

Chanuka: Yosef and Yavan

In scheduling the reading of the *parshiot* for each Shabbos, our Sages scheduled the reading of one or both of the *parshiot* that deal with the story of Yosef to always fall on Chanukah. They saw an inherent connection between these two chapters in the history of our nation, and it is therefore fitting that we explore this connection as well.

The *Shvilei Pinchas*, *Vayeshev* no. 92, teaches that indeed our Greek exile, *golus Yavan*, is a rectification and expiation for the story of Yosef. Indeed, the *Megaleh Amukos*, *Miketz* no. 16, notes that the gematrias (numerologies) of Y-O-Se-F, Me-Le-CH Ya-Va-N, and the particular Greek king involved in the Chanukah story, A-N-T-I-O-CH-uS, all add up to 156, pushing us further into finding some underlying principles in the relationship between these two chapters of our history. So the question we are left with is: How does the Greek interaction with Judaism explain the travails that Yosef suffered and vice versa, and what are we to extract from this juxtaposition?

Yosef played a special role in Jewish history. He was the first member of the full Judaic family to spend time in exile, in an alien culture. His words, actions and deportment in the various circumstances in which he found himself provide the model for our behavior as we live through this long exile. This forms the basis for a long discussion in the *Shvilei Pinchas*.

The *Shvilei Pinchas* starts the history lesson with Yaakov. When Yaakov fled from Esav, he did not go directly



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to Lavan. Instead, he stopped at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever for fourteen years to study particular areas of Torah, to learn how a Jew is to interact with strangers in an alien world. That is how he survived in the home of his uncle Lavan. When Yaakov had his own family, he taught all his sons Torah, but he understood through some Divine inspiration that Yosef would need this additional Torah. From the age of three, when one begins teaching some aspects of Torah to a child, until the age of seventeen, the same fourteen years he himself had studied the Torah of exile, he taught this specialized Torah to this son. At the age of seventeen, Yaakov sent Yosef in search of his brothers, thus precipitating the sale of Yosef to Egypt and this chapter of our history. This reflection of Torah learning is what Yosef saw when the wife of Potifar tried to seduce him, and this gave him the strength and determination to flee from her grasp.

Yosef had believed that if you try to integrate and interact with the culture around you, if you look like them and act like them, you will be accepted and you may influence them. He found out, however, that if you try to be more like them, you are more likely to be influenced by them than the other way around. He realized that he must remain strong in maintaining

his identity as separate from the Egyptians around him if he was to remain pure and true to his inner self. As such, he was to become the model for the rest of the fledgling nation as they would descend to Egypt twenty-two years later. This was the Divine plan. This was symbolized by the throwing of Yosef into a pit empty of water, but filled with snakes and scorpions; like the pit of Egypt empty of life sustaining Torah but full of the evils and immorality of their depraved culture. Just as Yosef survived both the physical pit and the symbolic pit of Egypt, so too would the nation he represented survive. We would learn how to maintain a separate identity amid the various corrupt nations in which we would find ourselves throughout our history.

This was the essence of the battle between the Greeks and the Hasmoneans, continues the *Shvilei Pinchas*. They wanted the Jews to assimilate into their culture, and unfortunately many Jews did. The Greeks brought their idols into the Temple and sacrificed pigs. And they sought out every jar and cruse of oil they could find to defile it, to compromise the purity of the oil, for the major characteristic of oil is that it separates and rises to the top of anything it is mixed with. Oil always remains separate; it always retains its

essence. The crux of the war with the Greeks was much more than political. The Greeks wanted us to lose our essence and become intermingled with them.

But we already had the example of Yosef, who always remained the *Ivri*, the different one. The Hasmoneans understood that they too, and the entire nation, could retain their specific separate Jewish identity even amid this strong alien culture. Yosef remained righteous by guarding his eyes, by being circumspect in what he allowed himself to see. He did not fall prey to the seductive eyes of the many women enamored of his good looks. He focused only on the purity of what he had learned in his father's house.

The Belzer Rebbe, in *Leket Sifsei Kodesh*, makes an interesting observation. Yosef remained circumspect in observing the three pillars of our faith throughout his life in Egypt. He kept *Shabbos*, *bris milah* (circumcision), and *niddah* (family purity). The initials of these three mitzvos spell out *shemen*, oil, the central symbol of our Chanukah observance. And these three mitzvos formed the backbone of the practices banned by the Greeks.

In the darkness of night, points out Reb Chaim Hachohen, all the wild animals of the forest come out. But when daylight breaks, the beasts disperse and go back to their lairs. In our dark exile, the *yetzer horo* of the alien cultures bare their claws and reach forward with their tentacles. We need the light so that our eyes will see the truth and we will retain our values as Jews.

This too is the lesson from Yosef. The Gemarah, *Shabbos* 22a, points out that the menorah may not be higher than twenty *amos*, approximately thirty feet. If the menorah is to be a beacon

that teaches us to keep our eyes focused on our inner essence, then it must be at something resembling a level that the eye can see without contorting oneself. With our eyes focused on the burning oil of the menorah, on holiness, says *Halekach Vehalebuv*, we will guard our eyes from seeing evil, and turn our sight to the holiness within ourselves, and light up that darkness. For what we see, even if it does not seem to register, remains in our permanent memory. Therefore, the candles must be placed where we can see them.

Returning to the story of Yosef, Yosef's brothers saw only an empty pit, without water. But a vacuum does not exist. If there was no water, surely there were snakes and scorpions in the crevices of the walls. The Hasmoneans recognized the dangers lurking in the walls of the pit of Greek culture. They wanted their homes to be filled with the life-sustaining water of Torah rather than with the emptiness of Greek civilization.

There is another completely different perspective through which we can examine the connection between Yosef and Yavan. *Halekach Vehalebuv* explores the concept of thoughts creating a reality of energy even if the thoughts are never translated into action. On this plane, we must consider the original intention of Yosef's brothers. They actually stated that they wanted to kill him. They only refrained from doing so at the urging of Reuven. But one can kill another in many ways. For example, embarrassing someone, especially in public, is akin to killing them, for we have drained the lifeblood from their face. Another way of killing someone is to kill their spirit, their inner essence. While the victim may be

physically alive, his essence and soul are gone.

The core of Greek philosophy was the worship of the outer shell, the beauty of form, with a total disregard for the inner spirit and soul. In this sense, the Greek exile represented the sin of murder that had existed in the minds of Yosef's brothers. While the brothers wanted to physically kill Yosef, the Greeks wanted to spiritually kill us and everyone else. All they were concerned about was outer beauty and the trappings of civilization and culture. They revered the outer shell and wanted to destroy the inner light.

Each vessel in the Temple and each of the garments worn by the priests contained symbolic meaning. The Menorah in the Temple was the counterforce to and provided expiation for murder, as each sacrifice was expiation for a particular sin. How were the wicks and the lighting apparatus made for the Menorah? The Rambam, *Hilchos Klei Hamkidash* 8:6, answers that the threads were taken from the trousers and belt of the priest's worn-out garments, and also from the tunic.

How was the tunic an appropriate garment from which to extract threads with which to light the Menorah? *Halekach Vehalebuv* cites the Shlah Hakodosh in discussing the pattern woven into the fabric of the tunic. He explains that the pattern was circles with squares inside. He explains the symbolism within this pattern. The circles, he says, represent the physical world. The earth, the sun, fruit — everything — is somehow a circle or derived from a circle. The square represents that which is supernatural, the spiritual. In the desert, for example, we were encamped in a square around the Tabernacle, modeled after the

angels surrounding the Throne of Glory. We recognize that everything in nature is imbued with holiness from above, just as our physical bodies contain the divine souls. We believe in the oil, the essence of the olive. The Greeks wished to discard the oil and sing odes to the beautiful, empty peel of the olive. They wished to defile the essence.

This was the philosophical battle the Hasmoneans were waging against the Greeks. To paraphrase a common axiom, we believe that this world is a round peg in a square hole, a material, tangible entity that is really part of a spiritual cosmos. We must use the light of Chanukah to see the spiritual essence in life and in this world.

Observe the dreidel. The traditional shape of the dreidel is square. Yet when it spins so quickly, it appears to be round. But we know the circle is an illusion, for when the dreidel stops spinning, we again see that it is really a square. The Greeks wanted us to believe only in the circle. [Again, numerology provides an interesting aside. Ya-Va-N = 66, as does Ga-L-Ga-L, a round wheel.] The circle of this world is the mirage; the reality is the square. As for ourselves, how often do we find ourselves running around in circles, not even knowing what our destination is? Now is the time to use the light of the menorah to find our way out.

The world is a world of nature, of seven, and Chanukah, the holiday symbolizing the spiritual which is above and beyond nature, is celebrated for eight days, the number

symbolizing the spiritual and the reconnection with Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Just as the Hasmoneans ignited the world of the physical into the spiritual with the lighting of the oil that burned for eight days, says Rav Moshe Breslover in *Lemachar Aatir*, so too can we ignite the temporal world around us to experience eternity. Now is the time to see the square and transform our circles into squares. Now is the time, says Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz, to infuse our lives with added spirituality, just as we add more light to the menorah each night of Chanukah. Now is the time to daven with greater intention and focus, to search out and get rid of the hidden snakes and scorpions that have crept into the walls of our homes from the surrounding culture.

The Prophet Zechariah 9:13, speaks of awakening the sons of TZiYON (Zion) over the sons of YaVON (Greece). In Hebrew, the only difference between the two is the letter “tzadik” at the beginning of Tzion. Yosef taught us the difference between the Greeks and the lovers of Zion, the Jews. Yosef is known as Yosef the Tzadik, for he remained true to his inner essence in all circumstances. We can also remain true if we keep our focus on righteousness and enthusiasm in doing the mitzvos, for we must remember that it is the inner essence of our observance that is important, not the rote, outer shell. We must use the pure light of the menorah not just to illuminate our windows and declare our beliefs outwardly, but also to search inwardly

In the middle of discussing the laws of Chanukah, the Gemara, *Shabbos* 22a, states that when Yosef was thrown into the pit, it contained snakes and scorpions. The statement comes immediately after the Gemara’s ruling that if one places the menorah higher than twenty *amos*, it is invalid. What is the connection? R. Moshe Feinstein, *Darash Moshe, drush* no. 9, explains that the goal of Chanukah is to look at the supernatural miracles and realize that G-d’s providence in the natural world is just as miraculous. A menorah higher than twenty *amos* symbolizes an approach that miracles are out of our reach and don’t relate to us. We have to light the menorah in a place where we can see it because when we look for signs of miracles, we should see them all around us. The brothers of Yosef threw Yosef into a pit full of snakes and scorpions and the fact that he was able to survive in there was nothing short of miraculous. The brothers were blinded by their hatred of Yosef and weren’t able to see the miracle. If they would have been looking for miracles, they would have realized how wrong they were and that G-d had great plans for Yosef.

and ignite our inner light that Hashem has kindled within us and that the Hasmoneans have modeled for us with their dedication to the essence of the teachings of our forefathers.



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