

Thinking Reflections

By William Kolbrener

In 1918, Max Weber, the German sociologist, famously described “scholarship” as a “vocation”—that is, literally (he was consciously appropriating the theological term) a “calling.” What, we might ask (somewhat skirting the larger question of the possibility of *Torah u'Madda*, especially in our generation) is the difference between the “vocation” of the scholar and that of a *talmid chacham*? Which is to say, when we inquire about the differences between the yeshivah and the university, we are not only asking a question about the nature of the curricula, but by necessity, we are asking about the nature of the different forms of *engagement*—intellectual, psychological, and spiritual—which they demand. In a sense, then, the question becomes (and it is one of no little import, for ourselves, not to mention for our children): What is the difference between *thinking* like a Greek and *thinking* like a Jew?

The English critic, Matthew Arnold, certainly got it right when he made his famous distinction between “Hebraism and Hellenism”—identifying the antithetical powers which inform the culture of the West; though, of course, he failed utterly to provide anything like an accurate definition of the former. In our own tradition, *lehavdil*, there has been no one who has provided more profound meditations upon the nature of the relation between Yavan (Greece) and Yisrael than Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *zt”l*. The following discussion on the difference not only between the Torah and *chachmat haolam* (worldly wisdom), but primarily between the Greek and the Jew¹ relies upon, and in some cases freely adapts, the sixth of the Chanukah *ma’amarim* in *Pachad Yitzchak*, the work by Rav Hutner.

As the Bach notes (*OC* 670), during all of the exiles except the Greek, the oppressing powers sought to destroy the very lives of the Jews (for the Bach, Purim, when Haman sought to *kill* all of the Jews, is the primary example of this). This, however, was not the case during the conquest and domination of the Greeks.

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Like a Jew: on Chanukah

Indeed, the other exiles entailed the complete destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the physical exile of the Jews from Eretz Yisrael. During the period of *galut Yavan*, the Jews were, in fact, living in Jerusalem. Interestingly, Yavan was content to simply *defile* the Temple; although the inside was converted into a gymnasium (a means for celebrating the Greek enlightenment ideal of the triumph of the human), the walls of the Temple remained intact and the Jewish presence in Jerusalem continued.

So what then were the powers of the Greeks? Why were they, unlike Edom, for example, willing to tolerate the continued presence of the Temple and the Jews themselves? Maharal explains, in his *perush* (commentary) on the Book of Daniel, that the special attribute of the Greek nation is wisdom, and it is with this that it tries to undermine—really destroy internally—Am Yisrael (*Ner Mitzvah* 1). Indeed, because of the special Greek claim to wisdom (who can deny the philosophical profundities of Plato? the epic majesty of Homer? the tragic insights of Sophocles?), the Greeks sought to challenge the privileged status of Torah. Which is to say, the Greeks were happy to tolerate the Jews in so far that they would abandon their particular practices, and acknowledge that the Torah had no special status, and could be assimilated to the Greek ideal of *universal* knowledge. As long as the Jews would turn their holidays into celebrations of bland and universal notions of religious freedom and enlightenment, as long as they wouldn't insist upon their particularity, they would be tolerated by the Greeks. The universalist and “tolerant” ethic of the Greeks led them to defile the oil from the Temple rather than pour it out. As Maharal explains, the Greeks chose to render the oil unusable rather than discard it, because their chief desire was *not* to destroy Am Yisrael, but rather, to blur the distinction between the Greek and Jewish cultures—to tolerate a watered-down version of Judaism in the ancient Greek version of multiculturalism. Indeed, the seemingly minor defilement of the oil was symbolic of the Greek defilement of the Jewish nation. For when the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they not only defiled all the oils, they blemished the thoughts and feelings (the internal worlds) of the majority of Am Yisrael. As Rav Hutner emphasizes, it is only in *galut Yavan* where one finds *mityavnim*, Hellenists (there was no corresponding group of *mitbavlim*, “Bavelists”).

The *galut* of Yavan was the internal exile of assimilation, an exile





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that sought to break down the claims to Jewish difference. As *Pachad Yitzchak* elaborates, the Greeks attempted to achieve this through two means: 1. the attack upon Torah in its essence, and 2. the attack upon the practice of mitzvot. The blessings which we say upon being called to the Torah end in two distinctive manners: *asher bachar banu*, emphasizing the God “who chose us,” and *asher natan lanu*, emphasizing the God “who gave us” the Torah. Greek wisdom—and the insistence upon the universalism of knowledge—entailed an attack upon both of these Jewish claims. The Jews as a people, the Greeks asserted, were no different than any other people: This was an assault upon the distinguishing features of Jewish practice, upon mitzvot, and upon *asher bachar banu*. Further, they asserted, the Torah was no different than any other branch of wisdom—thus the attack upon Jewish study and *asher natan lanu*. The Greeks abolished Torah study and banned those particular mitzvot, each of which, in its own way, emphasizes the distinctive Jewish approach to life and the sanctification of this world (*Olam Hazeh*). Thus the Greeks abolished Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and *Brit Milah*, because all of these mitzvot stress the Jewish relation to the World—the sanctification of creation, of time, and of the body respectively. In this way, Yavan attacked “*asher bachar banu*”—the Jewish distinctiveness derived from performing God’s will.

The chief means for attacking the latter distinction—*asher natan lanu*—was through an action considered so catastrophic that it merited a day of fasting and mourning: the translation of the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses, into Greek. The Megillah Ta’anit relates that “on the eighth day of Tevet, the Torah was rendered into Greek, during the days of King Ptolemy [Philadelphus],

and darkness descended upon the world for three days.” Indeed, *Chazal* explain that the darkness—the “*choshech*”—in the second verse of Bereishit refers, in fact, to Yavan. Here is where our own universalist outlooks (our sensibilities have almost certainly been influenced by those of the Greeks!) may come into play. For we may ask, perhaps even with incredulity, what could be so terribly problematic about a Greek translation? Why should we worry about—indeed *mourn*—the translation of the Torah?!

As *Pachad Yitzchak* explains, it was precisely through this translation, which Ptolemy forced the 70-member Jewish Sanhedrin to write (thus the name, *Septuagint*), that the Greeks endeavored to undermine the special status of the Torah, and thereby, that of Am Yisrael. In fact, as the Talmud tells us, the translation of the Bible would allow the nations of the world to claim, “*Anu Yisrael!*” “We are Israel!” That is, once the Torah was no longer the exclusive province of the Jews, the nations of the world could claim to occupy their own special place and status: “We are Israel!” We note, in passing, that there are two kinds of “*Anu Yisrael!*” There is the “*Anu Yisrael!*” of Edom (and the Roman Catholic Church) which accepted the Jewish ideas about transcendence and spirituality, but rejected—indeed attempted to replace—the Jews. In this way, Christianity would claim to occupy the sacred space which Am Yisrael inhabited (it is no wonder, then, that the Church required the actual exile of the Jews, for they came to *replace* the Jews, and thus could not bear the continued Jewish presence in Jerusalem).

More importantly, for our purposes, however, there is the “*Anu Yisrael!*” of

the Greeks, which does not come to supersede Israel, but rather to *blur the very difference between Israel and the nations*. The “We are Israel!” of Yavan is based upon the blurring of all distinctions between cultures into a universalism in which Jews are Greeks and Greeks are Jews. Contemporary manifestations of this sensibility are indeed ubiquitous: All of the nations of the world are, the refrain goes, different but equal, *all of us* are God’s chosen people. This is the universalistic claim, often made in the name of toleration, which comes to undermine the very distinction between Jews and the nations (it is these days, regrettably, a claim heard most loudly from within some quarters of Am Yisrael itself!). Indeed, the *Septuagint* became the central means by which such an assertion could be forwarded. For Torah, in translation, becomes *merely* a “book,” an external form of knowledge like any other, not part of a living tradition (guaranteed through the face-to-face transmission throughout the generations), but just another call number in the library (though in the religion section undoubtedly). It is a book, which now can be gazed upon (studied) from the outside. Thus the nations of the world can behave as if they too have the Torah, and as if the Torah is no different from any book, any other form of knowledge. This was the aim of the conquest by Yavan—to place Torah on the same footing as the wisdom of the nations. Calling Am Yisrael the “People of the Book” is actually part of the strategy of Yavan. For we are the people of the Torah, *not* the people of the book. The Torah, unlike the rest of the books in the library, is vital, alive, transformative. Torah has an internal soul, and is embodied in this world by means of its continued transmission and study. A

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book, on the other hand, and the library in which it resides, is founded upon *chitzoniot*, the external: The Torah, as a mere book, is the realization of the Greek ideal, not the Jewish one.

Just as the Greeks attempted to take the Jewish essence out of the Temple (defiling it internally, and leaving the empty shell), so they wanted to take the Jew out of the Jew. True, they were content to leave the Jew with his exterior form, maybe even some of his customs and books, provided that they didn’t lead him to claim a special status. That is, the Jews could continue to have the *Septuagint* so long as they studied it in the university, along with the wisdom of other nations. But they were not to learn it in their *batei midrash* and yeshivot and they were certainly not to learn the Oral Law, the internal soul of the Torah. The Greeks, as tolerant as they may have been, would not tolerate the *penimiot* of Torah; so they defiled the interior worlds of Israel—the Temple, the oil, and the people themselves—and left the external shells intact.

Torah, however, is thus not merely an external knowledge to be considered from the distant and dispassionate realm of the theoretical. Philosophical models from Western tradition encourage disengagement—standing apart (or perhaps above) in the so-called detached domain of the Ivory Tower. The Torah, by contrast, commands that we *listen, internalize, and then practice*. Indeed, the Torah is a lived activity, requiring the constant acknowledgement and *internalization* of Revelation. “*Asher natan lanu*” reflects our commitment to receiving the Torah; “*asher bachar banu*” is our commitment to mitzvot, to manifesting our acceptance of the Torah *in practice*. The power of the Torah is

transformative, different from *chachmat Yavan*, in demanding not the theoretical abstraction which remains external, but rather internalization—and the sanctification of *Olam Hazeh*.

In the time of the Hasmoneans, this was manifested most centrally in the miracle of the oil. For this miracle embodies the bending of the rules of nature and the ostensibly immutable strictures implicit in the natural processes so vaunted by the Greeks. The oil that burnt for eight days, instead of just one, testifies that the seemingly immutable *external* laws of the world are themselves always subject to change. The natural world is not as the Greeks say it is; nor is the Torah a mere external form, a mere book in the library. Nor is a Jew a Greek. “*Ner mitzvah, Torah ohr*”—“The candle of the mitzvah is the light of Torah”—so writes Shlomo Hamelech in Proverbs. The light of the Chanukah flames testifies to a force that transcends nature, and that force is the power implicit in the lights of the menorah—the internal light of Torah. This is the symbol of the Chanukah menorah: the internal powers of both the Torah and the Jew. Chanukah teaches about a world where the laws of nature *are* subject to change, a world based upon the internal, and not the external. Such a world is one where a man can be more than what the external laws of nature dictate—where a man can be a Jew.

There is an *avreich* (young man) now living in Jerusalem, who, many years back, attended a very prestigious university in America, and was a most outstanding student in one of its premier academic programs. He recalls how during his daily commute to the university he would carry with him

(depending upon the weekly assignment) either Plato, Aeschylus, Shakespeare or Homer. Frequently, he would sit on the train across from a young man (with whom he never actually spoke) who was carrying a *Chumash*. As my friend recalls, there was something about the way this young Jew studied his *Chumash*, that indicated that he viewed it as being more than a book—different from the classics which my friend himself carried. Indeed, carrying the *Chumash* was, in actuality, a *siman*—an external manifestation—that the young man was not merely carrying the Torah under his arm, but he was attempting to carry it *within himself*. The message of Chanukah, then, is not only about the difference between Torah and the wisdom of the Greeks, but the difference between *thinking* like a Greek, and *thinking* like a Jew. When the scholar studies in the university library, he aspires to inhabit the ostensibly dispassionate realm whereby he can objectively survey the different branches of wisdom. The *talmid chacham*, however, engages in scholarship as an *emesdicke* vocation (to coin a term)—that is, as a means of personal transformation. When we show our willingness to be addressed by the Divine, we ourselves, like the young fellow on the train, like the *avreich* in Jerusalem, and like the oil from the Temple at the time of the Hasmoneans, become potential vessels of *kedushah*. You can’t do that at Harvard or Yale. **JA**

Note

1. I am indebted to Rabbi Chaim Yitzchak Kaplan for my understanding of the *ma’amar*; however, any failure to adequately represent the intentions of Rav Hutner are mine alone.

