

Greeks, Jews and the Value of Chesed

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About 200 years prior to the Chanukah miracle, Alexander the Great marched upon Jerusalem, designing to capture this renowned capital. Encountering the Cohen gadol named Shimon Hazadik, Alexander immediately recognized this man as the saint who had visited his dreams prior to each Greek military victory. Deferring to this holy man, Alexander spared Yerushalayim, opting instead to penalize the local Samaritans who had been harassing the Jews.

This "chance encounter" between a Jewish Priest and a Greek general was characteristic of a broader cultural exchange between Athens and Jerusalem. As ancient Greece expanded their culture and their global influence, they looked to the cradle of prophecy- the city of Yerushalayim- for eternal truths. The Chanukah military faceoff was just a small installment of a larger confrontation. During the actual Chanukah battles, this encounter turned violent as the Northern Greeks attempted to crush our religion. However, in the centuries prior to the battles, the encounter between the two cultures was nonviolent, as Greece looked to Yerushalayim for knowledge and religious truth.

Though Alexander paid great honor to Shimon Hazadik, unfortunately he didn't read the Mishnah which this cohen had authored. Had he studied the well-known proverb of this man, he may have discovered a vital religious value sorely deficient in Greek philosophy. In a well-known saying, Shimon Hazadik delineated three pivots upon which the world is "founded": Torah study, prayer and chesed. Greek culture accounted for the first two, but was oblivious to the third. In the 3rd century, about one hundred years prior to the Chanukah miracles, the Greek King of Egypt named Ptolemy II, authorized the translation of the Torah into Greek- once again reflecting the great thirst in ancient Greece for Torah muse. The Greeks realized that Torah contained eternal "Heavenly" truths inaccessible through scientific inquiry. To study these prophetic truths, it must first be translated to Greek. In a more general sense, beyond the study of Torah, Greece appreciated the importance of philosophical study, acquisition of knowledge, and the inquiry into the human condition. Likewise, Greece acknowledged the value of prayer, offering praise to their gods or petitioning them for support. The "general" concepts - study and prayer- were familiar to the Greeks.

Unfortunately, ancient Greece placed little value in chesed, or charity for the poor or needy. For all their grand visions about an enlightened civilization, altruism was almost completely lacking. As Greek culture rapidly advanced across the world it promoted a model of religion and of society devoid of charity. By defeating the Greeks, the Jews protected the world from this fraudulent ideology. Chanukah assured that charity would always sit at the heart of the religious experience.

To be more precise, charity did exist in ancient Greece, but in a very different form. The Greek word “philanthrôpia” doesn’t refer to assistance to the poor or the underprivileged. Instead, it refers to hand-outs to socio-economic peers: friends, family members or guests. It was more hospitality than charity. Specific care for the needy or support for the impoverished isn’t a feature of Greek "philanthropy".

Greek charity was also driven by very different motives. Generosity to others wasn’t motivated by selflessness, but rather by what could be acquired "in return" for generous deeds. Kindness was reduced to a transactional "exchange" rather than unselfish charity. By performing acts of charity, a person could achieve honor, fame, social status and prestige. Charity was, in reality, a personal pursuit of social standing rather than a noble act of relieving suffering. Shockingly, many Greek philosophers encouraged charity only in situations of actual reciprocity. The 8th Century Greek poet named Hesiod wrote: "Give to him who gives but do not give to him who does not give [back]." Giving to others purely for reciprocal benefit perverts charity into a selfish and greedy practice.

Not unsurprisingly, there is little record in ancient Greece of organized charities or charitable societies allocating public funds to the poor. In the Greek 'polis' state poor people were viewed as inferior in the eyes of the gods who instead celebrated strength and power. The comfortable station of the rich was evidence that they, and not the poor, had been preferred by the gods. Why should humans shower mercy on those who the gods disliked? The gods had little interest in the weak and the feeble, so why should humans show them any kindness?

Ancient Greece made great strides in science, art, philosophy, mathematics. Additionally, they were the first to craft a semi-free democratic state, paving the way for modern democracies. However, The Greeks could not imagine a society which cared for the weak and lent a hand to those who could not support

themselves. Greece was a cold and efficient state, in which the anguished cries of the needy were unheeded by the gods and ignored by humans.

Likewise, the Greeks they could not imagine a divine Being who was all-powerful, but also compassionate and caring for the weak. To their credit the Greeks liberated the human imagination from the folly of paganism. They no longer worshipped nature or metal images. Science replaced darkness and logic supplanted the world of black magic. Religiously, the Greeks were veering in the right direction- toward a world of monotheism. Yet their image of the divine was bereft of empathy and benevolence. By defeating the Greeks, Judaism preserved the vital role of chesed and charity within religion. The cold and uncaring societies of Greece would not become the norm. The impersonal and aloof gods of Greek mythology were discredited. The Chanukah triumph upheld the image of a caring and compassionate G-d. It preserved the centrality of chesed to our religious experience. The third leg upon which the world "rests" was safeguarded.

Greece envisioned a society built upon honorable ideals of democracy, honor, science and progress. Yet these noble ideas never trickled down to day-to-day behavior and to simple acts of kindness for the needy. Greece constructed a moral foundation for the "state", but compassion and kindheartedness never inhabited their cities.

Ancient Greece is still alive in the modern world. We defeated their armies but their ideas still infiltrate the human imagination. The moral trap of Greece still ensnares modern man. The modern world has adopted numerous moral and social causes- from environmentalism to social equality to the defeat of bigotry and racism. These broad-scale movements are based on high-minded ethical values. Any desire to craft a better world for all its inhabitants is a noble calling. However, moral behavior can't be expressed solely in global or political agendas. Campaigning to change public opinion or to inspire policy changes is not equivalent to a life of compassion and kindness. Crafting a better "society" does not substitute for acts of charity and generosity to the "individuals" in our lives. Sadly, renowned social crusaders who launch grand reforms are often incapable of charity and morally sensitive behavior. Don't be trapped in ancient Greece. It is not sufficient to dream of a more democratic society or even a more prosperous world. Without charity our world turns cold and callous. Without kindness we no

longer resemble our Creator.