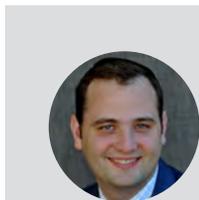


# The Torah's "Chanukah" Story: Jews as Minority and the Jewish People as a Nation of Shepherds

For the seventh time in the last 100 years, Chanukah and Christmas fall on the same day. Beyond being a calendar quirk, the coincidence of Chanukah and Christmas — maybe the most publicly-celebrated holidays of Jews and Christians respectively — accentuates our community's cultural standing here in the United States. Indeed, while the cultural embrace of Chanukah surely captures the ascension of Judaism in the American imagination, this calendric coincidence also highlights our continued status as a religious minority in the U.S. — as, to adapt a phrase from the Chanukah liturgy, *me'atim b'toch rabim*, the few among the many. Push comes to shove, we do not celebrate what is, for all intents and purposes, the singular national religious holiday.<sup>1</sup> As a community, we are on the sidelines with our own set of religious symbols, practices and prayers.

While the coinciding of Chanukah and Christmas is somewhat unusual, Chanukah this year falls in its familiar place on the Jewish calendar. As always, of course, it begins on the 25th of Kislev; but Chanukah this year is also, once again, nestled in among the familiar weekly Torah portions that describe Yosef's journey from lowly slave boy to viceroy of Egypt. The story itself is extraordinary, rife with a wide range of theologically significant messages such as the importance



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of religious commitment, personal repentance, and familial reconciliation.

But, in many ways, the overarching story of the second half of Sefer Bereishit is one that highlights our ancient status as a minority nation. Yosef's ascent from slave to royal eventually brings his extended family down to Egypt where they live as a nation within a nation:

וַיָּבֹאוּ מִצְרַיִם יַעֲקֹב וְכָל זֶרְעוֹ אִתּוֹ: בָּנָיו וּבָנֵי בָנָיו אִתּוֹ בְּנֹתָיו וּבָנוֹת בָּנָיו וְכָל זֶרְעוֹ הֵבִיא אִתּוֹ מִצְרַיִם.

... [A]nd they came to Egypt, Jacob and all his descendants with him: His sons and his sons' sons with him, his daughters and his sons' daughters and all his descendants he brought with him to Egypt.

**Genesis 46:6-7**

As a result, Chanukah falls squarely within the *parshiyot* describing what might have been our first — and surely our most nationally significant — experience as a minority nation within a larger host culture. Egypt, at that time, stood as the preeminent civilization in the ancient world. It was the economic center of the world, keeping civilization alive during a time

of famine, as well as the technological and cultural center of the world. Thus, the travel of B'nei Yisrael down to Egypt represented maybe the first time that we, as a burgeoning nation, were truly a nation-within-a-nation that had to think deeply not only about who we were, but about how to maintain our values in the midst of society suffused with a different ideology and a different worldview.

And a careful examination of the story makes clear that the Torah is keenly aware of the historical and national significance of this moment — a true *ma'aseh avot siman labanim*, the events of the forefathers are symbolic for their descendants<sup>2</sup> — which would hold significance not just for biblical times, but for all future times as well.

Accordingly, it is not simply that Chanukah falls out during the weeks we read these *parshiyot*, but these *parshiyot* track the central themes of Chanukah, serving as the Torah's, so to speak, "Chanukah Story"; like the story of the Jews traveling down to Egypt, the Chanukah story depicts a time when B'nei Yisrael were forced

to grapple with its minority status and decide how it would, as a nation, respond to oppression, violence and discrimination leveled against not only its religious practices,<sup>3</sup> but also its very identity as a people. In turn, the Egypt story provides us with a glimpse of how our forefathers grappled with these challenges — challenges not only relevant for the ancient Chanukah story, but challenges that remain at the forefront of our collective communal consciousness in the 21st century.

### The Torah's Chanukah Story: A Nation of Shepherds

To appreciate the timeless lessons of these *parshiyot*, I would like to focus specifically on how Yosef — the protagonist for much of Sefer Bereishit's Egypt story — approached the challenges presented by B'nei Yisrael moving down to Egypt, and how it provides a biblical blueprint for our own contemporary engagement with the world around us. Consider the context.

Yosef's family arrives in Egypt. And Yosef knows that he will eventually have to introduce them to Pharaoh. Given the importance of this encounter, it isn't surprising that Yosef — by now a sophisticated politician — wanted to prepare his family for their first meeting with Pharaoh. So he tells them, soon you will meet Pharaoh. And he also tells them exactly what it is Pharaoh is going to want to know:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִקְרָא לָכֶם פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַר מִה־מְעֹשֵׂיכֶם  
*And when it comes to pass that Pharaoh calls you, he will ask, 'What is your occupation?'*

**Genesis 46:33**

Put in more contemporary language, Pharaoh will want to know “What do you do?” Yosef then tells his family what to say:

וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֲנֹשֵׁי מִקְנֵה הַיּוֹ עֲבָדֵיךָ מִנְעוּרֵינוּ וְעַד־  
 עַתָּה גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ

*You shall say, 'Your servants have been shepherds from our youth until now. Not only have we been shepherds, but also our ancestors.'*

**Genesis 46:34**

In Egypt, being a shepherd isn't something you would want to readily admit. As Yosef quickly notes, shepherds are despised:

כִּי־תֹעֲבַת מִצְרַיִם כָּל־רֵעָה צֹאן  
 [A]ll shepherds are an abomination to the Egyptians.

**Genesis 46:34**

The Torah itself doesn't tell us exactly why it is that shepherds are despised in Egypt. But it presumably isn't because shepherds owned sheep. In the very next chapter, the Torah reports that all of Egypt came to Yosef to exchange, among other commodities, their sheep for food.<sup>4</sup> So the Egyptian revulsion to shepherds can't be that owning sheep is, in and of itself, an abomination.

Instead, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes earlier in Sefer Bereishit,<sup>5</sup> it is presumably because Egyptians despised the lifestyle of being a shepherd. Shepherds were nomads, wandering the Earth without the trappings of success. They had no permanent property, which is what Egyptian culture prized. In Egypt, you moved up the caste system to the extent that you were a wealthy landed property owner. And therefore nothing could be more despised than a shepherd.

Indeed, the importance of wealth and property in Egypt is clear from Pharaoh's first question to Yosef's family: “*mah ma'aseichem*” — what do you do? This is what Pharaoh needed to know in order to evaluate Yosef's family — to know where they would

fall in the Egyptian cultural hierarchy. And when they answer shepherds, Pharaoh knows that their place is at the very bottom of Egyptian culture.

Given all of this, one can only imagine that Yosef would feel quite uncomfortable about this anticipated exchange. Yosef had risen to the very top of the Egyptian political machine. His family, as lowly shepherds, would be an embarrassment — and maybe even a reminder to all of Yosef's own origins as a lowly slave brought in chains down to Egypt. As a result, we might have excused Yosef had he told his brothers not to mention that they were shepherds.

But Yosef did nothing of the sort. He instructed his brothers to go before the most powerful man in the ancient world and tell him who they were: shepherds. This insistence should, therefore, come at a bit of a surprise. And it begs the question: why was this so important to Yosef?

The answer begins with what should be obvious by taking a look at Tanach. Clearly, there is something important — something of deep value — about being a shepherd. It isn't just a profession. Avraham, Yitzchok, Yaakov and all of Yaakov's sons are shepherds; Moshe was a shepherd; Dovid Hamelech was a shepherd. Surely this isn't all just happenstance.

Even Hevel was a shepherd, which — as the *Ktav V'Hakablah* notes — is peculiar.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, there weren't too many people around during the early years of Hevel's life, thereby necessitating him to amass large amounts of sheep.

The *Midrash Rabbah*, in Sefer Shmot,<sup>7</sup> provides one reason why being a shepherd was a consistent and noteworthy character trait of so many biblical leaders. According

to the midrash, being a shepherd helps develop the compassion necessary for being a leader. Thus, in Sefer Shmot, the midrash recounts that Hashem evaluated Moshe's compassion by looking at how he treated his flock of sheep.

But other commentaries see another component to being a shepherd.<sup>8</sup> To be a shepherd is not only to demonstrate a deep sense of compassion; it is also to live a life of constant contemplation and reflection. It is to wander with your flock and explore the wonders of God's Earth. Shepherds can take advantage of quiet moments of thought to pursue the internal life of the mind. In so doing, they are nomadic not only in how they roam the Earth; they are intellectual nomads, constantly investigating the great wisdom and splendor of God's universe.

It is thus not surprising that Avraham — who discovered God by exploring the heavens<sup>9</sup> — was a shepherd. And it is not surprising that the key figures in our tradition across the generations were shepherds, providing the intellectual backbone for our national identity. Shepherds are the searchers and the seekers. They are the ones who want to explore the expanse of the heavens and plumb the depths of the universe to understand God's wisdom. And for this reason, shepherds repeatedly stand at the very center of our nation's long intellectual tradition. They live the life of an intellectual nomad, wandering the universe to unravel its mysteries.

Such a worldview emerged at odds with Egyptian culture. Egypt prized accomplishment, seeing it as a function of permanent wealth. A nation of shepherds prizes exploration, seeing it as a mechanism for understanding and wisdom.

Egypt admired the ephemeral; a nation of shepherds admires the ethereal. And Egypt valued people based upon what they owned. A nation of shepherds values people based upon what they've learned. These two worldviews stood — and for that matter, continue to stand — in diametric opposition. So Egypt viewed shepherds as an abomination, the low man on the social totem pole.

### **A Search for God's Wisdom: the Shepherd's Many Tents**

This is not to say that the shepherd lifestyle does not have its own pitfalls. It may be true that Egyptians were too absorbed with the material world, while shepherds spent their time in the noble pursuit of extracting God's wisdom from the world. But Chazal were keenly aware that the picture was more complicated. Being a shepherd may require valuing the intellectual over the material and dedicating one's life to theological exploration over and above financial achievement.

But to unequivocally pursue the life of a shepherd presents its own dangers. To focus solely on the internal life of the mind has the potential to cut you off from the world. Taken to an extreme, discovery can take the form of becoming self-absorbed and only concerned with one's own thoughts. And in that way, the process of discovery can become so solitary that you fail to learn from others. Thus, a fanatical obsession with the shepherd's lifestyle can undermine one of the key components of true exploration: to engage the world's great intellectual diversity.

Indeed, for Chazal, the process of learning from others is key if we are all to join in becoming a true

nation of shepherds. Chazal were therefore careful to emphasize the importance of intellectual diversity in discovering knowledge in God's world. They made clear that becoming a nation of shepherds meant not only exploring on our own, but doing so in conversation with others.

As an example, consider the following: Yaakov, as we know, was famously referred to as an *ish tam yoshev ohalim*, an innocent man who sat in shepherds' tents.<sup>10</sup> Or, to recharacterize the literal meaning of the verse, Yaakov was an indoors guy, in contrast to Esav, the consummate outdoorsman.

The commentators famously interpret these words in a wide range of ways. But it is first worth considering this description of Yaakov in light of an earlier verse in Bereishit where a marginal character, Yaval, is described as the *avi yoshev ohel umikneh* — the father of those who dwell in tents and have sheep.<sup>11</sup> The descriptions of Yaakov and Yaval have some clear similarities. And yet the midrash provides diametrically opposed interpretations. Yaakov is described as someone who spends his days studying Torah — spending some time in the *ohel* of Shem and some in the *ohel* of Ever.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the midrash accuses Yaval of spending time in his *ohel* engaged in *avodah zarah*.<sup>13</sup> Why such different interpretations of such similar descriptions?

One difference between the two verses stands out: Yaakov is a *yoshev ohalim*; Yaval is merely a *yoshev ohel*. Yaakov studies with all who can provide wisdom — whether it is Shem or whether it is Ever. He is constantly on the move in his pursuit of knowledge, never satisfied with a solitary search for wisdom. Yaval, by contrast, spends his days in his own tent. Sure, he rejects a

life of purely material pursuit. He does not align himself with an Egyptian worldview typified by Pharaoh's question of "mah ma'aseichem" — what do you do? But at the same time, he is absorbed within his own mind. He does not visit with others or explore the diversity of thought that typifies God's great universe. And this intellectual isolation is why Chazal see him as an idol worshipper. He does, in the end, worship his own mind.

### **The Minority of All the Nations as a Nation of Shepherds**

It is in this way that Chazal's vision of the shepherd emerges as a central metaphor for our national identity. The shepherd leverages the quiet of his profession to contemplate the world. He seeks out God's wisdom, pursuing knowledge and understanding. And yet at the same time, his search is typified by engagement with others. The search would not only be incomplete, but dangerously misguided, if it weren't pursued in conversation with others. To be a true seeker is to chase knowledge wherever it can be found. Becoming a nation of shepherds means being intellectual nomads, wandering wherever knowledge takes you — and visiting many tents in order to pursue wisdom. In sum, to be a shepherd is to embrace a focus on the life of the mind without getting lost in your own mind: to find God's wisdom in the world without forgetting about that world and all that its many inhabitants have to offer.

Success in this mission is difficult. It requires that we neither become obsessed with the material world nor become obsessed with our own thoughts. The problem is that maintaining this balance can often be quite difficult. In fact, this two-fold

objective can pull a minority nation in opposite directions.

One of the reasons for this is because pursuing knowledge as a minority while surrounded by majoritarian culture of materialism requires a singularity of focus. It requires a skepticism of the surrounding majority culture for fear of allowing the world's values to contaminate your own.

But skepticism of the world around you can all too easily lead to an intellectual narrowness; it can lead to the loss of the intellectual nomad that lives at the heart of a nation of shepherds. Or, put differently, it can lead you to stop being a *yoshev ohalim* and to become instead a mere *yoshev ohel* — and thereby become satisfied with your own thoughts, sacrificing intellectual exploration at the altar of theological zealotry. And in so doing, it can lead you to undermine the diversity of thought that is central to a nation of shepherds.

Balancing the pursuit of knowledge with an embrace of intellectual diversity has been a long-standing challenge for the Jewish people. Maybe the best diagnosis of the problem comes from Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch. Addressing a 19th-century audience about the lessons of Chanukah, Rabbi Hirsch proposed as follows:

*Let us evaluate, calmly and objectively, our position and our task from the vantage point of a minority . . . We try to make clear to ourselves what dangers must be avoided and what duties we must fulfill if truly we find ourselves relegated to the position of a minority.*

And so Rabbi Hirsch began his Chanukah exploration of the Jews as minority, which culminates with the following concern about the future of the Jewish community:

*The minority may come to regard . . . "outside" pursuits in themselves as the roots of the spiritual error it deplors in the majority. Eventually it may reach a point where it will fearfully shun all intellectual endeavors other than those directly related to its own philosophy as an enemy of its cause and as a threat to the purity and loyalty of its adherents.<sup>14</sup>*

Thus, Rabbi Hirsch worried that remaining strong as a minority — as a nation within a nation — might often lead to a deep skepticism of intellectual diversity. It might lead to the rejection of intellectual exploration for the sake of protecting ourselves from outside influences.

But such an outcome is not acceptable. A nation of shepherds not only rejects materialism. And a nation of shepherds not only embraces a life of spirit and intellect. But a true nation of shepherds combs God's great universe for inspiration and knowledge without fear of influence from the outside because to do otherwise — to become narrow as opposed to diverse, closed as opposed to open — would be to reject our extraordinary intellectual heritage. In a word, it would be to reject our identity as a nation of shepherds.

So what should we make of all this? First, our forefathers were not shepherds by happenstance. Being shepherds was more than a profession; it was a lifestyle. It meant a dedication to a life of constant learning and exploration, discovering wisdom wherever it could be found. But here and now in the 21st century, we aren't — to state the obvious — shepherds. So what's the lesson of all this?

It is true that we aren't shepherds. But let us not forget, neither was Yosef. Indeed, Yosef truly experienced some of the very same dilemmas as the

prototypical 21st-century modern Orthodox Jew. He climbed to the very highest echelons of the culture around him; he was held in the greatest of esteem by the Egyptian culture; he was considered wise and was granted extraordinary power. He achieved in all the ways that were valued by the Egyptian majoritarian culture around him.

But none of this changed who he was on the inside.<sup>15</sup> When the moment of truth came, and his family was about to enter Pharaoh's chamber, he had one message for them:

“וְאָמַרְתָּם אֲנֹשִׁי מִקְנֵה הָיִו עַבְדֶּיךָ מִנְעוּרַיִנִי וְעַד־עַתָּה גַם־אֲנִי וְגַם־אֲבֹתַיִנִי” — “You tell Pharaoh who we really are and who we always have been.”

“גַּם־אֲנִי וְגַם־אֲבֹתַיִנִי” — “And you tell him who your father is and who your grandfather was.”

Yosef stares into the eyes of his brothers and he tells them, “We have nothing to be ashamed of.” I don't care what the world around us thinks. To the contrary, our national heritage is nothing short of extraordinary and should be worn as a badge of honor. Because even as we choose professions that bring us great achievement and acclaim, inside we can remain a nation of shepherds. Our lives in this world are for unlocking the knowledge and wisdom God embedded in his universe. That is our heritage as a nation of shepherds.

This is why the ideological challenge of Egypt so closely tracks the ideological challenge of Chanukah — and remains at the center of our contemporary ideological challenge as we confront the world around us. We are and always have been a minority nation — we are always the *me'atim* confronting the ideologies of the *rabim*. And this status is not a bug; it's a feature. It is

precisely why Hashem declares his love for us in Sefer Devarim:

לֹא מִרְבֵּכֶם מִכָּל הָעַמִּים הַשָּׂקָה ה' בְּכֶם וַיִּבְחַר בְּכֶם כִּי אִתְּם הִמְעַט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים:

*Not because you are more numerous than any people did the Lord delight in you and choose you, [but] because you are the minority of all the peoples.*

**Deuteronomy 7:7**

As a minority nation with a clear ideological vision, we have the unique ability to navigate a world still typified by two, somewhat contradictory, extremes. On the one hand, we live in a world that is deeply materialistic, apathetic to exploring God's world of ideas. On the other hand, we live in a world that is ideologically narrow, only willing to engage those ideas it already agrees with. But in between base materialism and intellectual narrowness lies another path — one embodied by a nation of shepherds.

Of course, like Yosef of old, we aren't actually shepherds. But that does not mean we cannot still remain a nation of shepherds in our hearts and in our souls. Whether as a burgeoning nation in the land of Egypt, a minority nation persecuted by the ancient Greeks, or American Jews living in the 21st century, our collective aspirations have not changed. We look to the heavens to unlock all the various forms of wisdom that God has embedded in this universe. And in so doing, we both eschew the materialism of the world around us, without falling prey to the intellectual narrowness of spiritual zealotry. We build our institutions and our communities to reflect these values — the values of spiritual vitality, philosophical exploration and intellectual diversity. And even as the culture around us all too often vacillates between material achievement and intellectual

narrowness, we remain dedicated to a different set of values. We are, after all, intellectual nomads dedicated to search for God's wisdom wherever it can be found. And it is in continuing this pursuit that we reclaim our ancient heritage: as *anshei mikneh* — God's great nation of shepherds. This is the lesson of the Torah's “Chanukah story.”

## Endnotes

- 1 For the percentage of Americans celebrating Christmas, and their motivations for doing so, see Pew Research Center, “Celebrating Christmas and the Holidays, Then and Now” (Dec. 18, 2013), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/12/18/celebrating-christmas-and-the-holidays-then-and-now/#religious-observance-of-christmas>.
- 2 On this concept, see Ramban, *Commentary to Bereishit* 12:6.
- 3 On the persecution of the Jews at the hands of the Greeks, and specifically the Jewish practices targeted by Greek authorities, see *Bereishit Rabbah*, 2:4; Rambam, *Hilchot Chanukah* 3:1.
- 4 *Bereishit* 46:17.
- 5 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on Genesis* 4:2.
- 6 *Bereishit* 4:2.
- 7 *Shemot* 2:2.
- 8 For an example, see *haKtav v'Hakabalah*, *Bereishit* 4:2.
- 9 See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Avodah Zara* 1:3.
- 10 *Bereishit* 25:27.
- 11 *Bereishit* 4:20.
- 12 Rashi, *Commentary on Bereishit* 25:27 (quoting *Bereishit Rabbah*).
- 13 Rashi, *Commentary on Bereishit* 4:20 (quoting *Bereishit Rabbah*).
- 14 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Atem haMe'at 'You Are the Smallest of All': The Minority, Challenges and Problems*, The Collected Writing of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Volume 2, page 247.
- 15 On this point, see also Rashi, *Commentary on Shmot* 1:5.