

Breaking the Bonds of Bris

When we think of the story of Chanukah and the conflict between the Maccabees and their followers against the forces and influence of the Greeks, we think primarily of the spiritual heroism of the Jews. But what of the perpetrators? What were their motives and beliefs about Judaism?

Let us explore the minds of our enemies through the prism of Divrei Chazal—the words of our holy sages. Sfas Emes and other chassidic works quote a statement of our sages that the Greeks decreed against the Jews to desist from the performance of three mitzvos: Chodesh—the determination of the onset of the new Jewish month, Shabbos, and Milah—circumcision.

If we delve deeply into aspects of these three commandments, we will find a commonality present at the core of the mission of the Greeks. First, however, let us look at a phrase from the Chanukah liturgy that describes an event which casts a spotlight on the outlook of the Greeks. In Maoz Tzur we sing "ufortzu chomos migdalei"; that the Greeks "breached the walls of my tower" a reference to an incident recorded in Mishna Midos (2:3). The Mishna describes a lattice fence that surrounded the walls of the inner courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. It goes on to tell us that the Greeks made thirteen breaches in this fence. The significance of this fence is that according to Mishna Kelim (1:8) no gentile was allowed to pass that boundary. It is evident that the Greeks breached that fence in order to symbolize their opposition to the Torah's separation between Jew and gentile.

It is well known that the stated goal of the Greek persecution of the Jews during the period of Chanukah was not to exterminate them, but rather to Hellenize them, thereby making the Jewish people just another subdivision of Greek civilization. This made the Torah's demands for Jewish distinctiveness anathema to their goal of Hellenization. The distinction between two items is highlighted when it is contrasted against the backdrop of what they share in common. Areas of belief and practice where Jew and Gentile share common ground and yet the Torah demands of the Jew an added level of relationship and responsibility, highlight their differences.

I wish to suggest that Chodesh, Shabbos, and Milah which the Greeks decreed against, are all areas where the Torah gives the Gentile a role, yet where the Jew has an entirely different capacity. The role of a Jew in these areas is defined not only by a different set of responsibilities, but by a unique covenantal relationship with G-d.

In order to understand this we must first know that the Torah speaks to Gentiles as well as to Jews,

though in a more limited fashion. The Torah expects the "religion" of the Gentile to be the Noahide laws of conduct. Though there are only seven Noahide laws per se, we will see that there are a number of other items that apply to, if not all, but at least to some gentiles.

Let us look first at Shabbos. In Shmos (23:12) we are told regarding the commandment of Shabbos, "VTinafesh ben amosecho vehager" "The son of your maidservant and the ger shall rest." Who is the "ger" or "stranger" described here? The Mechilta quoted by Rashi tells us that it refers not, as it often does, to the righteous convert, but rather to ger toshav: the righteous gentile whose religion is the Noahide law. The Mechilta goes on to report of a disagreement as to the nature of this "Noahide Shabbos." Either a gentile must refrain on Shabbos from those acts of Melacha—creative work—that a Jew may not perform on Yom Tov (festivals), or from those he may not perform on Chol Hamoed—the intermediate days of the festivals.

The Jew however must refrain from a more comprehensive set of activities on Shabbos. He may not perform any one of thirty-nine categories of work; the same categories as were used in the construction of the Mishkan—the Tabernacle constructed in the desert. Our Sages derived this from the juxtaposition of the area of the Torah's commandment of Shabbos and the commandment to build the Mishkan. In that section regarding Shabbos (Shmos 31:13-16) G-d describes the Shabbos both as "An eternal sign between Myself and the Children of Israel" and most significantly as a "Bris"—a covenant.

Let us now look at Chodesh. I wish to suggest that this Greek decree against the Jewish calendar was symptomatic of an opposition to a more fundamental issue. This was an opposition to the system of tradition known as the Oral Law. The Jewish calendar is lunar-based, and as such, every month is either 29 or 30 days long. This is due to the fact that the lunar orbit around Earth is slightly longer than 29 and a half days. According to many authorities, the underlying determinant of whether any particular month will have 29 or 30 days is part of the oral tradition stretching back to Sinai (see Rabbeinu Bechaye, Shmos 12:1 quoting Rabbeinu Chananel).

This being so, there would hardly be any more relevant and powerful issue over which the Oral Law dictated control of the nation than the determination of the calendar.

What is manifest then in the opposition to Chodesh by the Greeks and their Hellenist Jewish followers, was a head-on confrontation over the

validity of the Oral Torah. Just as we shown in the case of Shabbos, Torah also is an area which the gentiles felt they had a claim, yet the Jewish possession of the Oral Torah represents a unique and covenantal relationship between the Jews and G-d.

Just prior to the period of the Chanukah episode, Ptolemy, the Greek ruler of Egypt, had forced the Jewish sages to translate the Written Torah into Greek, in what became known in the gentile world as the Septuagint. Thus, when the Greek persecutions began, the Written Torah already "belonged" to the entire world.

There is a Midrash (quoted in the introduction to Sefer Mitzvos HaGadol as having its source in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer) that Providence arranged that the need to formally write down the Oral tradition in the form of the Talmud occurred only after the establishment of Christianity and Islam. This timing denied the gentile religions the ability to use the Oral Torah as part of their faiths in the same way that they did with the Written Torah (the actual availability of written texts of the Talmud, according to many authorities, postdated the establishment of Islam).

This historical circumstance was an affirmation of what Rabbi Yochanan teaches in Talmud Gittin (60b), that the covenant that G-d made with the Jews about Torah was made in reference to the Oral Torah. This prized and uniquely Jewish possession roused the ire of the Greeks and stood in opposition to their universalist goals.

Milah too is not only the province of the Jew. The Talmud Sanhedrin (59b) teaches that when Abraham was commanded to perform circumcision, that requirement passed on not only to his Jewish progeny, but also to those children (and their decedents) that Abraham bore after he received the commandment of milah even though they would be gentiles. Milah has two elements to the procedure. There is the basic removal of the primary foreskin called orlah. The second element is called priyah and involves the pulling back of a remaining membrane. The priyah, rules Shaagas Aryeh (Chapter 49), was not incumbent upon Abraham himself, nor upon his gentile decedents who otherwise must practice milah. Furthermore, Bais Halevi (Lech Lecha) maintains that the true covenant of milah is only when accompanied by priyah. Thus G-d's promise to Abraham "and I will place my covenant" (Beraishis 17:2) regarding circumcision was really referring to the future cov-

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RABBI
DOVID
SPETNER



CHANUKAH HINTS

RABBI YITZCHOK PREIS

When Doniel describes the various nations who will rule the world, Yavan, Greece, is described as being like נחשת - copper.

With this in mind we can understand the comment of the Bnei Yissaschar about the juxtaposition of the last possuk in Parshas Terumah:

וַיִּצְקֶתָּ לָהֶם חֲמִשָּׁה אֲדָנִי נְחֹשֶׁת...

and the opening possuk of Parshas Tetzaveh:

וְאַתָּה תִּצְוֶה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָקִחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זֵית זָךְ כִּתִּית לְמָאֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד

As the Bnei Yissaschar points out, the Torah is hinting to the fact that in the time of the Greek Empire there will be a special need for pure olive oil!

Meforshim also note that נחשת can stand for: נר חנוכה שמאל תדליק and נר חנוכה and נר חנוכה שמש תדליק hinting to the fact that for the "Nechoshes"/Greek-induced lighting, the ideal would be to kindle olive oil, by means of a Shamash, on the left side of the doorway.

The 4 letters found on the Dreidel - נ ג ה ש - can form the word "גשנה".

Although there are other approaches that are too complex for this format, one thought, based on the Bnei Yissaschar, is that Galus Mitzrayim - the Egyptian exile - was the precursor of all other exiles. Yakov charged Yehudah with the critical task of protecting against assimilation by setting up a Torah study center [hmmm, a Kollel???] in Goshen. The Dreidel symbolizes the dedication Jews have always had to Torah study even in the harshest Golus/exile and is hinted to in this first act of securing the learning of Torah in such circumstances. 🕯️

MESSAGE IN THE MENORAH RABBI CHAIM HEINEMANN

A young man named Avraham ("Avrumel") Greenbaum lost his entire family in the Holocaust. After the war, he came to America and wanted nothing to do with Judaism. He changed his name to Aaron Green, moved to Alabama and married a woman there, who, miraculously, was Jewish. The day his oldest son Jeffrey turned thirteen, they were not going to celebrate his bar mitzvah. Instead, Aaron decided to recognize the day by taking Jeffrey to the mall and buying him anything he wanted there. When they went into a big electronics store and were browsing, Jeffrey's eye caught something in an antique shop across the way. He was mesmerized. He couldn't take his eyes off what he had seen. He told his father, "I don't want anything from the electronics store. I want to go across to the antique shop." When they got there, the boy pointed to an old wooden menorah and said, "That's what I want for my Bar-Mitzvah." His father couldn't believe it. He was letting his child buy anything he wanted in the whole mall and this is what he was choosing? He tried to talk him out of it, but couldn't. Aaron asked the shop owner the price of the menorah. To his surprise, the man replied "Sorry, that's not for sale." Aaron said, "What do you mean? This is a store." He offered a lot of money for it. Again the owner refused, this time explaining, "I found out the history of this menorah. A man constructed it during the war and it took him months to gather the wood. It survived, but he did not. It's going to be a collector's item. It's not for sale." Meanwhile, Jeffrey kept telling his father, "That's what I want. All I want is the menorah." So Aaron Green kept offering more money until the owner finally agreed to sell. The boy was so excited. He took the menorah up to his room and played with it every day. One day the parents heard a crash from Jeffrey's room. They ran upstairs and saw the menorah shattered to pieces.

The father yelled at his son for being so careless, as he paid so much money for it. Afterwards, Aaron felt bad about his reaction. He suggested to his son, "Let's try to glue it back together." While holding one of the pieces, the father noticed a piece of paper wedged inside. He pulled it out and started reading. Tears welled up in his eyes and soon after he fainted. His family threw water on him and revived him. "What happened?", they asked. He replied, "Let me read you this letter. It was written in Yiddish, so I'll translate. "To whoever finds this menorah, I want you to know that I constructed it not knowing if I would ever have the opportunity to light it. Who knows if I will live till Chanukah to see it being kindled? In all probability, going through this war, I will not. But if Providence brings this menorah to your hands, you who are reading this letter, promise me you will light it for me and for us, my family, and those who gave their lives to serve Hashem (G-d). "Aaron Green then looked up at his family and, in a choked-up voice with tears still in his eyes, said, "The letter is signed by my father." They were all speechless. That family recognized the Divine Providence involved and they returned to living their lives according to Torah and Mitzvos. How could they not! The hand of Hashem was undeniable, taking a menorah from Europe and bringing it back to the family in a remote mall in Alabama, inspiring them to return to Torah-True Judaism.

Here is a powerful lesson of Mesirus Nefesh (self sacrifice) that we should be taking away with us. This father / grandfather who did not make it through the Holocaust, today has a family, all of them following Torah and Mitzvos. In the camps, the father built a menorah with Mesirus Nefesh and when one serves Hashem with mesirus nefesh, blessings will come from it. 🕯️

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enanted that G-d would have with the Jewish people when they would begin to practice the uniquely Jewish form of circumcision—milah with priyah.

We have now seen the common theme that runs through the three mitvos that the Greeks attempted to abolish from among the Jews. They wished to remove items that highlighted not only a unique Jewish role, but most importantly, items

that were bound up in an exclusive relationship—a bris—between the Jew and his G-d.

This motivation can be seen clearly in a quote from the Greek tyrant Antiochus himself. This quote is actually the only known source for the tradition of the decrees against Chodesh, Shabbos and Milah. It is found in a work known as Megilas Antiochus, which according to Rav Saa-

diah Gaon (10th century C.E.) was written by the Chashmonaim themselves. In this quote, Antiochus tells his people that "let us destroy the covenant... of Chodesh, Shabbos and Milah."

With this statement, the mind of our enemy is revealed. He wished first and foremost to destroy the special relationship between the Jews and their G-d. 🕯️