



## PREFACE—GREEK CULTURE: A STUDY GUIDE

**R**av Shamshon Refael Hirsch, *B'Ma'aglei Shanah*, Chanukah no. 1, has a very poignant description of the underlying struggle in the Chanukah story:

היתה אז ההתנגשות הראשונה בין שתי השקפות חיים, שתי תרבויות שונות אשר עד היום הזה הן מתחרות ביניהן על השלטון בעולם: היוונות והיהדות. אלו שני היסודות הרוחניים אשר תרבויותיהם ומפעליהם מהווים את תולדות ההתפתחות של האנושות כולה בפעם הראשונה הם נפגשו בימי מתתיהו בארץ יהודה, ומאז ועד היום נטוש המאבק בין שתי ההשקפות הללו המתחרות על השלטון הרוחני בקרב ישראל.

*Chanukah represents the clash of two doctrines, two views, two civilizations, capable of molding opinions, training and educating those who until this very day compete for the mastery of the world. Hellenism and Judaism: These are the two forces whose effect upon the nations mark the historical development of mankind, and which surfaced in Judea for the*

*first time in the days of Mattathias. Hellenism and Judaism: when examined in depth they are the two leading forces which today again are struggling for mastery in the Jewish world. (Translation: Collected Writings, Vol. 3 pg. 200)*

R. Hirsch's observation that this culture clash existed in his time still rings true today. In surveying rabbinic literature on this topic, much of the focus is on the intellectual aspects of Greek culture, such as philosophy and literature. These discussions include questions such as whether it is appropriate to take time from Torah study to study Homer, or whether we should be concerned that reading Aristotle will lead us off the path of Torah. Yet there is another area in this culture clash that also deserves our attention — popular culture. We are probably more familiar with stories of people who dropped out of the Thursday night Talmud class to watch Thursday Night Football than we

are of people who dropped it to study literature. We are likely more concerned about our children's exposure to the behavior of celebrities than we are to our children's exposure to Greek mythology.

This section of *Torah To Go* will focus on this aspect of the culture clash and how it applies to our community. The study guide below will help provide some general sources and discussion points about how our rabbis related to popular culture, and some of the issues we struggle with today.

## Topic 1: Integrating Greek Culture

### Source 1a: Bereishit 9:27

יִפֶּת אֱלֹקִים לְיִפֶּת וַיִּשְׁכֵּן בְּאֶהֱלֵי שֵׁם וַיְהִי כְנָעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ.  
*May God expand Yefet, And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;  
And let Canaan be a slave to them.*

### Source 1b: Megillah 9b

יפת אלקים ליפת יפיתו של יפת יהא באהלי שם.  
*"May God expand (yaft) Yefet." The beauty (yofi) of Yefet will  
be in the tents of Shem.*

The Jewish people are descendants of Shem and the Greeks are descendants of Yavan, the son of Yefet. The Gemara introduces the concept of the beauty of Yefet as a source that a Torah can be written in Greek. The Gemara seems to endorse Greek influence even on our most sacred text. While other statements of Chazal seem to cast a negative light on Greek language (Mishna, *Sotah* 49a) and the translation of the Torah into Greek (*Masechet Sofrim* 1:7), there is a statement of Chazal that addresses a fundamental issue with Greek culture:

### Source 1c: Bereishit Rabbah 2:4

וְחֹשֶׁךְ, זֶה גְלוֹת יוֹן, שֶׁהַחֲשִׁיכָה עֵינֵיהֶם שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִזְרוֹתֵיהֶן, שֶׁהִיִּתָּה אוֹמְרָת לָהֶם, כְּתָבוּ עַל קֶרֶן הַשּׁוֹר שְׂאִין לָכֶם חֶלֶק בְּאֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.  
*"And darkness" — this is [a reference to] the exile of Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees, as it said to them, "Write on the horn of a bull that you have no share in the God of Israel."*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. If Greek culture leads to a kingdom and people who impose their viewpoints on the Jewish people, why did our rabbis praise their culture as a culture of beauty?
2. What do you think is meant by the imagery of the Jews being forced to deny their faith on the horn of a bull?

### Source 1d: R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Shmuot Ra'ayah* pg. 84

היונים שידעו חכמות, את התורה תרגמו ליונית, היונים חפצו את התבוללות ישראל בעמים אמרו כתבו לכם על קרן השור ליוסף נאמר בכור שורו הדר לו ... היונים חפצו שישראל יחזיקו בשיטת יוסף להיות בין העמים ולהתבולל ביניהם ... אבל לא הבינו את שיטת יוסף ואמרו כתבו לכם כי אין לכם חלק באלקי ישראל. לא הבינו שיוסף התכוון בשיטתו שישראל יהיו מורי הדרך לכל העמים שיש אלקי ישראל.  
*The Greeks, who had familiarity with wisdom and had the Torah translated into Greek, desired the Jews to assimilate among the nations. They said, "write on the horn of a bull," referring to Yosef upon whom it was said, "Like a firstborn bull in his glory" ... The Greeks wanted the Jews to embrace the doctrine of Yosef, to live among the nations and assimilate with them ... but they didn't understand Yosef's doctrine and said, "Write for yourselves that you have no share in the God of Israel." They didn't understand that Yosef followed a doctrine that the Jewish people should be a guide to the nations that there is a God in Israel.*

### Source 1e: R. Menachem Ben Tzion Sacks, *Menachem Tziyon to Parashat Noach*

בעזבו את התבה ראה לפניו נח עולם חרב ושמים ... הוא הגיע למסקנה שהעולם החדש זקוק למיזוג של שם ויפת לסינטיזה של תורתו ומוסרו של שם יחד עם המדע והאמנות של יפת בכדי להתגבר על כחו של חם ולרסן את הכנענים לכן הציג לעולם תכנית של יפיתו של יפת באהלי שם והדגיש את המילה וישכון להבליט שעל יפת לדעת ולהכיר את מקומו כי הוא רק שכן אצל שם ובשום אופן איננו בעל הבית אל יעז השכן לגרש את בעל הבית.

*When Noah left the ark, he saw before him a world that was destroyed and devastated ... He reached the conclusion that the new world needed a combination of Shem and Yefet — to synthesize the Torah and ethics of Shem together with the wisdom and culture of Yefet in order to overcome the power of Cham and to hamper the Canaanites (and their idolatrous influence). Therefore, he presented to the world a program of the beauty of Yefet in the tents of Shem. He stressed the word "veyishkon" — let him dwell — to emphasize that Yefet should*

know and recognize his place that he is only dwelling with Shem, but under no circumstances is he the host. The guest should never have the audacity to expel the host.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. R. Kook and R. Sacks both stress the importance of ensuring Torah's primacy before allowing Greek culture to "enter the tent." What do you think are examples of cultural elements that belong in the tent and elements that do not?
2. R. Kook and R. Sacks both highlight the dangers of assimilation when engaging with culture. R. Kook is based on a source (1c) that discusses an overt attempt at assimilation while R. Sacks is based on a source (1b) that doesn't discuss overt attempts at assimilation, and the danger seems to be when Jews embrace that cultural desire to assimilate. Does the culture around us pose a greater threat from overt attempts at assimilation or from an inner desire to assimilate? Why?

## Topic 2: Moshav Leitzim: Are We Wasting Too Much Time?

### Source 2a: Tehillim 1:1

אֲשֶׁרִי הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָלַךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים וּבְדַרְךְ חָטָאִים לֹא עָמַד וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יָשָׁב. כִּי אִם בְּתוֹרַת ה' חָפְצוֹ וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה.

*Praised is the person who did not follow the advice of the wicked and did not stand in the path of sinners and did not sit in the company of scorners. Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, and he studies that teaching day and night.*

### Source 2b: Rabbeinu Yonah, Commentary to Avot 3:2

אבל הכתוב שאמר ובמושב לצים לא ישב לא דבר מן הלצנים שאמרנו כי זה או בכלל חטאים או בכלל רשעים האמורים בראש הפסוק הוא. אלא מושב לצים קרא הפך ממה שכתוב אחריו כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יגה יומם ולילה. על העושים ישיבה של קבע על דעת לדבר בדברי הבאי ובוטלין מדברי תורה.

*The verse that states, "and did not sit in the company of scorners" is not referring to people engaged in cynicism; those are included among the "wicked" and the "sinners" mentioned in the verse. Rather, the "company of scorners" referred to in the verse is in contrast to what it says afterward, "Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, and he studies that teaching day and night," referring to those who set aside time to discuss frivolous matters and waste time that could be used for Torah study.*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think wasting time is considered a form of scorn?
2. How should one determine whether an event is considered a gathering of scorners or simply a means of relaxing and recharging?

### Source 2c: Avodah Zarah 18b

תנו רבנן ההולך לאיצטדינין (רש"י- מקום שמנגחין את השור) ולכרכום (רש"י- מצור ועושין שם שחוק וליצנות) ... הרי זה מושב לצים ועליהם הכתוב אומר אשרי איש אשר לא הלך וגו' כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו הא למדת שדברים הללו מביאין את האדם לידי ביטול תורה.

*Our rabbis taught: One who goes to stadiums (Rashi: places where they engage in bullfighting) or to camps of besiegers (Rashi: a siege where they engage in frivolity and cynicism) ... this is a company of scorners and on them, the verse states, "Praised is the person who did not follow etc. Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, etc." We see that these types of activities lead to wasting time from Torah study.*

### Source 2d: Rama, Orach Chaim 316:2

המשסה כלב אחר חיה בשבת הוי צידה וי"א דאף בחול אסור משום מושב לצים. [פרי מגדים- ואפשר אם פרנסתו בכך אין איסור, רק אם לטיול הוא עושה אז הוה מושב לצים.]

*If one sick a dog after an animal on Shabbat, it is considered trapping. There are those who say that even during the week it is prohibited because it is a "company of scorners." [P'ri Megadim: It is possible that if one is doing so for livelihood, there is no prohibition and the concern for "company of scorners" only applies when one is doing so for leisure purposes.]*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Is there a difference between the forms of entertainment mentioned by the Gemara and Rama and the forms of entertainment that are popular today? Why or why not?
2. Are there positive aspects of today's forms of entertainment that could be used to argue that it is not considered a "company of scorners"?



### Topic #3: Idolizing and Following Entertainers and Sports Figures

#### Source 3a: Mishlei 27:21

מִצָּרְף לְכֶסֶף וְכוּר לְזָהָב וְאִישׁ לְפִי מִהֲלָלוֹ.

*For silver — the crucible, for gold — the furnace, And a man is tested by his praise.*

#### Source 3b: Rabbeinu Yonah, Sha'arei Teshuva 3:148

ונאמר (משלי כז, כא): "מצרף לכסף וכוור לזהב ואיש לפי מהללו" פירושו: מעלות האדם לפי מה שיהלל, אם הוא משבח המעשים הטובים והחכמים והצדיקים תדע ובחנת כי איש טוב הוא ושרש הצדק נמצא בו, כי לא ימצא את לבו רק לשבח את הטוב והטובים תמיד בכל דבריו, ולגנות את העבירות ולהבוזת בעליהן, מבלי מאוס ברע ובחור בטוב.

*It says "For silver — the crucible, for gold — the furnace, And a man is tested by his praise." The explanation is that the assessment of a person is determined based on what he praises. If he praises good deeds, wise people and righteous people, you know and determine that he is a good person and the roots of righteousness are found within him, because his heart can only find a way to praise good and good people on a consistent basis, and to denigrate sins and those who don't despise evil and choose good.*

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. Many of today's entertainers have talents that are worthy of praise, but are not good role models in their personal lives. How do you think Rabbeinu Yonah's comments apply?
2. Can one make a determination about the character of an individual based on who he or she is following online? Why or why not?

#### Source 3c: Berachot 8a

אמר ר"ע בשלשה דברים אוהב אני את המדיים.

*R. Akiva said: In three areas I like the Medes.*

#### Source 3d: R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, Ben Yehoyada, Berachot 8b

בשלשה דברים אוהב אני ... קשה והא כתיב לא תחנם ודרשו רז"ל בגמרא דע"ז דף כ' לא תתן להם חן ופירש רש"י שלא יאמר כמה נאה נכרי זה ונ"ל בס"ד דכאן רוצה להלהיב את לבות ההמון יותר ע"י דברים אלו שיקחו ישראל קל וחומר ומה המדיים נזהרים בזה כל שכן ישראל שהם עם חכם ונבון.

*In three areas I like ... This is difficult because it states, "Lo Techanem," which our rabbis (Avodah Zarah 20) interpret as "Do not give [the idolaters] praise." Rashi explains that one should not say, "look how wonderful this heathen is." It seems to me that here [R. Akiva] wanted to instill in the hearts of the people that through these, the Jewish people should learn that if the Medes are careful about these, then certainly the Jewish people, a nation of wisdom and insight, should do so as well.*

#### Source 3e: R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, To Ro'i, Berachot 8b

בשלשה דברים אוהב אני את המדיים קשיא לי הא איכא משום לא תחנם ... ויותר נראה שכמו שמותר להודות לד' ... הכי נמי מותר לספר בשבחן אם הכונה היא כדי שיהיה לנו מקום לימוד ומוסר.

*In three areas I like the Medes. This is difficult because of the prohibition of "Lo techanem" ... it seems that just as it is permissible to praise God [for providing the individual with talent or beauty] ... so too, it is permissible to praise them if one's intent is teach ethics and morals.*

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. How are the comments of R. Yosef Chaim and R. Kook similar? How are they different?
2. What are some examples of ethical and moral lessons that can be learned from pop culture?