



CHANUKAH



A unique EXILE



Trying to make Israel the same as all the other nations | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

IN 3448, ALEXANDER THE GREAT, WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY conquered Persia, conquered the Middle East with the assistance of the Kutim. The Kutim then asked for permission from Alexander to destroy the *Beis HaMikdash* (the Temple) – less than 40 years after it was finished being rebuilt following the well-known events of Purim! – and, in gratitude for their help, Alexander granted their request.

As the Kuti army advanced on *Yerushalayim*, Shimon HaTzadik, the *Kohen Gadol* and last remaining member of the *Anshei Keneses HaGedolah* (the Men of the Great Assembly), did the unthinkable, exiting the *Beis HaMikdash* while still wearing the holy garments of the *Kohen Gadol*, with the intention of travelling to Alexander's camp and beseeching him to spare the *Beis HaMikdash*. As Shimon HaTzadik approached, Alexander saw him coming. What happened next is the stuff of

miracles. Alexander, likely the most powerful man on the face of the earth, suddenly descended from his horse and spontaneously bowed to the ground before Shimon. Seeing the puzzled looks on the faces of his officers, Alexander explained to them that, when he had gone out to battle, he had seen an image of this man, Shimon, wearing these clothes and leading his army to victory. Alexander thereafter revoked the authorisation that he had previously granted to the Kutim to destroy the *Beis HaMikdash*, ushering in a short-lived period of good relations between the Greeks and the Jewish people.¹

Unfortunately, the brief period of good relations was not to last, as just a few years later, in 3454, Alexander died and his kingdom was divided between four of his generals. *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel) was then caught between two of these four kingdoms, the Egyptian-Greeks and the

Syrian-Greeks, and was usually under the dominion of one or the other, as the Greek kingdoms fought against each other.

A UNIQUE EXILE

Our Sages teach that the Jewish people will be subjected to four periods of exile: *Bavel* (Babylon), *Madai*, *Yavan* (Greece), and *Edom* (Rome). The Greek Exile was not connected only to the period when the Greeks breached the *Beis HaMikdash*, desecrated it, and stopped the *avodah* (the daily service) there, but to the entire long period that the Greeks ruled the world. According to the Talmud², the Greeks ruled for 180 years during the *Second Beis HaMikdash*.³ According to the Rambam, Jews lived under the harsh decrees of the Greeks for a period of 52 years. Although we often think of the Jewish rebellion led by the *Chashmonaim* being short-lived, it actually lasted for well over a decade, with the bulk of the battles taking place long after the events of Chanukah, which took place early on in the rebellion.

The Greek Exile was rather unique in that it took place when the Jewish people were dwelling in *Eretz Yisrael* and while



the Second *Beis HaMikdash* was still standing and functioning. Nevertheless, this period is called the Greek Exile because the concept of “exile” is not specifically when we are exiled from our land. Instead, “exile” refers primarily to the exile of the *Shechina* (Hashem’s Divine presence).⁴ Such an exile occurs when the spiritual connection between the Jewish people and Hashem is weakened or disconnected, *chas v’shalom*, which can happen when non-Jews and their foreign culture rule over the Jewish people. A spiritual exile like this exists at all times that Jews become enslaved to the ways of thinking of non-Jews and accustomed according to their ways of doing things.

Consequently, the Greek Exile was, in contrast to other exiles, a spiritual exile, making it much more dangerous, as we explain in the prayer *Al HaNissim*, “...when the wicked Greek Kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to cause them to transgress

the statutes of Your Will.” And so the redemption from Greece was primarily a spiritual redemption, as our Sages explain⁵ the difference between the mitzvos related to Purim and those related to Chanukah:

“Antiochus [the title by which the Syrian-Greek ruler was known] did not decree upon them that they should be killed or destroyed – only troubled in order that they would convert from their religion...and if Israel was subjugated to the Greeks...and renounced their faith, G-d forbid, the Greeks did not ask more from them...therefore [our Sages] only established that we should say Hallel and give thanks and not feast and rejoice.... But, in the days of Haman, when the decree was to kill and to destroy us physically...therefore, when we were saved, [our Sages] established for us

to praise Hashem through feasting and rejoicing [ie. physical means].”

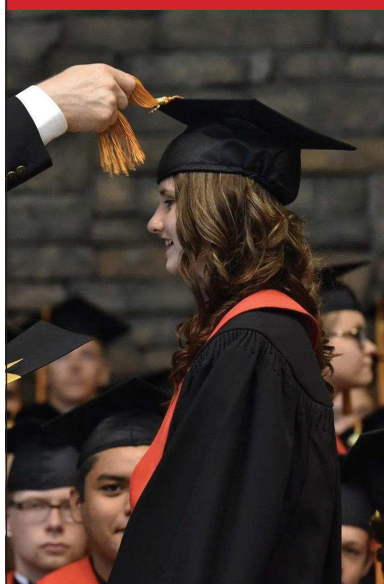
THE TORAH AS WISDOM

A strong person doesn’t concern himself with a weak person because such a person is no contest for him. A strong person concerns himself with someone who he sees is like him. Since the Greeks were the wisest of all the nations, they saw in the Jewish nation and their Torah a competitor in the field that they held most dear: wisdom. The Greeks wanted to destroy the unique hold that the Jews had on the Torah – they wanted to make the wisdom of the Torah their own, thus dispensing with the unique status of the Jews and the Jews’ exclusive connection to the Torah.

“THE GREEK EXILE WAS RATHER UNIQUE IN THAT IT TOOK PLACE WHEN THE JEWISH PEOPLE WERE DWELLING IN ERETZ YISRAEL AND WHILE THE SECOND BEIS HAMIKDASH WAS STILL STANDING AND FUNCTIONING.”

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CHANUKAH



In 3515, the Egyptian-Greek ruler, known by the title Ptolemy, gathered and separately sequestered 72 of the Sages of Israel, forcing them to translate the Torah into the Greek language – with the result that the Sages produced 72 identical translations, including identical changes to the text in 13 places.⁶ Why did the Greeks do this? Because the Greeks were lovers of wisdom; the discipline of philosophy, which literally means ‘love of wisdom’, was born in Greece. Torah is a wisdom and the Greeks were thirsty to know the wisdom of the Torah. It’s clear from the impact that they’ve had on history, with most academic disciplines tracing their roots back to Ancient Greece, that wisdom is something connected to Greece more so than to any other nation in the history of the world. The reason they asked to have the Torah translated into Greek is because they wanted to swallow the Torah up and turn it into a part of Greek wisdom – to make it just another branch of wisdom: math, science, medicine, astronomy...and Torah.

THE HORN OF AN OX

By 3570, Jewish Hellenists (known as *Misyavnim*) and other breakaway groups, who chose to cleave to the wisdom of the Greeks and to live and act according to Greek ways, were promoting the accep-

“THE GREEKS WERE LOVERS OF WISDOM; THE DISCIPLINE OF PHILOSOPHY, WHICH LITERALLY MEANS ‘LOVE OF WISDOM’, WAS BORN IN GREECE.”

tance of Greek culture and even helping the Greeks with the forceful coercion of their Jewish brethren who observed the Torah. By 3600, *Eretz Yisrael* had fallen under the dominion of the Syrian Greeks.

Our Sages famously teach that the ancient Greeks “darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees”. In the continuation of their words, our Sages bring one prominent example, whose aim was the public denial of and rebellion against Hashem and the special connection between Hashem and the Jewish people – and in which was hidden the source of the goal of their decrees: “So they said to [Israel], ‘Write on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the G-d of Israel.’” Why did the Greeks order them to write precisely on the horn of an ox?

The Maharal explains that the reason the Greeks had them write this statement on the horn of an ox was that they wanted to remind the Jewish people of the *cheit ha’eigel* (the sin of the golden calf) for which Hashem detested them and which the Greeks believed had stopped the Jews from being the chosen people. But, the truth is that

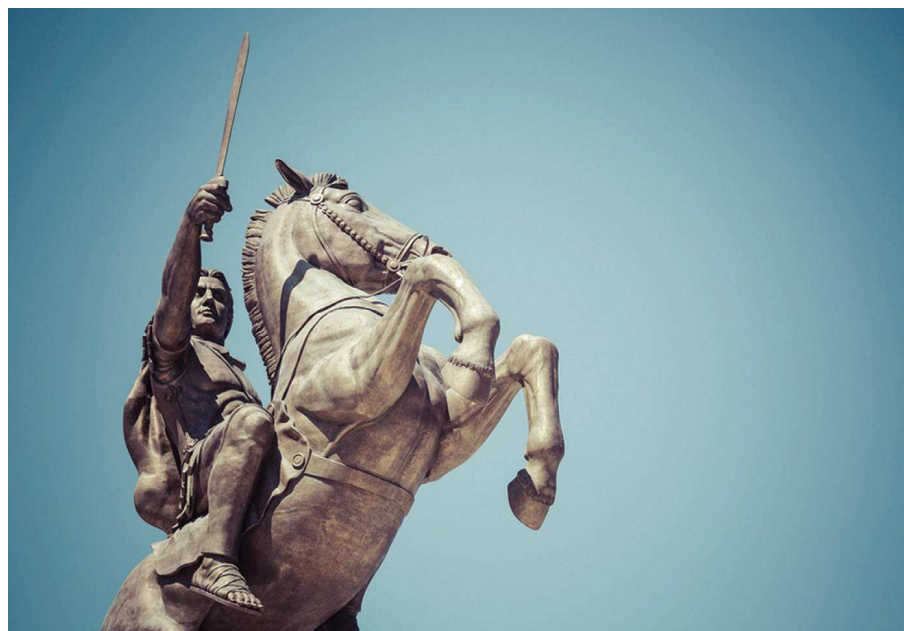
Hashem’s choice in the Jewish people was an eternal one, and He loved us with “a love that isn’t dependent on something”,⁷ and, even after we sinned, we remained His people.

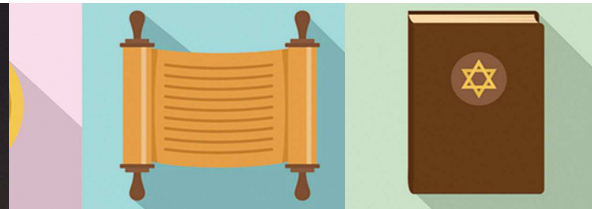
The Greeks wanted us to write down for ourselves that we had no special relationship with Hashem. They wanted us to believe this. Just as Haman was not satisfied with everyone bowing down to him with the exception of Mordechai – the Greeks were not satisfied with spreading their wisdom and cultural influence to all the nations of the world except Israel. It wasn’t enough for them to be thought of as the wisest of peoples – they wanted to be the chosen people from all of the nations. They wanted their wisdom, not the Torah, to be the highest level of wisdom in the world to which a person is able to reach.

The Greeks wanted to destroy from the nation of Israel our spiritual qualities that expressed the specialness of Israel from all the other nations. This aspect of the Greek Exile is what made that exile the most bitter and dangerous of all of the exiles that we have experienced – because all of those exiles were, first and foremost, physical exiles, but, the Greek Exile was a spiritual exile that endangered the very essence – the soul – of the nation of Israel. And so this is why our Sages associated the Greeks in particular with “darkness”.

ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

Greek wisdom is the wisdom of the human mind and deals a lot with the natural sciences, with the goal of using that wisdom related to the natural world to rule over it. The more one knows the laws of nature, the more one can reign over the natural world. And a person who can become the master of the natural world will become the master of the entire world and everyone and everything in it. This is what man strives for in every generation: to expand his rule over the natural world as much as possible.





“TORAH IS A WISDOM AND THE GREEKS WERE THIRSTY TO KNOW THE WISDOM OF THE TORAH.”

While it's permissible for man to take advantage of nature and to make use of it for his needs, it becomes forbidden and unfit to do so when he reaches a place where he feels that he is able to rely on his own intellect and work everything out alone, no longer needing the *chesed* (kindness) of his Creator, and, consequently, disconnecting from Him and forgetting Him, *chas v'shalom*. This world view – this outlook is absolutely opposed to the world view of Israel and to the wisdom of the Torah – according to which the aim of the entire creation and nature itself is to serve the will of Hashem, sanctifying the physical world to serve Him. This is the gist of the struggle between Greece and Israel – what has become known in academic circles as the struggle between Athens and Jerusalem – and hidden within this is the reason for the specific things that the Greeks decreed against us.

WHY DID THEY CHOOSE THOSE DECREES?

The Greeks famously decreed against our observance of three specific mitzvot: *bris milah* (circumcision), *Shabbos*, and *Rosh Chodesh* (the inauguration of the new lunar month). They also sought to put a stop to Torah study, as well as to put an end to the *avodah* in the *Beis HaMikdash*. Their goal was to take away the things that defined us as unique, chosen, and different from all of the other nations, decreeing against *bris milah* and *Shabbos* because the Torah refers to these as “signs” of the eternal covenant between Hashem and His nation Israel.

But, more than this, all of these things that they sought to destroy or ban were connected through one common theme: *kedusha* (sanctity, holiness). The Greeks

decreed against Torah study because the Torah is the foundation of sanctity for all of creation. The Greeks likewise sought to destroy the holiness of the nation of Israel that was connected to every part of the physical reality: person, time, and place.

Bris milah sanctifies the person, the body of man – the ever-present mitzvah that accompanies a man wherever he goes, marking him as outwardly different from other men, a reflection of the inner reality which, likewise, separates him.⁸

Shabbos and *Rosh Chodesh* sanctify time. The *kedusha* of *Shabbos* is both independent of the Jewish people as well as entirely unique to them, as a non-Jew who keeps *Shabbos* incurs the death penalty.⁹ Interestingly, while Hashem personally sanctifies *Shabbos*, He empowers the Jewish people to sanctify the new moon and to declare the start of the new lunar month, ie. *Rosh Chodesh*, which, in turn, determines when the *Yomim Tovim* will fall out, ie. when those days will be sanctified.

In fact, Hashem leaves it entirely in our hands to the point that, even if there is an error in our determination – based on, for example, a miscalculation or, as occurred in one famous episode in the gemara, an argument over whether witnesses had testified truthfully – Hashem will agree to follow whatever the Sanhedrin declares, right or wrong. As the *midrash* testifies¹⁰ to when the *malachim* (angels) come and ask Hashem when *Rosh Hashanah* is, He responds, “Why do you ask

Me? Let us go to the earthly court (who determines such things)!”

Finally, the *Beis HaMikdash* sanctifies place, as the *Shechina* (Hashem's Divine presence) rests there always, despite its latter destruction.¹¹

A FITTING MITZVAH

The Greeks created these specific decrees in order to nullify the special virtues of Israel and to make us equal to all the other nations. Unlike other nations throughout history who have tried to destroy us, the goal of the Greeks was not to destroy us physically from this world, but spiritually – to assimilate us and put an end to our unique relationship to Hashem and His Torah, stripping away any and every vestige of holiness from Israel and, thereby, our uniqueness from all the other nations of the world.

It is, perhaps, fitting then that the mitzvah, by which Our Sages chose to commemorate the miracle of Chanukah and the attempt by the Greeks to strip us of what makes us holy, is by igniting a light that is itself deemed to be holy and from which we can derive no benefit, as we sing after lighting the Chanukah candles each of the eight nights: “*Haneros halalu kodesh hem, ve-ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem, ela lirosam bilvad*” – “These lights are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them, only to look at them”...and to dispel the darkness around us. **III**

Based primarily on a *sicha* by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander.

¹The Tannaim and Amoraim, Rabbi Nosson Wiggins, Judaica Press (2019)

²Avodah Zarah 9a

³From approximately 3449 – 3622.

⁴See Ramban Pesicha to Chumash Shemos

⁵Lavush Hilchos Chanukah 670:62

⁶Megila 9a

⁷See Pirkei Avos 5:16

⁸See Menachos 43b

⁹Sanhedrin 58b

¹⁰Devarim Rabbah 2:14

¹¹See Shemos Rabbah 2:2

“THEY WANTED THEIR WISDOM, NOT THE TORAH, TO BE THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF WISDOM IN THE WORLD TO WHICH A PERSON IS ABLE TO REACH.”