

Dining at Yosef's Table

- Almost exactly one year ago, there was an article in the New York Times entitled “The Hypocrisy of Hanukah.”¹ In it, a Jewish novelist named Michael Lukas describes his ambivalent feelings towards the holiday of Chanuka. He describes at first trying to convince his three year old daughter about the merits of celebrating Chanuka over the more popular Christian holiday that occurs at this time of year.

“True, [they] have those sparkly trees, ornaments and fruitcake. But we have latkes, jelly doughnuts and eight nights of presents.”
- After further reflection the author of this article researches what Chanuka is really about and decides he no longer wants to observe it. He says:
 - *“the Maccabees won out in the end and **imposed** their version of Judaism on the formerly Hellenized Jews. So Hanukkah, in essence, commemorates the triumph of fundamentalism over cosmopolitanism.”*
 - *“The more I thought about all this, the more it disturbed me. For what am I if not a Hellenized Jew?...When it comes down to it, it’s pretty clear that the Maccabees would have hated me. They would have hated me because I’m assimilated and because I’m the product of intermarriage.”*
- When this article was published, I remember hearing a number of Jewish leaders decry the state of American Jewry today. People scoffed at this secular Jew admit that he wishes he didn’t celebrate Chanuka and that he prefers being a “a hellenized Jew” over a “religious extremist.”

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/opinion/sunday/the-hypocrisy-of-hanukkah.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap>

- However, one year later, if we reflect upon this article, we should not be so startled. Can we really blame this person for his ignorance? Can we really blame individual Jews for assimilating? After all:
 - studies show that the intermarriage rate is at 58 percent, up from 43 percent in 1990 and 17 percent in 1970. Among non-Orthodox Jews, the intermarriage rate is 71 percent.
 - Far more respondents said having a good sense of humor was essential to their Jewish identity than observing Jewish law — 42 percent compared to 19 percent.

- And even if we, the people sitting in this room and the relatively small amount of rooms like this one throughout the world, are part of the lucky few Jews who have not fallen to assimilation, it would seem that we are not completely innocent when it comes to adopting secular culture.
 - Many of us here, including myself, go by non-Jewish names.
 - Many of us, if not all of us, base our style of clothing on what the secular culture finds fashionable.
 - We engage with the secular world in our jobs and in our leisure activities.

- We too must ask ourselves if the Maccabees would be ok with us.
 - Would they think we are too “hellenized” for them?
 - Are we too entrenched in the secular culture that makes celebrating Chanuka a “hypocrisy”?
 - Are we doing enough to ensure that our families don’t become lost to assimilation?
 - Are we really very far from Michael Lukas and his feelings about chanuka?

- I believe the answer to these questions can be found in a very seemingly insignificant part of this week's parsha. During the brothers' second visit to Yosef as second in command of all of Mitzrayim, Yosef orders his servants to prepare a banquet for himself, the brothers, and the Egyptian servants. Strangely, the Torah describes in detail the exact seating arrangements that were prepared.
- We are told in Perek מ ד pasuk 17 that one table was prepared for the brothers. Another table was assigned specifically to the Egyptian servants. And a completely separate table for Yosef himself.
- Now, everyone knows that the hardest part of having guests over at your shabbos meal is trying to figure out the perfect seating arrangements. I've seen people agonize over where to place the guests to make them feel most comfortable. We all know of all the different cheshbonos that come into making these decisions: Reuven can't sit next to Shimon because they once had a fight, but Shimon must sit across from Moshe because they are in the same business but Moshe happens to be a Giants fan while Shimon is a Jets fan which complicates things. Sarah must sit next to her husband Moshe and close to the hostess Rochel in order to not get offended, but not too close to her because Rochel's husband Dovid is a Democrat and Sarah is a republican. And the worst is when there is a teenager at the table. Do you put them with the adults or at the kid's table? And when you have a lefty, that compliments matters even more because they need to be on the left end!
- The same is true in this part of the parsha. If the Torah is going out of its way to describe the seating arrangements it must be for a reason. If we

think about the rationale behind the arrangements, two of these tables make a lot of sense.

- We understand why the brothers had to be at a separate table. After all, even back then we know they kept to a dietary code. They kept kosher, at least to a certain degree. They couldn't have eaten from the same food as the Egyptians who did not adhere to the laws of kashrus.
- We also understand why the Egyptian servants had to be placed at a separate table. After all, Targum Onkelos tells us that the Egyptians thought it was repugnant to eat at the same table as the Jews because the very animal they worshiped, the sheep, the Jews ate.
- The one table that remains a mystery is Yosef's table. On the one hand, he was a Hebrew and should have sat next to his brothers. On the other hand, he is the Viceroy of Egypt and represents Egyptian culture and thus should have sat next to his Egyptian servants.
- But Yosef decides to sit alone. Neither at the table set aside for his brothers nor at the Egyptian table. Now, the simple explanation for this is that because he was the royal leader of the country, it would be beneath his dignity to sit with his inferiors. However, I think the Torah is trying to teach us an important lesson about assimilation.
- There are two types of Jews in the world. There is the type of Jew who is represented by the 11 brothers who ate at their own table. This type of Jew remains completely closed off from the outside world. Not only do they eat alone, but they also keep their own style of clothing and language. They

only use their Jewish names and they shun any efforts to imitate secular culture.

- However, most of us identify more with the second type of Jew- the Yosef Jew. The Yosef Jew is a Jew who has a secular name, wears the same style of clothing as his surrounding culture, and even works closely amongst the gentiles of his country. They are able to live amongst the non-Jews and yet retain their Jewish identity.
- How does the Yosef Jew succeed? How does he remain steadfast in his beliefs despite his involvement with the secular culture? What ensures that his children won't be one of the many that take involvement with the secular culture too far and ultimately assimilate?
- The answer is that despite Yosef's involvement with the Egyptian culture, he makes sure not to eat with them. Yosef may not be the same as his brothers, but he sets boundaries to ensure his children won't end up one day at the Egyptian table. The key to Jewish survival as a Yosef Jew is to set and maintain the proper boundaries between us and the goyim.²
- Halacha already guides us in ensuring we have the proper boundaries. The gemara in Avodah Zarah discusses the prohibition of not drinking wine touched by non-Jews (if it isn't mevushal). Similarly, it discusses not eating certain foods that are fully cooked by non-Jews and the prohibition of drinking beer in a non-Jew's home. Some are even careful not to eat any bread-products made by non-Jews. The gemara tells us that these things were instituted to avoid intermarriage. The gemara also warns us of having

² For a different analysis of the seating arrangements see Rabbi Lamm:
<https://archives.yu.edu/gsd/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH0107/78723564.dir/doc.pdf>

Yichud with a non-Jew of the opposite gender for similar reasons. When we set up and adhere to the proper boundaries we ensure our survival.

As Warren Buffet once said, *“The difference between successful people and unsuccessful people is that successful people are able to say NO.”* A successful person is someone who has the integrity to draw red lines and the determination to never cross them.

- In addition to the boundaries mentioned by Chazal, each person must create their own boundaries that ensures they retain their Jewish identity and their inner sanctity. After all, Yosef refrained from eating with the Egyptians even though there is no explicit prohibition against eating at the same table as non-Jews. For many others, eating at the same table as non-Jews does not pose a threat to their religiosity. However, Yosef saw that in his unique situation, eating alone was absolutely necessary for his own spiritual survival. It is not a coincidence that the very first Mishna in Pirkei Avos teaches *עשה סייג לתורה* - make a boundary for the Torah. It is the backbone and foundation that allows the rest of Pirkei Avos to be followed.
- Yosef teaches us the proper way we can relate to Chanuka and avoid assimilation. He teaches us that we can be involved with the outside world and still be considered a “tzadik.” We can engage in secular culture without being considered “hellenized Jews,” chas vshalom. Let us take this holiday of Chanuka to reflect upon whether or not we are being the best Yosef-Jews we can be. Let us remind ourselves of the proper boundaries that we should be adhering to and perhaps the additional boundaries that we should place upon ourselves. If we do this, we will merit that our descendants celebrate many more Chanukas to come.