה גלות יון שהחשיכה עיניהם של ישראל

2. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, p. 53 – The period is referred to as the Greek exile, even though it took place in the Land of Israel.**

This time period is called the "Greek exile." The term "exile" does not only refer to time periods when the Jews were exiled from the Land of Israel, as was the case with the Babylonian exile, etc. "Exile" is mainly the removal of the Holy Presence (*Shechinah*), occurring when the spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people is weakened or disconnected. This comes about in situations where non-Jews rule over the Jews spiritually, and the Jews are influenced by their culture and behave according to the ways of the nations.

אעפ"כ תקופה זו נקראת גלות יון, כי המושג "גלות" אינו בדוקא כאשר גלינו מארץ ישראל, כמו שהיה בגלות בבל וכו', מפני ש"גלות" היא בעיקר גלות השכינה, דהיינו כאשר הקשר הרוחני בין עם ישראל לקב"ה מוחלש או מנותק ח"ו, וזאת ע"י שהגויים שולטים על עם ישראל באופן רוחני, כאשר הוא מושפע מתרבותם ומכוון את הליכותיו לפי אורחות החיים של הגויים.

Why is Greek civilization, which brought enlightenment to the world, characterized as "darkness"?

3. **Ibid. – As a competing form of light, Greece is likened to darkness.**

Defining (Yavan) Greece as darkness opposes what is accepted in the world and what is known from the history of the Greeks, since the blossoming of enlightened human civilization was rooted in Greece. The development of philosophy, science, and culture and their dissemination, from the Romans to the great empires that followed, including the Arab nations, all founded themselves on the wisdom of the Greeks – it remains the basis of culture and science today. Yet, the Sages determined that this worldview is "darkness."

However, this is the reason [for Yavan being coined "darkness"]: Since the Greeks were so scholarly, it was their intention to compete with the Torah's wisdom and with the Torah nation. The Maharal explains, "The Greeks wanted to destroy the special relationship of the Jews to the Torah, according to the principle that a strong nation is jealous of another strong nation, and therefore wanted to dispossess them of their Torah." In fact, since the Greeks were wiser than other cultures, they specifically viewed the Jewish nation as a threat to their stature. Their goal was to translate the Torah into Greek and to transform Judaism into a sub-culture of Greece.

הגדרת יוון כ"חושך" היא לכאורה הפוכה מהמקובל בעולם ומהידוע מההיסטוריה של יוון, שהרי כל הפריחה של התרבות האנושית הנאורה היתה בעיקר ביוון, וכל התפתחות הפילוסופיה, המדע, התרבות והפצתן מאז, בימי רומי ובימי כל הממלכות הגדולות שבאו אחריה כולל הערבים, כולם התבססו על חכמת יוון והרחיבו אותה, והיא הבסיס של התרבות והמדע עד היום הזה. והנה חז"ל קבעו ופסקו שכל זה הוא "חושך"...

אלא היא הנותנת, מכיוון שהיו חכמים לכן רצו להתחרות בחכמת התורה ובעם התורה, כמו שביאר המהר"ל "והקירוב הזה עצמו" – לחכמה ולתורה – "היה גורם שרצו לאבד מהם" – מישראל – התורה, "כי אין גיבור מתקנא אלא בגיבור שכמותו, ולפיכך רצו לאבד מהם התורה". כי אדרבא בגלל שהיו חכמים יותר משאר האומות לכן ראו דוקא בעם ישראל ובתורתו את המתחרה שלהם, ומסיבה זו ביקשו לתרגם את התורה ליוונית כי רצו לבלוע את התורה ולהפוך אותה לחלק מהחכמה היוונית וכסניף לה.

PART B. WHERE DID GREEK INTELLECTUALISM FAIL?

Limiting wisdom to that which man can experience with his senses or rationalize with his mind denies spirituality as a source of knowledge.

1. Ramban, Vayikra (Leviticus) 16:8 – The Greeks denied the reality of anything that they could not grasp themselves.

Scientists go in the way of the Greek [i.e. Aristotle] who denied the reality of anything that he could not experience with his senses. He and his wicked students were arrogant enough to believe that anything which they did not understand could not possibly be true.

המתחכמים בטבע הנמשכים אחרי היוני אשר הכחיש כל דבר זולתי המורגש לו, והגיס דעתו לחשוב הוא ותלמידיו הרשעים, כי כל ענין שלא השיג אליו הוא בסברתו איננו אמת.

2. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, p. 56 – The Greeks denied the spiritual realm as the source of knowledge.

Greek wisdom is the wisdom of the human intellect, dealing much with the sciences; they explored the laws of nature and became accomplished in this field in order to rule over nature. When the laws of nature are better known, there are more possibilities to utilize them. One who is master over nature becomes master over the world and its inhabitants. This is the whole desire of man in all generations – to expand his control more and more.

Although it is permissible for man to utilize nature for his needs, it becomes forbidden when he comes to feel that he can rely on his understanding and prowess alone without needing the kindness of God, leading him to disconnect from God and forget Him. Such a worldview completely contradicts the outlook of the Jews and the Torah's teachings, which maintains that the essence of Creation and nature are intended to be subordinate to fulfilling God's Will. This was the crux of the conflict between Greece and the Jewish nation.

חכמת יוון היא חכמת השכל האנושי, שעסקה הרבה במדעי הטבע, הם חקרו את חוקי הטבע והחכימו בזה, כדי להשתלט על הטבע, כי ככל שידיעת חוקי הטבע גדולה יותר, אפשרויות השימוש והשליטה בטבע רבות יותר, ומי שנעשה בעל הבית על הטבע הוא אדון על עולם ומלואו. זו כל שאיפת האדם בכל הדורות, להרחיב את שלטונו עוד ועוד.

אכן מותר לאדם לנצל את הטבע ולהשתמש בו לצרכיו, אך הדבר פסול ואסור כאשר מגיע להרגשה שיכול לסמוך על שכלו, ומסתדר בכל דבר לבד, ואינו זקוק לחסדי הבורא, ומתנתק ממנו ושוכח אותו ח"ו. השקפת עולם זו מנוגדת בתכלית להשקפת העולם של ישראל ולחכמת התורה, על פיה מטרת כל הבריאה והטבע הוא להשתעבד ולשרת את רצון ה', ועלינו לקדש את הכל לעבודת ה'. זה היה התוכן של המאבק בין היוונים לעם ישראל.

Denying the spiritual realm undermines and limits humanity whose greatness lies in their Divine soul.

3. Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, The Jerusalem Kollel – The failure of Greece was in undervaluing the potential of the human being.

The Greeks were "humanists." Humanism places man at the center of the universe. Were they so far off? Judaism also believes that the world is created for man. There are those who claim that the failing of Greece is that they made too much of the human being. No, that's not our claim.

Greece made too *little* of the human being! They limited the human being's capabilities and accomplishments to the realm of what man can comprehend. Judaism does not. We maintain that we can accomplish more than we understand – we can reach worlds that we know nothing about. What is Greek wisdom? Worship of the human mind, human body, aesthetic sense, and values that speak to the human being.

What is the aspect that God gave the human being that sets him apart? *Kedushah* – holiness – there is nothing more powerful, nothing more beautiful, nothing deeper. Through kedushah we affect worlds, transcending physical existence by way of our own actions and intentions. The universe is a lot bigger than what Greece thought it was.

PART C. TORAH VS. WISDOM

The Maharal of Prague (Ner Mitzvah, Ch. 1) understands the conflict between the Jews and Ancient Greece in light of the following Midrash:

1. **Eichah (Lamentations) Rabbah 2:13 – What wisdom do the nations possess?**

If someone tells you that there is wisdom amongst the nations, believe him. [If someone tells you] that there is Torah amongst the nations, do not believe him.

אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגוים תאמן ... יש תורה בגוים אל תאמן.

As Rabbi Reuven Leuchter points out, for this statement to have any meaning it must be telling us something more than the obvious. The Bible is not a physics textbook and non-Jews do not study the Talmud, so what then is the significance of them having “wisdom” but not “Torah”? What the Midrash means to convey is that the wisdom of the nations is qualitatively different from the wisdom of the Jews – even when the subject matter of the two overlap!

With respect to Greek wisdom in particular, the divergence from Jewish thinking is fundamental:

2. **Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, Chanukah in a New Light, p. 43 (based on Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, Pachad Yitzchak: Chanukah 4:6) – Whereas Greek wisdom builds its philosophy from the lessons of nature, the starting point of Jewish wisdom is the revelation of the Torah.**

“There was an intense commitment by the Greeks to intellectual inquiry and an effort to understand the natural world. However, Greek philosophy and thought was dominated by their fixation on nature, where human choice plays no role. This intellectual fixation made it impossible for the Greeks to comprehend or appreciate the Jews’ Torah, which is totally rooted in the spiritual world created by God and sustained through human choice. While both Israel and the Greeks were highly intellectual, the Greeks viewed reality through the lens of the physical world where compulsion rules.” (Pachad Yitzchak)

Through their study of nature and the constellations, the Greeks saw the world as mechanical and automatic. They then extended the rules of nature to all aspects of life so that Greek wisdom and intellect inexorably led to the development of a philosophy that drove the Greeks to misunderstand and oppose Jewish intellectualism.

(Note: The above may seem a grand generalization of Ancient Greek philosophy, which was surely more

varied and complex. Nevertheless, the particular philosophy at hand here is most likely that of Aristotle. Aristotle was the father of empiricism, the theory that all knowledge derives from the experience of the senses. As the teacher of Alexander, the influence of Aristotle's philosophy surely spread to the areas he conquered. It was this view of knowledge and the philosophy of life built upon it that so disturbed the Jews at the time.)

Judaism values wisdom, but at the same time recognizes that Torah stems from a much more lofty source. This attitude finds expression in the following laws of making blessings:

3a. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 58a – There are different blessings recited over Torah Sages and non-Jewish scholars.

One who sees an outstanding scholar of Torah wisdom recites, "Blessed are You, our God, King of the universe, Who separated from His wisdom to those who fear Him."

One who sees a scholar of worldly wisdom recites, "Blessed are You, our God, King of the universe, Who gave from His wisdom to man."

הרואה חכמי ישראל אומר ברוך שחלק מחכמתו ליראיו.

חכמי עובדי כוכבים אומר ברוך שנתן מחכמתו לבריותיו [לבשר ודם]

3b. Ma'adaney Yom Tov, Berachot 58a – The reason we recite the different blessings.

The reason that regarding outstanding Torah scholars [we recite "Who separated from His wisdom to those who fear Him"] is because their wisdom cannot reach the ultimate depth of Torah, since the Torah is infinite. Therefore the word used is *chalak* – "separated," which means that it was a part of a greater entity. In contrast, the wisdom of the nations can ultimately be fully understood; therefore it is appropriate to use the language of *matanah* – a "gift," as all wisdom was given to them to be fully comprehended.

ורמ"י ז"ל נתן טעם בדבר לפי שחכמת חכמי ישראל בתורה א"א לבא עד תכונתה כי היא בלתי תכלית לכך אמר ל' חלק אבל חכמת חכמי עובדי כוכבים אפשר לבא עד תכליתן לפיכך שייד לשון מתנה שניתן להם כל החכמות והן כולן על שלמות תכליתן.

The difference between Torah and wisdom is not only the source of the information but its purpose as well; the goal of wisdom is to control nature whereas that of the Torah is to control oneself.

4. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, p. 66 – The difference in the quest for Torah wisdom in contrast to other forms of knowledge.

The Holy Torah is the revelation of God to the Jewish nation, in which He placed the ability to perfect man. *Torah*, as its name connotes, teaches man how to live; *Torat Chaim* means a complete life of good attributes and performing mitzvot in accordance with God's Will. The purpose of Torah is not just to make a person wiser, but through it, one can ethically develop and educate himself to achieve perfection. Any wisdom that does not improve the human character is not classified as wisdom.

התורה הקדושה היא התגלות אלוהית מהבורא לעם ישראל, שנתן בה את הסגולה והכח לתקן את האדם. "תורה" כשמה שהיא המורה לאדם ומלמדת אותו איך לחיות – "תורת חיים" – חיי שלימות במידות טובות ובעשיית המצוות כרצון השי"ת. תכלית חכמת התורה אינה רק להחכים את האדם, אלא שעל ידה האדם יחנך את עצמו ויבוא לידי שלמות. לדידינו כל חכמה שאינה משפרת את האדם אינה בגדר חכמה כלל.

The nations of the world did not merit a Divine revelation of Torah. Therefore, their quest for knowledge is for the purpose of gaining wisdom alone and does not instruct man to perfect his character. They are also of the opinion that the purpose of knowledge is to advance man, meaning that through wisdom man will rule over nature and make it subservient to his needs in a more efficient way. However, this wisdom does not inherently improve a person's character.

האומות לא זכו להתגלות אלוהית-תורה. לכן חכמתם היא לשם חכמה, ואינה מחנכת את האדם להיות טוב יותר. גם הם בדיעה שהחכמה מטרתה להיטיב לאדם, כלומר, ע"י החכמה ישתלט האדם על הטבע וישעבד אותו לצרכיו ולנוחיותו בצורה יותר יעילה, בכך ייטב לאדם. אך החכמה אינה מטיבה ומשפרת את האדם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ⌘ While during the Greek occupation there was no actual exile of the Jewish people from their land, the Sages still referred to this period as the Greek exile because the Divine Presence was in exile at the time.
- ⌘ Greece, although seen by the world as a nation that brought enlightenment, was classified as just the opposite by our Sages.
- ⌘ Greek intellectualism was called darkness because it denied the reality of the spiritual world, the source of Torah wisdom, and the ethical purpose of that wisdom.
- ⌘ The Greeks applied their minds to developing the world for the purpose of man but their wisdom was not Torah – it did not develop the world according to the purpose of God.

SECTION IV. THE GREEK DECREES AGAINST THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The Jews may have seen Alexander as a scout, and his culture as a means to pave the way for “the Spirit of Israel,” but the Greeks certainly did not share the same outlook. They viewed Judaism as a quaint culture to be subsumed within the library of world religions. As Greek influence spread throughout the known world, Jewish resistance to it was not met kindly by the Greeks and their supporters, who took action to quash the rebellion.

In this section we will explore the Greek attempt to subdue and subsume the Jewish religion through a series of calculated religious, cultural, and symbolic decrees.

PART A. SHABBAT, ROSH CHODESH, AND BRIT MILAH

1. **Otzar HaMidrashim, Chanukah, p. 189 – The Greeks decreed against mitzvot that symbolize the Jewish covenant with God.**

At that time the Greeks arose over the Jewish people and nullified the covenant which the Jews made with their God: Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh [the Jewish calendar system] and Brit Milah.

עתה באו ונעלה עליהם ונבטל מהם את הברית אשר כרת להם אלהיהם שבת ראש חדש ומילה.

Shabbat is the Jewish statement of faith in God as Creator of the world and Director of its affairs. Brit Milah, too, expresses belief in Creation and the lofty task of mankind to finish the job God started.

2. Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 5 – Man maintains a role in the completion of the world.

The wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, “Whose actions are more beautiful, those of God or of man?” He replied, “Those of man are more beautiful.” Turnus Rufus said, “Can man create something similar to the heavens and the earth?” Rabbi Akiva responded, “Do not ask me about something which is beyond the capability of man ... rather ask me something which is within the capability of man.”

He asked, “Why do you circumcise yourselves?” Rabbi Akiva said, “I knew that it was this topic that you meant earlier and therefore stated that the actions of man are more beautiful than those of God.” Rabbi Akiva brought him raw wheat and some cakes. He said, “This [wheat] is the work of God and these [cakes] are the work of man. Aren’t the cakes better than the wheat?”

מעשה שישאל טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ר' עקיבא איזו מעשים נאים, של הקב"ה או של בשר ודם. א"ל של בשר ודם נאים א"ל טורנוסרופוס הרי השמים והארץ יכול אדם לעשות כיוצא בהם א"ל ר"ע לא תאמר לי בדבר שהוא למעלה מן הבריות שאין שולטין עליו אלא אמור דברים שהם מצויין בבני אדם.

א"ל למה אתם מוליך? א"ל אני הייתי יודע שעל דבר זה אתה שואלני ולכך הקדמתי ואמרתי לך שמעשה בני אדם נאים מושל הקב"ה. הביא לו ר"ע שבליים וגלוסקאות. א"ל אלו מעשה הקב"ה ואלו מעשה ידי אדם. א"ל אין אלו נאים יותר מן השבליים.

The Jewish calendar system is also symbolic of mankind's connection to spirituality.

3. Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, Ohr Gedaliyahu, p. 78 – Sanctification of the new month expresses the spiritual power of personal renewal.

The Greeks wanted to nullify Rosh Chodesh, Shabbat, and circumcision. We need to understand why the Greeks were opposed to the mitzvah of sanctifying the new month, as this only includes arranging the order of the months. The explanation is that the Greeks wanted to destroy the power of renewal inherent within the Jew and the ability to release himself from habit and rote. This power of renewal is related to Rosh Chodesh and to sanctifying the new moon, as is hinted in the words we say when we sanctify the new month: “That in the future they (the Jewish people) will be renewed like her (the new moon).” On Rosh Chodesh a person is given the power to renew himself like the moon that is renewed each month. By seeing that the moon is renewed, we come to understand that there is an influence of renewal in the world.

היונים רצו לבטל חודש שבת ומילה, וצריכין להבין למה התנגדו היונים למצוות קידוש החודש, שיש בה רק ענין של סידור סדר החדשים, אלא כבר ביארנו שהיונים רצו לבטל הכח ביד היהודי לחדש את עצמו, ולצאת מתוך ההרגל וההתישנות, והכח הזה של חידוש שייך לר"ח ולקידוש הלבנה וכמרומו במה שאומרים בנוסח של קידוש לבנה, “שעתידין להתחדש כמותה”, כי בראש חודש ניתן הכח באדם לחדש את עצמו, דוגמת הלבנה שנתחדש בכל ר"ח, כי אם אנו רואים שהלבנה מתחדשת, רואים אנו שיש השפעה של התחדשות אז להעולם.

PART B. JEWISH FAMILY LIFE

Jewish family life is founded on holiness and spiritual purity. The Greeks attempted to eradicate this element of Jewish life and thereby undermine the family structure of the Jewish people.

1. **Rashi, Shabbat 23a – Jewish brides were accosted by Greek governors.**

The Greeks decreed that all Jewish brides had to visit the foreign governor prior to their wedding night.

שגזרו יוונים על כל בתולות הנשואות להיבעל לטפסר תחלה.

2. **Ba'al HaTurim, Bereishit 26:22 – Jewish women were not allowed to immerse themselves in the purifying waters of a mikvah.**

The third well dug by Yitzchak (Isaac) is called Rechovot. This refers to the future: when the Greeks decreed that the Jewish wives could not immerse [in a mikvah] in order to prevent the Jews from having children. God made a miracle and each family found a mikvah in their own home. This is the connotation of the verse, "[God has granted us ample space] and we can be fruitful in the Land" (Bereishit 26:22).

רחובות. כנגד יון שגזרו שלא יטבלו כדי למונעם מפריה ורביה, ונעשה להם נס ונזדמן להם מקוה בבית לכל אחד ואחד (מדרש מעשה חנוכה). וזהו "ופרינו בארץ".

3. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 459 – The Greeks aimed to detach the Jewish people from tradition, holiness, and from being the Chosen People.**

The Jewish exile by the Greeks darkened the eyes of the Jews [it obscured their ability to have clarity of understanding]. Not only did the Greeks enact many decrees against the Jews in order to have them forget the Torah and bring darkness upon them, but they also wanted to prevent the Jews from observing God's laws and take away their status of being the Chosen Nation so that they should become "free" and assimilate. This would undermine the essence of the holy nation!

גלות התורה בין החשיכה עיני ישראל. די בגזירות להשכיחם תורה כדי להחשיך להם. ועוד זאת שהתכוונו להעבירם מחוקי רצונו יתברך ולדחותם מלהיות העם הנבחר להיות בני חורין ו"מתעלים" – הרי זה פוגע בעצם מהותה של האומה הקדושה!

PART C. THE HORN OF AN OX

The Greek decrees did not always have a practical purpose; sometimes they were symbolic. Analyzing the Greek directive to make the Jews renounce Judaism shows us what the overall intent of their decrees really was.

1. **Bereishit Rabbah 2:4 – The darkness of Greece can be seen in the purpose of their decrees against the Jewish people.**

[The Greeks] told [the Jewish people], "Write for yourselves on the horn of an ox that you have no share in the God of Israel."

אומרת להם כתבו לכם על קרן השור שאין לכם חלק באלהי ישראל.

2. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. II, pp. 59-61 – Why write on an ox's horn?

Why did the Greeks specifically decree that this be written on an ox's horn as opposed to writing it publicly on the entrances to Jewish homes?

The Maharal explains that the Greeks wanted to remind the Jews of the transgression of the Golden Calf, on which account the Greeks wrongly concluded that God now despised the Jews and that their status as the Chosen People had been discontinued. The truth is, however, that God chose the Jews for eternity and loves them independently of any specific actions or events. Even after this incident they remained His nation.

“Write for yourselves” means to clarify and make clear to yourselves – for when a person writes something he attempts to elucidate his message more than when he speaks – that your existence and prowess is exclusively through nature, as the ox is the symbol of the powers of nature and its horn expresses its strength. By ordering the Jews to write on the ox's horn “You have no part in the God of Israel,” the Greeks hoped that the Jews would recognize that nature alone drives Creation, that man by using his mind is all-powerful [and not God], and he can use nature as he wishes.

מדוע גזרו לכתוב דוקא על קרן השור, ומדוע לא לכתוב באופן בולט על פתחי הבתים?

המהר"ל (נר מצוה עמוד טו) מבאר את הסיבה לכתוב על קרן השור, שרצו להזכיר לכלל ישראל את חטא העגל שבגללו מאס בהם השי"ת, ולכן חדלו מאז מלהיות העם הנבחר. אך האמת היא שהשי"ת בחר בישראל בחירה נצחית ואהב אותם אהבה שאינה תלויה בדבר וגם לאחר שחטאו הם עמו....

“כתבו לכם” היינו תבררו ותבהירו לעצמכם – כי כאשר אדם כותב דבר הוא משתדל להבהיר את הדברים יותר מאשר בדיבור – שהקיום והכח שלכם הוא על ידי השימוש בטבע, שהרי השור הוא הסמל לכוחות הטבע, והקרן היא המבטאת את החוזק של השור. כלומר, בכך שתכתבו על קרן השור “שאינ לכם חלק באלוקי ישראל”, תשרישו ותחזקו בנפשכם את ההכרה שהטבע הוא המוביל את הבריאה, והאדם בכח שכלו משתמש בטבע כרצונו והוא בעל הבית ובעל הכוחות.

What was the overall goal of the Greek decrees?

3. Ibid., p. 57 – The Greeks decreed that the Jews should renounce their relationship with God.

... The purpose of the Greeks' decrees was to darken and conceal the vision of the Jewish people as the Chosen Nation, holy to God, treasured and different from all other nations. For this reason they decreed that the Jews could not perform circumcision or observe Shabbat, as these mitzvot are signs of the covenant between God and His nation, sanctifying their bodies to God – through circumcision, and through time – with Shabbat. The Greeks instituted these laws to nullify the greatness of the Jews and make them equal to other nations.

...הכוונה שמטרת היוונים בגזירותיהם היתה להחשיך ולכסות את המראה והתדמית של עם ישראל כעם סגולה קדוש לה', הנבחר והשונה מכל העמים. לכן גזרו על המילה והשבת (כמבואר במגילת אנטיוכוס) שהן אות ברית בין השי"ת לישראל עמו, המקדשים לה' את גוף האדם – המילה, ואת הזמן – השבת. את זאת עשו היוונים כדי לבטל את מעלתם של ישראל ולהשוותם לכל העמים.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ≈ In their ideological battle with the Jews, the Greeks sought to abolish those Jewish practices most rooted in the Jewish concept of spirituality and connection to God.
- ≈ The Greeks also sought to undermine Jewish family life in a further attempt to subsume the identity of the Jewish people under the umbrella of Greek culture.
- ≈ The overall thrust of the Greek decrees was to make the Jewish people renounce their belief in God and the special relationship they have with Him.

SECTION V. THE JEWISH RESPONSE

The Jewish response to the religious oppression of the Greeks was military, waging the war of the few against the many, the weak against the strong. In this section we will explore why the Jews of the Chanukah period chose to take this route rather than that of prayer and repentance, as they had done in Persia, at the time of Purim, prior to the establishment of the Second Temple.

PART A. THE REAL REASON FOR THE DECREES

Although the Greek rationale was based on man's preeminence, Judaism maintains that nothing happens in this world against the Will of God. As the Torah makes clear over and over again, the pulse of history beats beneath the surface; it is a function of our relationship with God. No matter what the Greek political or ideological motives may have been, ultimately it was not they who were calling the shots.

The question then arises, why did God grant the Greeks the power to decree against the Jewish people? What had the Jewish people done to deserve such a fate?

1. **Bach, on Tur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 670 – Laxity toward Jewish service in the Temple.**

On Chanukah, the main reason for the decree upon the Jews was because they were lax in their service of God in the Temple. Accordingly, the Heavenly Decree was to take away the Temple Service from them ...

אבל בחנוכה עיקר הגזירה היתה על שהתרשלו
בעבודה וע"כ היתה הגזירה לבטל מהם העבודה....

2. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 456 – The Greek decrees corresponded directly to their causes.**

We have gained a new clarity: Decrees do not come without reason! The decrees came measure for measure: If there had been no weakening in their Divine Service, there would have been no decree by the Greeks ...

פנים חדשות ראינו כאן: גזירות אינן באות בלי סיבה!
והגזירה באה במידה כנגד מידה: אם לא היתה איזו
התרשלות בעבודה – לא היו גזירות היוונים

According to the above, the Greek desecration of the Temple came about due to the Jews' own lack of respect for it. By extension, the Greek suppression of Judaism resulted from the Jewish people's waning commitment to their religion, understood as "Divine service" in the broad sense of the term.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Avodat Yom HaKippurim (Laws of the Yom Kippur Service) 1:7 – Disregard for the authenticity of the Oral Torah.**

In the days of the Second Temple, heresy blossomed among the Jewish people. The Sadducees appeared ... who denied the Oral Torah.

בימי בית שני צץ המינוח בישראל ויצאו הצדוקין ...
שאין מאמינן בתורה שבעל פה

PART B. THE JEWISH REVOLT

The basic message is that if Judaism was under attack it was because the Jews themselves had not been loyal enough to its cause. The Jewish response therefore was a rededication to Jewish commitments, self sacrifice for the sake of Jewish survival, and dedication to the sanctity of the Holy Temple.

1. **Rabbi Ken Spiro, Crash Course in Jewish History #29 – Dedication to Judaism sparked the Jewish revolt against Greek influence.**

The year is 167 BCE and the horrible persecution of Judaism by the Greeks is in full swing. The Greek troops show up in the town of Modi'in (a site west of Jerusalem which you can visit today off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway) and demand that the Jews there sacrifice an unkosher animal to the Greek gods. The elder of the town, Matityahu, who is a Kohein, that is of the priestly class, refuses.

Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers ... We will not obey the king's word by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left (I Maccabees 2:19-22).

But there is a Hellenized Jew in the town who is willing to do what is unspeakable in Jewish eyes. As he's about to sacrifice the animal, Mattathias stabs him, also killing the Greek official present. He then turns to the crowd and announces: "Follow me, all of you who are for God's law and stand by the covenant" (I Maccabees 2:27).

PART C. A JEWISH RENEWAL

As we will explore in depth in the second Morasha class on Chanukah, God responded to the dedication of the Jews with miracles that eternally fortify the Jewish people.

1. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 456 – Jews risked their lives for Judaism.**

When the Kohanim risked their lives for the Divine Service with unswerving dedication, they immediately saw miracles: (1) In the war – "God gave over the strong into the hands of the weak, etc.," and (2) through the rededication of the Temple Service – with the miracle of the flask of oil.

וכאשר הכוהנים מסרו נפשם על העבודה – מיד
ראו שוב נסים, הן במלחמתם – "מסרת גבורים ביד
חלשים" וכו' – והן בהחזרת העבודה – בנס הפך שמן.

2. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II, p. 114 – Total selfless commitment to Jewish life.

Through the total and absolute dedication of the Hasmoneans to Judaism, they rose to the level of being purely selfless in their commitment, and this was the essential spiritual reason that they merited to overcome the Greeks. And the miracle of the oil, that the lights were not extinguished, showed them a sign from Heaven, which revealed that their hearts contained an eternal inner light.

אך במסירת נפשם של החשמונאים עלו למדרגת לשמה גמור, וזאת היתה הסיבה האמיתית הרוחנית שמחמתה זכו להתגבר על היונים. ובנס השמן שגרות המנורה לא כבו הראו להם סימן מן השמים שנתגלה בלבם האור הפנימי שאין לו הפסק לעולמים.

Throughout history, the Jewish nation has persevered with pure faith and dedication to uphold the eternal messages of Chanukah:

Chanukah came to Bergen Belsen. It was time to kindle the Chanukah lights. A jug of oil was not to be found, no candle was in sight, and a Chanukiah (menorah) belonged to the distant past. Instead, a wooden clog, the shoe of one of the inmates, became a Chanukiah; strings pulled from a concentration camp uniform – a wick; and the black camp shoe polish – pure oil.

The Rabbi of Bluzhov (Israel Spira) lit the first light and chanted the first two blessings in his pleasant voice, and the festive melody was filled with sorrow and pain. When he was about to recite the third blessing, he stopped, turned his head, and looked around as if he were searching for something.

But immediately, he turned his face back to the quivering small lights and in a strong, reassuring, comforting voice, chanted the third blessing: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season."

As soon as the Rabbi of Bluzhov had finished the ceremony of kindling the lights, Mr. Zamietchkowski, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Bund, elbowed his way to the rabbi and said, "Spira, you are a clever and honest person. I can understand your need to light Chanukah candles in these wretched times. I can even understand the historical note of the second blessing, 'Who did miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season.' But the fact that you recited the third blessing is beyond me. How could you thank God and say, 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season'?"

"How could you say it when hundreds of dead Jewish bodies are literally lying within the shadows of the Chanukah lights, when thousands of living Jewish skeletons are walking around in camp, and millions more are being massacred? For this you are thankful to God? For this you praise the Lord? This you call 'keeping us alive'?"

"Zamietchkowski, you are a hundred percent right," answered the rabbi. "When I reached the third blessing, I also hesitated and asked myself, what should I do with this blessing? I turned my head in order to ask the Rabbi of Zaner and other distinguished rabbis who were standing near me, if indeed I might recite the blessing. But just as I was turning my head, I noticed that behind me a throng was standing, a large crowd of living Jews, their faces expressing faith, devotion, and concentration as they were listening to the rite of the kindling of the Chanukah lights.

"I said to myself, if God, Blessed be He, has such a nation that at times like these, when during the lighting of the Chanukah lights they see in front of them death looking from every corner, if despite all that, they stand in throngs and with devotion listening to the Chanukah blessing 'Who did miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season'; if, indeed, I was blessed to see such a people with so much faith and fervor, then I am under a special obligation to recite the third blessing." (From Chanukah in Bergen Belsen, in "Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust," by Yaffa Eliach, published by Oxford University Press.)

The lessons we integrate from Chanukah can strengthen us throughout the year.

3. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, pp. 456-7 – Chanukah is the holiday of Jewish renewal.**

Chanukah is the holiday of spiritual strengthening! We can learn from the salvations and wars of Chanukah uncompromising dedication to Jewish life. If we are worthy, the strength we derive from Chanukah will accompany us throughout the year, as this is the special influence this holiday can impact.

הרי זהו חג החיזוק! כל מה שניתן לנו ללמוד מהתשועות והמלחמות בחג זה, הוא: מסירת נפש! אילו זכינו, היינו מפקים מחנוכה חיזוק למשך כל השנה, כי זוהי סגולת החג.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

- ≈ The Jewish perspective on history teaches us to look at our own failings as the source of our enemy's success. In the case of Chanukah, Judaism was under attack because the Jews themselves had been taken in by Greek culture and had become lax in their commitment to Judaism.
- ≈ The Jewish response was to fight fire with fire; if laxity was the short-coming, then its rectification would be achieved through self-sacrifice and rededication to Jewish ideals and practices.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT HAPPENED ON CHANUKAH THAT STILL IMPACTS US TODAY?

When the Greeks conquered the Jewish homeland and spread the influence of their culture in the area, the Jews offered a mixed response: some Jews embraced Greek culture while others resisted it.

The Greeks and their sympathizers sought to advance the pace of Jewish assimilation, resorting to a series of decrees that amounted to religious persecution.

The Jews organized a highly risky military revolt against the Greeks, achieving a miraculous victory, rededicating the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and ultimately reestablishing Jewish sovereignty.

The miraculous military success was accompanied by another miracle in the rededication of the Temple as one small jug of oil lit the Menorah for eight consecutive days.

WHAT IS THE ETERNAL CONFLICT BETWEEN THE JEWS AND THE GREEKS?

The conflict between Judaism and Greek culture was centered on the Jewish idea of spirituality and understanding that there is knowledge beyond that which can be experienced or rationalized by human intelligence. The Greeks denied spirituality, the existence of God, and the Jewish people's special relationship with Him.

ANCIENT GREECE IS USUALLY SEEN AS THE MOTHER OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION – WHY DID THE JEWS OPPOSE THEIR ADVANCEMENT?

At first the Jews and Greeks found common ground in a shared intellectualism and desire to spread the influence of civilization. But an ideological rift was soon apparent as the Greeks sought to subsume Judaism and the Jewish people under the umbrella of their own culture.

The Greek denial of spirituality and deification of the human intellect was seen by the Jews as a source of spiritual darkness that threatened the continuity of Jewish life.

HOW DID THE GREEKS OPPRESS US?

The Greeks imposed decrees that banned certain Jewish practices, particularly those that expressed Jewish belief in God and our relationship with Him.

The Greeks also sought to undermine the continuity of the Jewish people by accosting Jewish brides and by a ban on the mitzvah of family purity.

WHY DID THE JEWS REVOLT AGAINST THE GREEKS?

While many Jews were content to slip into the mode of Greek life, a small band of Jews refused to give in under pressure and mounted a rebellion against the Greek oppressors.

The Jews revolted militarily against the Greeks because they recognized their failing as being lack of commitment to Jewish values and observance. The way to rectify this laxity was to go to the opposite extreme, risking life and limb for the sake of Jewish survival.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. II

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Moadim, Vol. II

Rabbi Sholom Brezovsky, Nesivos Shalom on Chanukah

Rabbi Shlomo Brevda on the meeting of Shimon HaTzadik and Alexander the Great.

