

CHAPTER NINE

ISRAEL, GREECE, AND RELIGION

COMPARING THE CELEBRATIONS OF PURIM AND CHANUKAH

When comparing Chanukah with its “sister” Rabbinic festival of Purim, we notice a stark contrast in the nature and focus of the celebration:

- Purim is described in the Book of Esther as “days of feasting and rejoicing,”¹ and these themes do indeed pervade the festival.
- In contrast, Chanukah is designated as “days of praise and thanksgiving,” with little or no emphasis on physical celebration.

What is behind these different modes of marking the festival?

The classic explanation of this matter is that it reflects the differing nature of the oppression from which we were saved:

- On Purim, Haman sought to destroy us physically, therefore, we celebrate our deliverance from his decree through physical means of feasting.

1 *Esther* 9:22.

- Chanukah, however, celebrates our deliverance from spiritual oppression, as Greece sought to detach us from Torah and mitzvos; therefore, the celebration itself takes the more spiritual form of praising and thanking Hashem.²

GREEK RELIGION

Let us consider a further approach. When we discuss the ideological confrontation between Greece and Israel, we generally describe it as the confrontation between philosophy and Torah. However, as we know, the Greeks also had their deities; in fact, they had a lot of them! How does their approach to religion fit in with their emphasis on philosophy, and how did this form part of the conflict between them and us?

A key point to consider here is that the difference between monotheism and polytheism lies not just in the number of deities to which one subscribes; it reflects a fundamentally different approach to one's relationship with the deity.

In the Greek polytheistic view, each of the many deities in the pantheon was in control of a different force. When a person needed something in a particular area, he would petition the deity associated with that area for success. If he had no such need, he would not make contact. This was a purely benefit-oriented arrangement, with no significance ascribed to the relationship itself. Moreover, since each deity was in control of only one force, it was naturally in conflict with other deities controlling conflicting forces (as reflected in the numerous power-struggles that comprise much of Greek mythology) and hence was in constant need of empowerment. The service of that deity was looked upon as providing it with that empowerment, in return for which the deity would grant success in its area of control. In brief, the approach was, "If I scratch the deity's back, it will scratch mine."

The Jewish People do not subscribe to any deity other than the One God Who controls all forces. This has radical implications for our understanding of Divine service. If Hashem alone is in control of all

² See *Levush, Orach Chaim* 670.

forces, then He is not competing with anyone else and is in no need of empowerment. If so, then what is the goal of serving Him?

The answer leads us to a completely different approach to religion. Our relationship with Hashem is not about what He wants *from* us, but about what He wants *for* us. Through fulfilling Hashem's will, we elevate ourselves to become more like Him and to draw close to Him, thereby partaking of His Infinite Goodness. In other words, the relationship with Hashem is not a means toward some external benefit; it is the goal itself. To live a Godly life of truth and kindness is the greatest reward.

ANTIGONUS' SAYING

This aspect of the conflict between Greece and Israel will give us deeper insight into one of the well-known sayings cited in the beginning of *Pirkei Avos*. The Mishnah reads:

אנטיגנוס איש טובו קיבל משמעון הצדיק. הוא היה אומר, אל תהיו
כעבדים המשמשים את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס, אלא הוו כעבדים
המשמשים את הרב שלא על מנת לקבל פרס.

*Antigonus of Socho received [the tradition] from Shimon Hatzaddik. He used to say: "Do not be like servants who serve the master on condition of receiving reward. Rather, be like servants who serve the master not on condition of receiving reward."*³

It is interesting to ponder why, of all things, this was the message that Antigonus chose to transmit to the Jewish People in his time. However, as the Mishnah states, Antigonus lived in the generation after Shimon Hatzaddik and received the tradition from him. Shimon Hatzaddik lived in the time of Alexander the Great (indeed, there is a famous account in the Talmud of the two of them meeting).⁴ Antigonus' generation, therefore, was one where Greece had already assumed control of Israel, and its Hellenistic ideas were already making inroads. He saw that even people who did not adopt Greece's polytheistic worldview

3 *Avos* 1:3.

4 See *Yoma* 69a.

were nonetheless adopting its general approach to religion, i.e., that its goal is to receive temporal success in one's worldly endeavors and no more. Therefore, Antigonus felt that the message his generation needed most was one that exhorted them against this approach, for ultimately it reduces our relationship with Hashem to a means purely of attaining one's worldly needs, effectively missing the entire point of that relationship.⁵

CRYING WOLF

A key difference between the approaches of Greece and Israel to religion relates to the question of how to respond when one's request is not answered to one's satisfaction. According to the Greek approach, where the entire relationship is based on the deity providing me with what I ask for, if it should fail to deliver, then I will reject it and move on to another one. There is no notion that the answer "no" could actually be for my ultimate benefit—to move me towards introspection and repentance, or to allow for some otherwise more positive outcome further down the line. Those ideas are based on the notion that the deity has my well-being at heart, something that is antithetical to the entire Greek approach. In contrast, Israel understands that Hashem is our Father Who loves and cares for us, and hence it relates to all responses from Him—both "yes'es" and "no's"—with that understanding.

A classic episode that expresses the differences between these two approaches is recorded in the Talmud at the very end of *ma-seches Sukkah*:

מעשה במרים בת בילגה שהמירה דתה ונשאת לטרדיוט אחד ממלכות
יוונים. כשנכנסו יוונים להיכל היתה מבעטת בסנדלה על גבי המזבח
ואמרה, לוקוס לוקוס עד מתי אתה מכלה ממונן של ישראל ואי אתה
עומד עליהם בשעת הדחק?

*It happened with Miriam the daughter of Bilgah, who
apostatized and married an officer of one of the Greek kings.*

5 *Derashos of Rav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, Chanukah.*

*When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, she kicked the Altar with her sandal and exclaimed: "Wolf! Wolf! How long will you consume the money of Israel, and yet you do not stand by them in a time of pressing need!"*⁶

We note that the Gemara prefaced its presentation of this terrible incident by saying that Miriam married a Greek officer. Indeed, her words of derision towards the Altar represented not just an abandonment of Judaism but her adopting the Greek approach to religion, which understands that if the deity does not satisfy one's demands, it is of no value and is deserving only of scorn and rejection.⁷ In this respect, Greece's attitude toward religion did not differ at its core from their attitude toward philosophy: Both place man at the center, seeking to harness the relevant forces to develop his interests and endeavors as he sees fit in this world.

A rejection of this perspective as defining our relationship with Hashem was therefore a central part of our conflict with Greece, and thus becomes a central part of the festival of Chanukah itself. Perhaps now we can understand why the celebrations on Chanukah take the form, not of feasting and rejoicing, but of praise and thanksgiving—matters that express the connection between us and Hashem. Through this, we are establishing one of the most important lessons of the Chanukah story: Our relationship with Hashem is not just of value as a means *toward* celebration, rather it is the basis and cause *of* the celebration!

6 *Sukkah* 56b.

7 Rav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, loc. cit.