

## Chanukah- The Intellectual Battle Between Athens and Jerusalem

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The Chanukah miracle was a multi-layered phenomenon: The perseverant oil which didn't extinguish, signaled that, even in a post-prophetic era, Divine intervention still visited our nation. Chanukah also marked the first time in our history, that we faced anti-religious hostility. For the first time we encountered violent efforts to suppress our religious beliefs and practices. Our courageous triumph demonstrated that ideas cannot be defeated by weapons. This victory foreshadowed a two-thousand year struggle, during which we consistently outlasted tyrants bent upon crushing Judaism. Finally, the military triumph of Chanukah restored Jewish sovereignty for a final 'moment' – two hundred years before we lost autonomy “for good”. It afforded a final taste of what Jewish sovereignty was meant to be.

In addition to these milestones, Chanukah was also an intellectual and cultural faceoff between Athens and Jerusalem. The Maharal casts Jewish history as an intellectual and moral battle against morally corrupting ideals posed by the great empires. Four major empires descended upon Earth to confront our people and our faith: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. Each empire, at some point, dominated civilization and threatened the overall moral and religious state of humanity. Each of these intimidating empires threatened to contaminate the core of religious ideas. By grappling with these empires, the Jewish people defeated these fraudulent ideas, thereby protecting human experience. Our military battle with the Seleucid Greeks, was also a faceoff against the dangerous doctrines of Athens.

In truth, ancient Greece spurred major advances in numerous fields such as: science, math, philosophy culture and politics. There is hardly of sphere of modern civilization which Greece didn't deeply impact; Greece can be referred to as the "first civilization".

In addition to these revolutions, the Greeks re-imagined the religious dogmas of the ancient world, breaking with archaic

notions of paganism. No longer were gods physical statues, stars, or human-crafted images. The Greeks abstracted their gods into larger-than-life beings who inhabited a distant mountain and possessed superior powers. Though they were able to imagine an abstract non-physical god, they could not imagine “one God” responsible for the variety and dichotomy of this booming and buzzing world. However, they did make great religious strides by dismissing the world of classic paganism. Greece represented a major step forward for mankind.

Yet, despite these breathtaking advances, Greece and Greek philosophy also posed danger to religious consciousness. The Jewish defeat of the Greeks protected religion from the spiritual encroachment of distorted principles.

One important difference between ancient Greece and Judaism lies in their differing views of time. Time exerts powerful influence upon our experience, and Man has perennially speculated about its meaning. The human mind pondered the concept of time well before Aristotle and Plato attempted to define it. However, unlike their predecessors, by applying scientific and philosophical tools of inquiry, developed highly abstract views of time.

In general, Greece sought to impose “order” and predictability upon a random and chaotic world. The word cosmos is actually a Greek word denoting “order”. For Plato, reality consists of a world of eternal “ideas” and absolute “essences”. Under this doctrine of “Ideas” experience is really a “shadow” of objective truths or “Platonic truths” which are infinite and indestructible. Our world of experience has no real being and is merely a shadow of that prototypical world. For example, the chair you sit on isn’t real, but rather, a projection of a theoretical and perfect Platonic chair. We aren’t living actual experience but merely living through a “shadow reality” which is projected from ultimate truths which exist in a realm “above” and “beyond” our ever-changing world. This system of thought assigns truth to absolute and objective categories, rather than to specific, individual experiences.

One of the by-products of this approach is a radically different view of time. As Greek philosophy dealt in absolute, timeless truths, time lost much of its experiential meaning. For example, many Greek philosophers saw the universe as infinite with no beginning

and no end. Many further postulated that time didn't actually and was merely an illusion. After all, the past has already expired, and the future hasn't yet evolved. Under this logic, time doesn't exist at all. A famous 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek philosopher named Zeno crafted a well-known paradox of a race between a tortoise and a hare to prove that time was merely an illusion. In a world of absolute truths time lost all 'particular' meaning.

Our view of time stands completely antithetical to this notion. We view time as a trajectory with a point of inception or genesis and a distinct conclusion or terminus. The arch of time between the creation and the terminus is called "history" and history is by no means formless. History is constantly surging toward a terminus – a moral and religious state of affairs which is similar to the point of origin. We call this surging historical process "redemption". Additionally, history, as a redemptive "process" is significantly impacted by human behavior. Human beings shape the pace and texture of the historical trajectory. As agents of redemption, the Jewish people inordinately affect the passage of history. Athens spoke of time as a mere illusion or as merely a concept, whereas Jerusalem spoke of time as a framework for human behavior and a stage for a redemptive narrative. Athens viewed Man as helpless to affect inanimate time or even to identify it. Jerusalem empowered Man to craft a story of redemption.

For this reason, one of the focal Greek decrees against Judaism targeted the abolition of Rosh Chodesh. By adhering to a lunar calendar, Jews reserved the right to alter the calendar and manipulate time. The concept of Rosh Chodesh asserts the dynamic nature of history and the empowered role of Man to shape that experience. This particularly infuriated the Greeks, for whom time barely existed and certainly wasn't subject to any human imprint.

The Chanukah miracles preserved the concept of "history". By and large it is this notion of redemptive history which has been adopted by humanity. A society which believes in redemption will forever search for a better tomorrow. Living in the "flow of history" inspires

political reform, scientific inquiry, and social justice crusades. A society searching for the “promised land” will seek invention, discovery, and technology. Had it not been for the Jewish Chanukah victory, humanity at large may have been locked in the Greek illusion of “pointless” and illusory time. Chanukah assured that humanity would occupy a vibrant world of history and redemption.