

Parshas Mikeitz - Chanukah *Hellenism: A Duplicitous Foe*



One of the strangest denizens of the world of punditry is a man by the name of Christopher Hitchens. He may be rational when dealing with the war in Iraq or when discussing the conflict in Darfur, but, when it comes to religion he is off the board fanatical, which is ironic considering that fanaticism is what he so often rails against. After reading about his last book –whose title is too blasphemous to mention in a Shul – I figured he has two enemies of faith and Judaism was not one of them. However, Wednesday I came across an article by him that surprised me even considering the writer. Here are some choice parts from the piece:

Jewish orthodoxy possesses the interesting feature of naming and combating the idea of the apikoros or "Epicurean" –the intellectual renegade who prefers Athens to Jerusalem and the schools of philosophy to the grim old routines of the Torah. ...the Greek or Epicurean style had begun to gain immense ground among the Jews of Syria and Palestine. The Seleucid Empire, an inheritance of Alexander the Great – Alexander still being a popular name among Jews – had weaned many people away from the sacrifices, the circumcisions, the belief in a special relationship with God, and the other reactionary manifestations of an ancient and cruel faith. I quote (from a contemporary rabbi) "Along with Greek science and military prowess came a whole culture that celebrated beauty both in art and in the human body, presented the world with the triumph of rational thought in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and rejoiced in the complexities of life presented in the theater of Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes..."

But away with all that. Let us instead celebrate the Maccabean peasants who wanted to destroy Hellenism and restore what they actually calls "oldtime

Moshe Taub//732.232.4911

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I have never before seen Chanukah attacked in the main stream press and started, without thinking, working on my response.

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The holidays as well, as we have shown in the past, have strange and often eerie resemblances to each other. Of all holidays for Chanukah to parallel, it may surprise some that I would choose Sukkos, for, consider:

- 1) Beis Shammai famously uses Sukkos and its Karbonos as precedent for his opinion of Lighting the Menorah starting with 8 and, nightly, working our way down.
- 2) The Talmud compares the limited height of the Menorah (20 Amos) to that of the Sukkah and it having the same law.
- 3) The concept of Hidur Mitzva being an institutionalized part of both Sukkos (Pri Etz **Hadar** –this dramatically effects the Halachos of Sukkos), and, Mehadrin being incorporated into the laws of Chanuka (to the point where the Shulchan Aruch entirely omits the basic law of lighting just one candle every night. See Pri Megadim and Avi Ezri et al.).

¹ As to why Binyamin was not harmed by the statement of the brothers, like Rachel was from the statement of Yaakov, see Moshav Zekainim.

4) The premise of both Holidays: their Mitzvos Hayom, traditionally, takes place just outside the home.

5) The entire structure of both holidays were manipulated to impress on Gentiles the Mitzva (Sukkos, as the Beis Yoseph teaches does not take place in Nissin, and, Chanuka, as many Poskim teach, one fulfills Parsumei Neessa through the viewing of Gentiles as opposed to Mikras Meggila where this would not be viable)

6) Chasiddai Ger explain the idea of the 8 days of Chanuka (also a famous question asked first by the Beis Yoseph) that like Sukkos G-d added an 8th day because of his love for us so to Chanukah.

Now, what does Chanukah have that “balances” Sukkos, and, what does Sukkos have that “completes” Chanukah?

This past Sukkos, we spoke about how that holiday signifies our view of the relationship between us and the Umos Haolom: the 70 sacrifices - referenced above by Beis Shammai regarding Chanuka – are brought during the festival of Sukkos for the benefit of the 70 nations; the verse in Zacharyah 14 - that we read the first day Sukkos - that teaches how the non-Jews will celebrate, specifically, the Holiday of Sukkos; the Talmud (A.Z.) that teaches how G-d will test the Nations with one Mitzva - Sukka, this list goes on and on; We spoke about the dangers of viewing Gentiles as evil, how our “beef” is not with our neighbor and with culture –that is caused from a lack of Torah and Kedusha and can come from, R”L, Jews as well – rather we have fundamental disagreements: between RaMBaM and Aristotle, RamCHaL and Spinoza etc; the danger if Rebbeim simplify this deep debate and make it unsophisticated –Goyim are bad –and what happens when these boys and girls go to University and meet “Goyim” for the first time, seeing that they are normal, thoughtful, caring and capable of sound logic (see J.C.H article by R. Alfred Cohen on this issue); How the Netziv teaches (when Yaakov and Eisav embrace) that Eisav is our brother and when he acts like one we embrace; How on Sukkos we go outside our homes and, while protected in our own cocoon, look outside the box, to see and care for the “Chochmas BaGoyim”.

However, there is a danger to all of this. There can be a misconception in *Chochmas BaGoyim Taamin* that could lead to the utter *destruction* of Yahadus. And it is that danger that Chanukah comes to protect us from. Let me explain.

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Last week I was studying with a Conservative rabbi, and he was telling me how the letter Samech comes from the Greeks. "Why is it", I asked, "that whenever the Talmud discusses pi, deep mathematical ideas or astrology or astronomy etc. people always come along to say ' we got it from the Greeks, the Romans, the Babylonians etc.'?" Is it possible that it is they who got it from us? Can it not be that the nation who, as taught in the Talmud Yerushalmi, was the first to make the claim –and follow it by law- that the world is round not flat –long before Galileo -, the Rabbis on whom it was said (Talmud Shabbos) that their light on the nations will be in the science and wisdom of astronomy and astrology, that they – we - had and have something to teach the world, that we influenced, in profound ways, each and every geographical land mass we were exiled to?

What Mr. Hitchens fails to realize is that the story of Chanukkah is not about a nation afraid that the *void* of science, philosophy and poetry would be *filled* by Hellenists, rather would be *replaced* by Hellenists. There was no chasm to filled, for we already had ours.

Torah Umaadah; Torah and Derech Eretz. These are ideas to think about seriously, however, if we only focus on the latter half we are doomed.

Sukkos is when we go outside and see what comes into our Sukka (Chama Merrubba...), Chanukah is when they, the Amim, look into *our* homes, see the light burning, the Eish Shel Torah, and pine for what *we* have, what they can learn from us². Chochmas BaGoyim –Taamin, but we must always remember, Torah BaGoyim –Al Taamin.

When I was in Yeshiva - and every Yeshiva Bachur has been through this - I had a friend who every time I was home would debate Yeshiva philosophy with me. One time he made the claim that his main problem with Yeshiva boys is that they stick to the Talmud and have no idea about culture. While I was not entirely convinced that the 17 year old boys that were not in Yeshiva *were* familiar with the arts and culture, I did give my friend the following illustration:

Imagine you go on a camping trip with your wife. After you pitch your tent and go to sleep, you hear in the distance a faint noise. Frightened, you both get out of bed to investigate. You soon realize that you camped 100 feet from an Indian reservation. The

² Indeed, many Poskim hold that Parsume'i Nissa of Chanukah can be fulfilled through Goyim, for instance, if one is alone in a city of non-Jews he may light with a Brachah.

tribe sees you and asks if you would like to join. You spend the rest of the night with your face painted, dancing around the fire, smoking their pipes, hearing their legends etc. When the night finally ends the Tribal leader turns to you and asks, "How was it?", "Well", you answer, "it was great, but you know what you are missing? Culture."

How absurd, they *are* culture. And, to have the belief that boys studying texts that are thousand of years old, written in a forgotten language, as well as us here, shaking a Lullav, lighting a Menorah, reading from a Torah scroll –are all *lacking* culture, is simply heartbreaking.

Chanukah creates the balance so badly needed: yes, in Galus we must think about *all* of G-d's creations, and, at times, we can learn from them, however we must believe that it is *our* wisdom *our* culture and *our* Torah –our flame- that will carry us through to a new tomorrow.

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