

Who Wants to be a Greek?

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A few days before the school's Hanukkah play, my son announced: "I am going to be a Greek soldier in the play! You may be disappointed – you probably wanted me to be a Maccabee – but please understand; if everyone were to be the 'good guys', the production wouldn't be possible, so I volunteered to be a Greek; someone has to do the dirty work..."

As I watched the heroic battle of Hanukkah re-enacted by my son and his peers, I received a better understanding of my son's apparent altruistic motives: onto the stage marched the brave Jewish warriors, dressed in "traditional" Hashmonai garments: a shtreimel, a kapota, and shining tzitzit. Then came the Greeks – along with my son – dressed in shimmering armour, glamorous helmets, waving magnificent swords and riding fearless horses (not real ones, the budget of the school was limited to fake ones). The mother seated next to me leaned towards me and whispered: "my son was chosen to be a Hashmonai. He cried non-stop for three days. Finally, I called the teacher and begged her to let him be a Greek; he wanted the horse ..."

Watching the play started me thinking: are we really proud of the victory of the Hashmonaim? Don't we identify with Greece, the cradle of Western civilization? Don't we indulge ourselves with the pleasures of Western culture? What is the essence of Hanukkah? What miracle are we celebrating?

These questions are addressed by our sages in the Gemara.

"What is Hanukkah about which our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] eight days of Hanukkah, on which eulogies and fasting are forbidden? For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed, and defeated them, they searched and found only one flask of oil, which was left with the seal of the High Priest, which only contained enough for one day's lighting. A miracle occurred upon it and they lit [the menorah] with it for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

Talmud Shabbat 21b

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשנכנסו יונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל, וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאוּם ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

מסכת שבת דף כא:

According to this, the miracle of the jug of oil is the essence of Hanukkah. Yet, surprisingly enough, the miracle of the jug of oil is not mentioned at all in the “Al Hanissim” prayer composed by our sages to commemorate the Hanukkah victory. The prayer tells the praises of Hashem, as revealed through the miraculous Hasmonean military victory; but no mention of the miracle of the jug of oil.

“... You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of your Torah... your children came to the Holy of Holies of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified the site of your Holiness and kindled lights in the courtyards of Your Sanctuary...”

What was, in fact, the miracle of Hanukkah? How can the apparent contradiction between the Gemara and “Al Hanissim” be reconciled?

According to the Maharal³⁶ the victory of the Maccabim over the Greeks is highlighted in “Al Hanissim”, as an expression of gratitude on our behalf, for this tremendous miracle which saved Am Yisrael from a life-threatening situation. The miracle of the jug of oil is not mentioned in “Al Hanissim” as it was not crucial for the physical redemption of Am Yisrael³⁷.

Why, then, does the midrash focus on the insignificant miracle of the jug of oil?

The Maharal explains that the essence of the Hanukkah miracle was the victory over the Greeks. Yet in order for us to appreciate the miracle of our victory, and not to misinterpret it as a natural event (such as attributing it to smart guerrilla warfare), Hashem performed an unmistakable miracle – the miracle of the oil – which could not be understood as anything but a miracle beyond the laws of nature. Through the miracle of the lights, Hashem illustrated that all of the events that had transpired were miraculous, and that it was He that had brought about the victory of the Jews.

The Maharal further suggests that the story of the jug of oil is a symbol of the true meaning of the struggle between the Greeks and the Jews. Greek wisdom was of tremendous strength, and represented a great threat to the Torah. This is why the Greeks were not easily defeated by the Maccabim, as we can see from the passage in the Gemara quoted above, which testifies that the Greeks managed to defile all the oils in the Heichal (the קודש)³⁸.

Yet one single pure jug of oil remained untouched. How did it survive the Greek attack?

The Maharal claims that this jug was unique because it was stamped by the seal of the Kohen Gadol, the sole person that enters the Holy of Holies. Although the Greeks had the power to dominate the Heichal (קודש), they were unable to defile the Holy of Holies (קודש קודשים).

³⁶ חידושי אגדות למסכת שבת, חלק ראשון, ד'.

³⁷ In fact, due to the principle “טומאה הותרה בציבור”, it wasn't even necessary for Am Yisrael's spiritual needs!

³⁸ The Maharal deduces this by gematria (assignment of numeric values to Hebrew letters). The value of “היכל” is 65, while the gematria of “יון” is 66 – and therefore of greater strength.

What distinguishes the Holy of Holies (קודש קודשים) from the Heichal (קודש)? How can anything be holier than holy?

The difference between the Holy and the Holy of Holies is profoundly explained by Rav Kook³⁹:

There is a world of the secular, and a world of the holy, worlds of secularity and worlds of holiness. These worlds contradict each other. Obviously, the contradiction between them is subjective: Man, in his limited comprehension, is unable to harmonize secularity and holiness, and is unable to neutralize their contradictions. They are, however, reconciled in the higher world, in the place of the holy of holies.

Rav Kook defines holiness as separation from secularity, whereas the Holy of Holies is defined as the combination of holiness and secularity.

This suggested definition of the Holy of Holies sheds light upon the Jewish triumph on Hanukkah, as explained by Rav Kook⁴⁰:

According to Greek philosophy there are two possible separate ways: either following the forces of nature, developing and strengthening them (and [the Greeks] were the first to conduct sport rituals and rituals celebrating the body) or going against nature, devoting oneself to complete secession from all natural forces and leading a spiritual life. Am Yisrael is not like that. They are called "ממלכת כהנים": a physical kingdom involved in political leadership, and a Priesthood involved in spiritual leadership; combined and united. ויגוי"ש קדוש: not only individuals reach the level of holiness, but rather the entire nation, involved with any physical work ... this is why the triumph was that of the Hashmonaim, descendants of Aharon, from the family of priests. It is they who fought this holy war, and returned the glorious kingdom to Yisrael. It is they who symbolized the struggle; the fierce warriors utilizing the power of the body were also the protectors of the nation's spirit and soul, its purity and its temple.

The Greeks appreciated Holiness, yet according to their belief, in order to experience Holiness one must be detached from secularity, from routine matters of the mundane. Judaism, on the other hand, stems from the Holy of Holies, from the ability to combine secularity with spirituality.

The Maccabim, sons of Aharon, living in Eretz Yisrael and struggling for its independence, were authentic representatives of the Holy of Holies: spiritual priests and religious leaders, yet powerful men and fearless warriors.

In contrast to the manner by which the Maccabim were portrayed by my son's schoolteacher, I am confident that the Maccabim too had fearless horses and shimmering armour. Yet for the Maccabim, these physical accessories served as an integral part of their spiritual identity.

³⁹ אורות הקודש, הקודש הכללי, י"ז

⁴⁰ מועדי רא"ה קס"ה

Hanukka is a celebration of the ability to combine worlds of physicality and spirituality in Eretz Yisrael, the land of milk and honey, where the concept of the Holy of Holies comes to life, as highlighted by Rav Kook⁴¹:

"We are all drawing closer to nature, and it is drawing nearer to us. The young spirit that demands its land [Eretz Yisrael], its language, its freedom, its honor, its literature, its strength, possessions and feelings, all propelled by the flow of nature, which in its very heart, is imbued with holy fire...

Our physical demand is great. We need a healthy body. We have been preoccupied with spirituality; we forgot the holiness of the body, we neglected health and our physical strength. We forgot that we have holy flesh, no less than the Holy Spirit. We forgot about the practical aspects of life...

All of our repentance will succeed only if it will be, along with its spiritual splendor, also a physical repentance producing healthy blood, healthy flesh, firm, mighty bodies, and a flaming spirit, shining over powerful muscles."

We are blessed to be living in an era in which the idea of the Holy of Holies is no longer theoretical. Now we truly appreciate the Maccabim, we understand what they were fighting for: the ability to be an independent nation living upon its land, leading a spiritual-physical life of קודש קודשים B"H, after two thousand years of Diaspora, the true miracle of Hanukkah is becoming a reality.

⁴¹ אורות התחייה ל', ל"ג