

It's All Greek to Me! The Septuagint, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Translation



Lehrhaus Live
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December 25, 2017



The Greek Translation of the Torah: The Septuagint

1. שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות תשעה באב ושאר תעניות סימן תקמט סעיף א

(א) חייבים להתענות בתשעה באב ובי"ז בתמוז ובג' בתשרי ובעשרה בטבת, מפני דברים הרעים שאירעו בהם.

1. Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 549:1

We are obligated to fast on the 9th of Av, the 17th of Tammuz, the 3rd of Tishri, and the 10th of Tevet, because of bad things that happened on them.

2. משנה ברורה על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות תשעה באב ושאר תעניות סימן תקמט סעיף א

... ועשרה בטבת שבו סמך מלך בבל נ"ג הרשע על ירושלים והביאה במצור ובמצוק ומזה נמשך החורבן:

2. Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim, 549:1

... and on the 10th of Tevet, on which the evil Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia, besieged Jerusalem, and brought about the siege and the straits and from this the destruction [of the Temple] emerged.

3. שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות תענית סימן תקפ סעיף א-ב

סעיף א אלו הימים שאירעו בהם צרות לאבותינו וראוי להתענות בהם; ואף על פי שמקצתם בראש חדש, יש מי שאומר שיתענו בו (וטוב שלא להשלים בראש חדש). **סעיף ב** בשמונה בטבת נכתבה התורה יוגית בימי תלמי המלך והיה חשך בעולם שלשה ימים; ובט' בו לא נודע איזו היא הצרה שאירע בו.

3. Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, 580:1-2

Se'if 1 These are the days on which catastrophes happened to our forefathers, and it is proper to fast on them. And although some of them are on Rosh Chodesh, some say that we should fast on them (although it is good not to complete the fast on Rosh Chodesh).

Se'if 2 On the 8th of Tevet the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy and it was dark in the world for three days. And on the 9th it is not known what disaster occurred.

4. משנה ברורה סימן תקפ ס"ק יג

(יג) לא נודע - ובסליחות שלנו איתא שמת עזרא הסופר:

4. Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim 580:13

It is not known – but in our *selihot* it appears that Ezra the Scribe died [on this date].

5. Letter of Aristeas (probably 2nd century BCE)

Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king's library, received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king...

I am told that the laws of the Jews are worth transcribing and deserve a place in your library.'...

'They need to be translated,' answered Demetrius, 'for in the country of the Jews they use a peculiar alphabet (just as the Egyptians, too, have a special form of letters) and speak a peculiar dialect' ...

And the king when he understood all the facts of the case ordered a letter to be written to the Jewish

High Priest that his purpose (which has already been described) might be accomplished... [T]he king ordered a letter to be written to Eleazar [the High Priest] on the matter ... The High priest selected men of the finest character and the highest culture, such as one would expect from their noble parentage. They were men who had not only acquired proficiency in Jewish literature, but had studied most carefully that of the Greeks as well. They were specially qualified therefore for serving on embassies and they undertook this duty whenever it was necessary...

So they set to work comparing their several results and making them agree, and whatever they agreed upon was suitably copied out under the direction of Demetrius... And it so chanced that the work of translation was completed in seventy-two days, just as if this had been arranged of set purpose. When the work was completed, Demetrius collected together the Jewish population in the place where the translation had been made, and read it over to all, in the presence of the translators, who met with a great reception also from the people, because of the great benefits which they had conferred upon them. They bestowed warm praise upon Demetrius, too, and urged him to have the whole law transcribed and present a copy to their leaders. After the books had been read, the priests and the elders of the translators and the Jewish community and the leaders of the people stood up and said, that since so excellent and sacred and accurate a translation had been made, it was only right that it should remain as it was and no alteration should be made in it. And when the whole company expressed their approval, they bade them pronounce a curse in accordance with their custom upon any one who should make any alteration either by adding anything or changing in any way whatever any of the words which had been written or making any omission.

6. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ט עמוד א-ב

דתניא: מעשה בתלמי המלך שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים, והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים, ולא גילה להם על מה כינסן. ונכנס אצל כל אחד ואחד ואמר להם: כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם. נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא בלב כל אחד ואחד עצה, והסכימו כולם לדעת אחת. וכתבו לו בראשית א-להים בראשית, אעשה אדם בצלם ובדמות, ויכל ביום הששי, וישבות ביום השביעי, זכר ונקבה בראו ולא כתבו בראם, הבה ארדה ואבלה שם שפתם, ותצחק שרה בקרוביה, כי באפם הרגו שור וברצונם עקרו אבוס, ויקח משה את אשתו ואת בניו וירכיבם על נושא בני אדם, ומושב בני ישראל אשר ישבו במצרים ובשאר ארצות ארבע מאות שנה, וישלח את זאטוטי בני ישראל, ואל זאטוטי בני ישראל לא שלח ידו, לא חמד אחד מהם נשאתי, אשר חלק ה' א-להיך אתם להאיר לכל העמים, וילך ויעבוד אלהים אחרים אשר לא צויתי לעובדם, וכתבו לו את צעירת הרגלים, ולא כתבו לו ואת הארנבת, מפני שאשתו של תלמי ארנבת שמה, שלא יאמר: שחקו בי היהודים והטילו שם אשתי בתורה

6. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 9a-b

It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted each one of them and they conceived the same idea. And they wrote for him “God created in the beginning”; “I will make a person in a form and image”; “And he stopped on the sixth day and rested on the seventh” [and another 10 changes noted in several places – yMeg 71d etc.]...

Was the Translation Good or Bad? And Why?

7. מסכתות קטנות מסכת ספר תורה פרק א הלכה ו

אין כותבין לא עברית ולא עילמית, לא מדית ולא יונית. שבעים זקנים כתבו כל התורה לתלמי המלך לשון יונית, והיה אותו היום קשה לישראל כיום שעשו בו את העגל, שלא היתה תורה יכולה להתרגם כל צרכה. שלשה עשר דברים שינו בה...

7. Tractate Sefer Torah 1:6

We do not write [the Torah] in Hebrew [script] nor in *limit*, not in Medean nor Greek. Seventy elders wrote the entire Torah to Ptolemy in Greek language, and that day was as difficult for Israel as the day that they made the Golden Calf, because the Torah couldn't be translated properly. They changed thirteen things...

8. מגילת תענית בתרא (נוסח בעל הלכות גדולות)

בשמונה בטבת נכתבה תורה בימי תלמי המלך יונית והחשך בא לעולם שלשה ימים; בתשעה בו לא כתבו רבותינו על מה הוא; בעשרה בו סמך מלך בבל על ירושלם להחריבה

8. The Latter Megillat Ta'anit (version of Halakhot Gedolot)

On the eighth of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and darkness came to the world for three days...

9. רב סעדיה גאון בסליחה לעשרה בטבת

"אז בעזבי מקרא "כלתה רוחי בחדש זה כנכתבה דת יונית לכן וימש חשך שלשת ימים וגזרתים תענית

9. Rav Sa'adiah Gaon (on Selihah for Asarah bi-Tevet)

My spirit failed in this month when the Law was written Greek; therefore the darkness was felt for three days and I declared them as a fast.

10. יוסף ן' אביתור (ספרד/מצרים)א"י; מאות י' - י"א

דיעכני בשמנה בו שמאלית וימנית הלא שלשה ימים נקבעתי בתענית ומלך יון אנסני לכתוב דת יונית ועל גבי חרשו חורשים האריכו למענית

10. Joseph ibn Avitur (Spain/Egypt, 10th/11th centuries)

He destroyed me on the eighth of it [Tevet], left and right; did I not establish a fast for three [!] days. The Greek king forced me to write the law in Greek, "the plowers plowed upon my back; they lengthened their furrows" (Ps 129:3).

11. רשימה מן הגניזה הקהירית

בי"ח בו כתבו זקנים את התורה לתלמי המלך בלשון יונית והיה אותו היום קשה מאותו יום שעשו בו את העגל לפי שלא היתה התורה צריכה ליתרגם כל צרכה

11. Listing from Cairo Genizah

On the 18th of [Tevet] the elders wrote the Torah to King Ptolemy in Greek, and that day was harder than the day on which the Golden Calf was made, because the Torah was not supposed to be translated properly.

12. רשימת תעניות מכ"י של המאה ה"ט

בי"ח בו כתבו זקני ישראל לתלמי המלך את התורה ופירשוה יונית והיה אותו היום קשה לישראל כיום שנעשה בו העגל כי לא היתה תורה צריכה להתרגם אלא לישראל לבד

12. Manuscript listing fast days, 15th century

On the eighteenth of [Tevet], Jewish elders translated the Torah for Ptolemy and explained it in Greek and the day was as harsh for Israel as the day that the Calf was made, since the Torah should not be translated except for Israel alone.

The Dangers of Greek

13. משנה מסכת סוטה פרק ט משנה יד

בפולמוס של אספסינוס גזרו על עטרות חתנים ועל האירוס בפולמוס של טיטוס גזרו על עטרות כלות ושלא ילמד אדם את בנו יונית בפולמוס האחרון גזרו שלא תצא הכלה באפריון בתוך העיר ורבותינו התירו שתצא הכלה באפריון בתוך העיר:

13. Mishnah Sotah 9:14

During the war (*pulmus*) with Vespasian they decreed against crowns worn by grooms and against the marriage [bell]. During the war against Titus they decreed against crowns worn by brides, and that no one should teach their son Greek. During the final war they decreed that a bride should not go out in a palanquin within the city. But our rabbis permitted a bride to go out in a palanquin within the city.

14. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף מט עמוד ב

ושלא ילמד את בנו יונית. ת"ר: כשצרו מלכי בית חשמונאי זה על זה, היה הורקנוס מבחוץ ואריסטובלוס מבפנים. בכל יום ויום היו משלשלין דינרים בקופה ומעלין להן תמידים. היה שם זקן אחד שהיה מכיר בחכמת יונית, לעז להם בחכמת יונית, אמר להן: כל זמן שעוסקים בעבודה אין נמסרין בידכם. למחר שלשלו להם דינרים בקופה והעלו להם חזיר, כיון שהגיע לחצי חומה, נעץ צפרניו נודעזעה א"י ארבע מאות פרסה. אותה שעה אמרו: ארור אדם שיגדל חזירים, וארור אדם שילמד לבנו חכמת יונית... איני? והאמר רבי: בא"י לשון סורסי למה? אלא אי לשון הקודש אי לשון יונית! ואמר רב יוסף: בבבל לשון ארמי למה? אלא או לשון הקודש או לשון פרסי! לשון יונית לחוד, וחכמת יונית לחוד. וחכמת יונית מי אסירא? והאמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל משום רשב"ג, מאי דכתיב: עיני עוללה לנפשי מכל בנות עירי? אלף ילדים היו בבית אבא, חמש מאות למדו תורה וחמש מאות למדו חכמת יונית, ולא נשתייר מהן אלא אני כהן וכן אחי אבא בעסיא! שאני של בית ר"ג, דקרובין למלכות הוו; דתניא: מספר קומי הרי זה מדרכי האמורי, אבטולוס בן ראובן התירו לספר קומי, שהוא קרוב למלכות; של בית רבן גמליאל התירו להן חכמת יונית, מפני שקרובין למלכות.

14. Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 49b

The mishna taught that during the war of Titus the Sages decreed that a person should not teach his son Greek. The Sages taught that this decree came about as a result of the following incident: When the kings of the Hasmonean monarchy besieged each other in their civil war, Hyrcanus was outside of Jerusalem, besieging it, and Aristobulus was inside. On each and every day they would lower dinars in a box from inside the city, and those on the outside would send up animals for them to bring the daily offerings in the Temple.

A certain Elder was there, in Jerusalem, who was familiar with Greek wisdom. He communicated to those on the outside by means of Greek wisdom, using words understood only by those proficient in Greek wisdom. He said to them: As long as they are engaged in the Temple service, they will not be delivered into your hands. Upon hearing this, on the following day, when they lowered dinars in a box, they sent up a pig to them. Once the pig reached halfway up the wall, it inserted its hooves into the wall and Eretz Yisrael shuddered four hundred parasangs.

When the Sages saw this, they said at that time: Cursed is the person who raises pigs, and cursed is the person who teaches his son Greek wisdom....The Gemara raises a question: Is that so? But didn't Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi say: In Eretz Yisrael, why should people speak the tongue of Syriac [Sursi], the Aramaic commonly spoken in Eretz Yisrael? Rather, they should speak either in the sacred tongue, Hebrew, or in the beautiful tongue of Greek. And Rav Yosef similarly said: In Babylonia, why should they speak in the vernacular tongue of Aramaic? Rather, they should speak either in the sacred tongue, Hebrew, or in the tongue of Persian, used by the authorities. The Gemara answers that there is a difference: The Greek tongue is discrete and Greek wisdom is discrete, and the Sages prohibited the latter but not the former. The Gemara poses a question: And is Greek wisdom prohibited? But didn't Rav Yehuda say that Shmuel said in the name of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: What is the meaning of that which is written: "My eye affected my soul, due to all the daughters of my city" (Lamentations 3:51)? There were a thousand children in my father's house, the princes' household. Five hundred of them learned Torah, and the other five hundred learned Greek wisdom, and there only remained of them, after the bar Kokheva revolt, me, here in Eretz Yisrael, and the son of my father's brother, who lives in Asia Minor [Asya]. The fact that Rabban Gamliel allowed half of his household to study Greek wisdom indicates that it is permitted. The Gemara answers: The members of the house of Rabban Gamliel are different, as they were close to the monarchy, and therefore had to learn Greek wisdom in order to converse with people of authority. As it is taught in a baraita (Tosefta, Shabbat 7:1): One who cuts his hair in the komi style, which was the gentile fashion of cutting and wearing the hair, is considered to be acting in the ways of the Amorites, and it is prohibited to act in their way. However, they permitted Avtolos ben Reuven to cut his hair in the komi style, as he is close to the monarchy, and similarly they permitted the house of Rabban Gamliel to study Greek wisdom, because they are close to the monarchy.

15. תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו עמוד ב

אחר מאי זמר יווני לא פסק מפומיה אמרו עליו על אחר בשעה שהיה עומד מבית המדרש הרבה ספרי מינין נושרין מחיקו

15. Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 15b

The Gemara explains: Aḥer, what was his failing [causing him to lose a place in the world to come]? Greek tunes never ceased from his mouth. He would constantly hum Greek songs, even when he was among the Sages. This shows that from the outset he was drawn to gentile culture and beliefs. Similarly, they said about Aḥer: When he would stand after learning in the study hall, many heretical books, which he had been reading, would fall from his lap. Therefore, he was somewhat unsound even when among the Sages.

The Special Status of Greek

16. משנה מגילה פרק א משנה ט

מתני' אין בין ספרים לתפילין ומזוזות אלא שהספרים נכתבין בכל לשון ותפילין ומזוזות אינן נכתבות אלא אשורית רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר אף בספרים לא התירו שיכתבו אלא יונית:

16. Mishnah, Megillah 1:9

There is no difference between [Torah] scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* other than that [Torah] scrolls are written in any language, while *tefillin* and *mezuzot* are only written in Assyrian [script]. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says: even for [Torah] scrolls they only allowed them to be written in Greek.

17. תלמוד ירושלמי (וילנא) מסכת מגילה פרק א הלכה ט

תני בר קפרא [שם ט כז] יפת א-להים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם שיהו מדברין בלשונו של יפת באוהלו של שם...
תני רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר אף בספרים לא התירו שיכתבו אלא יונית בדקו ומצאו שאין התורה יכולה להיתרגם כל צורכה אלא יונית בורגני אחד בידא להם ארמית מתוך יונית רבי ירמיה בשם רבי חייה בר בא תירגם עקילס הגר התורה לפני רבי אליעזר ולפני רבי יהושע וקילסו אותו ואמרו לו [תהילים מה ג] יפית מבני אדם

17. Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:9

Bar Kappara taught: “God should enlarge Yefet (*yafit*), and he shall dwell in the tent of Shem” (Gen. 9:27) – that they should speak the language of Yefet in the tent of Shem...

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught: even for [Torah] scrolls they only allowed them to be written in Greek. They checked and found that the Torah can only be translated fully properly (כל צורכה) into Greek. One aristocrat made up for them [a translation] into Aramaic from the Greek. Rabbi Yirmiyah said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya bar Ba: Aqilas the convert translated the Torah before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehohsua and they praised him and said “You are the most excellent (*yafyafita*) of men” (Ps. 45:3).

18. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ט עמוד ב

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר אף בספרים לא התירו שיכתבו אלא יונית. אמר רבי אבהו אמר רבי יוחנן: הלכה כרבן שמעון בן גמליאל. ואמר רבי יוחנן: מאי טעמא דרבן שמעון בן גמליאל - אמר קרא יפת א-להים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם - דבריו של יפת יהיו באהלי שם. - ואימא גומר ומגוג! אמר רבי חייה בר אבא: היינו טעמא דכתיב יפת א-להים ליפת - יפיותו של יפת יהא באהלי שם.

18. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 9b

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught: even for [Torah] scrolls they only allowed them to be written in Greek. Rabbi Abahu said Rabbi Yohanan said: The Halakhah is like Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. And Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the reason of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel? The verse says: “God should enlarge Yefet (*yafit*), and he shall dwell in the tent of Shem” (Gen. 9:27). The words of Yefet will be in the tents of Shem. And maybe it's Gomer and Magog [rather than Yavan who inherits Yefet's role here]? Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba: This is the reason, because the verse says “God should make nice to Yefet” – the beauty of Yefet should be in the tent of Shem.

19. תוספתא מסכת עבודה זרה (צוקרמאנדל) פרק א הלכה כ (מצוטט בבבלי מנחות דף צט עמוד ב)

שאלו את ר' יהושע מהו שילמד אדם את בנו יווני ספר /ספר יווני/ אמר להן ילמד בשעה שאינה לא מן היום ולא מן הלילה שנ' והגית בו יומם ולילה:

19. Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 1:20 (quoted in Bavli, Menahot 99b)

They asked Rabbi Yehoshua: May a person teach his son Greek books? He said to them Let him learn at a time that is neither day nor night, as it says “[Let not the Book of the Torah leave your lips,] and you shall consider them day and night” (Josh. 1:8).

The Problem of Translation

20. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (written 1921), trans. Harry Zohn

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point-establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity-a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. Without explicitly naming or substantiating it, Rudolf Pannwitz has characterized the true significance of this freedom. His observations are contained in *Die Krisis der europaischen Kultur*, and rank with Goethe's notes to the Westostlicher Divan as the best comment on the theory of translation that has been published in Germany. Pannwitz writes: "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect. However, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly."

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein on Torah and Greek Wisdom

21. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “God and Man According to Judaism and Hellenism”, (orig. 1987), accessible at <http://www.gush.net/archive/sichot/bereshit/10-66chanuka.htm>

It is only natural that, starting from childhood, we carry with us cultural baggage (obviously with profound historical roots) which portrays the Greeks as cruel enemies, forces of darkness who came to destroy our world. As a result, this culture is usually drawn in broad, ugly strokes, identifying Greek culture in general with a crude type of idolatry. As a result of this approach, our work is made somewhat easier: in contradistinction to this world of statues and gods stands our true faith. Needless to say, this approach engenders a certain measure of disdain for Greek culture and philosophy.

The disadvantage of such an approach is in fact twofold. Firstly, it does not enable us to get to the crux of the issue and prevents us from understanding the full significance of the conflict between the two cultures in a profound way. Turning the opponent into a "straw man" makes it easier for us to deal with him, but the real battle - in terms of faith and belief, philosophy and culture - is never addressed.

In addition, the diminution of Greek culture and turning it into something childish cuts us off, to some degree, from a culture which does, after all, represent one of the cornerstones of the civilized world, whose influences are felt on many different levels. In the ancient world, Greece represented the dominant culture. Without doubt its contribution to humanity was great, not only in practical matters but also culturally and spiritually. This was a culture which even the great names among the Rishonim could appreciate. Rambam regarded Aristotle as a "half-prophet," and other Rishonim, too, benefited from Greek culture and valued it. Thus, erecting a wall between us and this culture can lead to us voluntarily cutting ourselves off from its considerable wealth...

The essence of the Divine response [to Job] is "Lav ba'al devarim didi at," Iyov is not a legitimate claimant of God: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding. Do you know who fixed its dimensions, or who measured it with a line?" (Iyov 38:4-5). In other words, we are talking about a different dimension of reality. It is as if God is telling him, "You don't know, you don't understand. After all is said and done, you are a mortal, and are not capable of debating with Me." The very most a human being can say, in fear and trembling, is: "You will be in the right, O Lord, if I make claim against You, yet I shall [nevertheless] present charges against You" (Yirmiyahu 12:1). In short, Iyov is not - and does not perceive himself as - an equal opponent or partner for discussion with God.

Two fundamental principles are involved here. One pertains to the relationship between God and man, the other to the nature of the reality in which man lives. With regard to the first point, in the Greek perception there is no fundamental difference between man and his gods. The gods may perhaps be wiser, stronger and richer, but the difference is not a qualitative one. From this point of view, it is the humanistic outlook of Greek culture which represents both its greatness and its weakness...

The world of the Greeks [as opposed to that of other religions] displayed a considerable rapprochement between the transcendent world and that of mortals. The fear and terror which had surrounded the gods in other cultures diminished, to a large degree, and in its place came a closeness between man and his gods. Thus the Greeks largely succeeded in overcoming much of the primitive instinctual fear of the gods, attaining a position of relative peace of mind and equilibrium, a belief based on logic rather than primitive fear. Obviously, what we describe here refers to a long process. Anyone examining early Greek culture can see that it was much closer to the general pagan world. F. M. Cornford's book, "From Religion to Philosophy," which deals with the transition from Homer to Aristotle, describes both periods.

As mentioned above, this progression represented a great achievement. The Greeks perceived their existence in the world as being under the aegis of forces which could be understood and which one could deal with. This perception allowed for some of the self-assurance characterizing Greek culture, which was so distant from the primitive feelings of other pagan cultures which preceded it. Indeed, this very point is the source of the main weakness inherent in Greek culture, when viewed from a religious standpoint. Toynbee was correct when he wrote, in his book about Greek culture, that the cardinal sin of Greek culture - from the Christian point of view - was its humanism. On one hand, this was an achievement: a culture with a profoundly humanistic basis. They held man in high esteem and viewed the world through human lenses. On the other hand, the achievement in no way diminished the problematic nature of this philosophy. Together with abandoning all the primitive feelings of fear associated with paganism, the transition to Greek humanism also did irreparable harm to the concept of holiness.

The sense of awe - not the primitive fear of the early pagans, but true religious fear, the awe associated with "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts," the God on High - this diminished and disappeared. When we see gods as humans (only slightly more sophisticated, perhaps) or as philosophical abstractions, then there is no longer any room for a sense of fear, awe or majesty.

This leads to the obliteration in Greek culture of a category which is fundamental to us: commandments. In our world, man sees himself first and foremost as someone who is commanded, as the bearer of a Divine mission, as carrying upon his shoulders a task which must be fulfilled. This conception is generally lacking in the classical Greek world of Plato and Aristotle.

22. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “God and Man According to Hellenism,” accessible <http://etzion.org.il/en/god-and-man-according-hellenism>

The inclusion of the virtue of kindness in Western culture is attributable not to the Greeks but rather to Christianity (which adopted this idea from Judaism). In Matthew Arnold's celebrated 19th-century work, "Culture and Anarchy," there is a chapter on "Hebraism and Hellenism." I believe that Arnold failed to understand fully the Jewish outlook, and his attitude towards Hebraism reflects primarily his view of the evangelical sect of Lutheran Protestants; nevertheless, his description of the general outlines certainly does have some basis. Arnold contrasted Hellenism, characterized by logic and balance with Hebraism, characterized by passion (often joined with impetuosity) and the will to build, to act and to change. He sees the Greek world as one which sought primarily to understand; to the extent that it was creative, even this creativity was directed to a single purpose - comprehension. The issue of "perfecting the world" (tikkun olam) was not the focus of Greek consciousness. The focus was the individual man's effort to understand and to try to live an ordered and reflective life. In the absence of the historical dimension, according to which history moves "towards something," why should one labor to achieve perfection of the world? This view, reflecting less esteem for the individual, leaves one bereft of a consciousness of a mission to perfect the world, and the scope of a person's aspirations becomes necessarily limited. The prophetic dimension - even relating to false prophets - is not characteristic of the Greek perception. In none of the great creative works of classical Greece - from Aeschylus to Aristotle - are these voices dominant. There are, of course, individuals with vision - Plato is without doubt one of the greatest spirits of the Western world - but this is "vision with insight," not prophetic or messianic vision. In contrast to the dispassionate Hellenistic attitude, Arnold sees the Jewish view as yearning for deep feeling and striving for justice.

23. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View,” orig. published 1961, republished in *Leaves of Faith I*, pp. 94-95

Nor should we be deterred by the illusion that we can find everything we need within our own tradition. As Arnold insisted, one must seek “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” and if, in many areas, much of that best is of foreign origin, we should expand our horizons rather than exclude it. “Accept the truth,” the Rambam urged, “from whomever states it.” Following the precept and practice of Rabbenu Bahye, he adhered to that course himself; and we would be wise to emulate him.

The explicitly systematic discussions of Gentile thinkers often reveal to us the hidden wealth implicit in our writings. The Gentiles, furthermore, have their own wisdom, even of a moral and philosophic nature. Who can fail to be inspired by the ethical idealism of Plato, the passionate fervor of Augustine, or the visionary grandeur of Milton? Who can remain unenlightened by the lucidity of Aristotle, the profundity of Shakespeare, or the incisiveness of Newman? There is *hokhmah ba-goyim*, and we ignore it at our loss. Many of the issues that concern us have concerned Gentile writers as well. The very problem that we are considering has a long Christian history, going back to Tertullian and beyond. To deny that many fields have been better cultivated by non-Jewish than by Jewish writers is to be stubbornly, and unnecessarily, chauvinistic. There is nothing in our medieval poetry to rival Dante, and nothing in our modern literature to compare with Kant, and we would do well to admit it. We have our own genius, and we have bent it to the noblest of pursuits, the development of Torah. But we cannot be expected to do everything.

24. Shlomo Zuckier and Shalom Carmy, An Introductory Biographical Sketch of R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Tradition* 47:4 (2015), pp. 11-12

In his three substantial articles on the integration of secular studies and Torah education, R. Lichtenstein emphasizes that Torah ideals must remain both supreme and central to an observant Jew's life, and Torah study similarly as important to his or her thinking. Within this frame of reference, R. Lichtenstein identifies several valuable contributions of a general education. One is that exerting a positive religious influence on society requires genuine understanding of the social milieu. Additionally, Torah study itself is, at times, aided by deploying analytic tools developed in the academy. Most importantly, however, "the humanities deepen our understanding of man: his nature, functions and duties." The observant Jew who studies what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and said in the world"²² is more likely to become an edified, spiritually ennobled person with an enhanced sense of human complexity.

Postmodern Critiques to Rav Lichtenstein's Position

25. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting," *By His Light* (2003) pp. 220-252, accessible at <http://gush.net/archive/develop/12develop.htm>

Starting with the question of general culture, I wrote a brief essay in the 1960's setting forth my position with respect to the validity and value of such culture and its relation to the dual problems of *bittul Torah* (taking time from Torah study) and potentially pernicious influences. In certain respects, the piece is unquestionably and clearly dated...

I freely admit that, during the intervening years, confidence in culture—culture in Arnold's sense, "the study of perfection"—has been generally shaken, and this for at least three reasons. First, high culture—"the best that has been thought and said in the world," as Arnold defined literature—is less cherished than it once was. Interest in the humanities has waned, both within academia and outside of it, as the focus has shifted to more pragmatic and technological areas. Not only have priorities changed, but to most people the kind of spirit which animated an Arnold to posit literary culture as the "one dam restraining the flood-tide of barbarian anarchy," now seems hopelessly naive.

26. Sarah Rindner, "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Student Point of View: A Response to Rav Lichtenstein," *The Commentator*, February 13, 2006

In "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View," R. Lichtenstein makes a powerful case for the spiritual value of a strong secular education.

"Secular studies possess immense intrinsic value insofar as they generally help to develop our spiritual personality. Time and again, they intensify our insight into basic problems of moral and religious thought. History and the sciences show us the divine revelation manifested in human affairs and the cosmic order. The humanities deepen our understanding of man: his nature, functions, and duties. In one area after another a whole range of general studies sustains religion, supplementing and complementing it, in a sense deeper and broader than we have hitherto perceived."

When I first read those words during my year in Israel, they strengthened my decision to go to college in a Jewish environment. They made me proud to be engaging in an integrated pursuit of "wisdom" that would color every aspect of my school day. But the more I became attuned to the "basic problems of moral and religious thought" that R. Lichtenstein is referring to, the more I questioned how exactly they were going to contribute toward a deepened spiritual involvement. This was because some of the most searching problems raised by the literature I've encountered have involved man's sense of isolation in the universe, or the complexities of human conflicts in contrast to coherent moral and philosophical frameworks. With the possible exception of explicitly devotional poets such as John Milton and George Herbert, the bulk of the Western literature I have

read, and grown to love, has seemed intent on taking us into the depths of human suffering and the chaos of belief, without entirely lifting us out. The Odyssey is most compelling precisely when the gods don't take care of Odysseus and he seems to be in his excruciating journey alone. We laugh at Plato's expulsion of poets from his ideal republic, because as good readers we see nothing wrong with thinking about beauty and pain and confusion in contrast to abstract philosophical and religious ideals. In "Dover Beach," when Mathew Arnold's speaker gazes into the sea before him, he does not find religious confirmation, but rather, that the world "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" . . .

I still cannot imagine how R. Lichtenstein's Torah-centered ideal of synthesis could function in a serious college English literature class, even with the most religiously grounded of students. The supplementary, ancillary model of secular education that R. Lichtenstein lays out, however inspiring it is from a "Torah point of view," does not create the kinds of students who would make our English professors proud. That is, purveyors of the Western literary tradition ask for a similar personal engagement that our Rabbis ask of us, and it is unreasonable to expect committed students to stop listening or being attracted to secular perspectives after those ideas cross a certain line. I can understand how a line can, in theory, be drawn; but in my experience in English classes, students who find literature interesting enough to read and care about tend to find themselves to a certain extent "lost" in the worlds they encounter, temporarily losing sight of the relationship between a novel they are immersed in to Torah values they've inherited.

27. Gil Perl, "Postmodern Orthodoxy: Giving Voice to a New Generation," *Lehrhaus*, November 6, 2017, accessible at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/postmodern-orthodoxy-giving-voice-to-a-new-generation/>

If that was true in the Modern Orthodox world two decades ago, it is only more so today. Not only is the towering presence of Modern Orthodoxy's original luminary, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, still sorely missed, but his outsized student, intellectual successor, and philosophical ambassador Rabbi Lichtenstein is no longer with us as well.

And while their writings have a deservedly hallowed place on the shelves of the serious Modern Orthodox student, their content for many of Modern Orthodoxy's young and hungry minds comes up short. The Brisker dialectics, Neo-Kantian categories, Hegelian syntheses, Miltonian sensitivities, and Kierkegaardian paradoxes which dominate their writing speak with unmatched eloquence and profundity to the problems of modernity. Yet the questions plaguing the community that continues to look to these works for guidance are less frequently the questions of modernity and more frequently the questions of postmodernity.

Today's students are less bothered by their inability to reconcile seemingly competing value systems as they are by their inability to determine whether objective value systems do—or ought to—exist at all. It is not the incongruence of their world that motivates their angst as much as its fluidity. Boundaries taken for granted only a generation ago—between private and public, leader and laity, normative and deviant, even male and female, are increasingly evaporating.

The scientific prowess of the post-industrial twentieth century—that which informed the tantalizing transition of Germany's *Torah Im Derekh Eretz* to America's *Torah u-Madda*—is increasingly being recast as hubris and conceit. Today, our technological know-how is no longer celebrated as a vehicle for progress toward some more enlightened future, but is seen at best as a last resort for saving humanity from itself and, at worst, as humanity's inevitable march toward obsolescence. Indeed, in today's world of infinite information and unparalleled opportunities for learning, our young men and women often feel that they know less rather than more.

28. Shalom Carmy, “The Soul of Man Under Postmodernism: Further Comments on Rav Shagar’s Contribution, *Lehrhaus*, Nov. 27, 2017, acc. at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/the-soul-of-man-under-postmodernism-further-comments-on-rav-shagars-contribution/>

The stakes are much higher with respect to the nature of our connection to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Rav Shagar often advocates unquestioning reliance on self-acceptance as a guarantee of our certainty regarding moral and religious truth, even while doubting, in the postmodern mode, the existence of truth external to oneself.

Such attitudes are indeed characteristic of postmodernism, and any attempt to bring Judaism in line with the subjectivism fashionable among the enlightened classes must contend with the total opposition between them. Rav Shagar himself is sensitive to the danger that his teaching sounds like worship of the self. He fears that such a faith, “the tendency to turn oneself into the yardstick for reality” (*Faith Shattered*, 34), emanating from the bowels of one’s selfhood, would not be religious faith, but merely an act of egocentric self-anointment.

29. Gidon Rothstein, “There Is Nothing New Under the Sun: A Reply to Gil Perl,” *Lehrhaus*, November 23, 2017, accessible at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/there-is-nothing-new-under-the-sun-a-reply-to-gil-perl/>

If markers of postmodernism are the denial of objective truth and the pluralism that extends from it, a Postmodern Orthodoxy can—and perhaps should—stress where Torah is more open than we might have realized, where the right and wrong of living a life in the service of Hashem is not as unequivocal as prior generations made it seem.

A Postmodern Orthodoxy can and probably should emphasize its openness to forms of spirituality that we have not yet encountered, as long as they do not fly in the face of the objective truths we know and they can be fit into our limited pluralism. A Postmodern Orthodoxy can and probably should stress that many aspects of *avodat Hashem* were left undefined by Jewish tradition, so that many more choices can fit comfortably within the world of Torah than we have hitherto modeled. But a Postmodern Orthodox approach can never allow itself to accept what Rav Shagar seems to believe, that we can acquiesce to the denial of objective truth, that pluralism can mean all ideas are equally valid. As *ma’aminim benei ma’aminim*, a favorite phrase of Rabbi Lichtenstein’s, descendants of those who have faced such challenges repeatedly, we know Hashem exists, that Hashem gave us objective truth in the Torah.

30. Rafi Eis, “In Search of Modern Orthodoxy, *Lehrhaus*, November 20, 2017, accessible at <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/in-search-of-modern-orthodoxy/>

Moving from the philosophic to the educational, Rav Shagar’s approach is, I believe, harmful rather than helpful. In his essay on *Kabbalat Ol Malkhut Shamayim*, Rav Shagar reconstitutes the traditional understanding of weightiness and obedience as a postmodern faith of “self-acceptance, meaning accepting my life as part of reality, of the will of God,” that “its existence is as God created it.”

While Shagar later tries to integrate this concept with free will and human growth, he cannot do so convincingly. As Levi Morrow notes, any resolution would either face difficulties or else allow for an “anything goes” attitude, incorporating all sorts of contradictions in the name of postmodernism. While those who accept the principles of postmodernism might revel in such confusion, it is difficult to accept. With this version of “acceptance of the yoke of Heaven,” the individual never truly becomes a servant of God, although he is now equipped with a fundamental philosophy to pat himself on the back for his mediocrity.

Further, not all intellectual movements are equal. While the Enlightenment and modernity broke communal bonds and the concept of essential religious obligation, they also led to great scientific advances and increased self-understanding. In its wake emerged a messianic drive toward realizing

utopian visions: “Make everything scientific and understood, remove difference and conflict! We want truth!”

Postmodernism, on the other hand, correlates with increasing rates of mental illness and drug use in the U.S. population. Postmodernism corrodes the human psyche, leading to a desperate cry for help. Even with soft postmodernism, which finds truth in everything, humans become complacent, and choices lose their importance and meaning—no decisions are meaningful when all decisions are good. One religious thinker and a psychologist suggest that the postmodern removal of the meaning of life has created an existential-psychological void that craves to be filled, but the person no longer has the values or character strength to choose wisely. Actions have consequences, whether we like it or not.

Postmodernism and Translation

31. Ira Chernus, “Frederic Jameson’s Interpretation of Postmodernism”

Although the signs may comment about each other, we do not expect them to relate to each other in any stable or unified way. They are related to each other primarily by the differences among them. Postmodern artifacts display an “absolute and absolutely random pluralism . . . a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems” (372). Each subsystem reflects a different realm of experience and has its own way of being understood—its own “code.” A postmodern building, for example, may incorporate elements of ancient Egyptian, Gothic, Victorian, and modern architecture side by side. (See, for example, the bell tower of the new Humanities building on this campus, which has no relation to the Italian Neo-Renaissance style of the rest of the building.) Each element can be interpreted in terms of its own code. But there is no single code to tell us why they should be placed together in just the way they are. An issue of *People* magazine is similar. Articles about a movie star, a political leader, and a homeless drifter may appear side by side. Each makes sense in terms of its own code. But there is no clear reason why they should all appear on the same page. Each architectural element or magazine article is a free-floating image, detached from its original context, with no meaning beyond itself.

We take in all the juxtaposed signs, accepting each as a discrete entity. So we learn to focus on many signs simultaneously. We do not expect them to form a single overarching language. The best we can do is to translate the terms of one code into a roughly corresponding set of images in another code. This is called “transcoding.” We “set about measuring what is sayable and ‘thinkable’ in each of these codes and compare that to the conceptual possibilities of its competitors” (394). We draw lines of relationship from signs in one code to signs in another, letting each translate and interpret the other. We do not expect this transcoding to bring the signs into a single system or code. Nor do we expect it to link the signs with anything else in reality.

Transcoding is the best we can hope for in the postmodern world. Culture remains a kaleidoscope of interacting images. It has no more meaning than the kaleidoscopes we played with as children. This endless diversity of images gives us the feeling that there is no longer any unity in our world. But, Jameson argues, a system that produces constant diversity is nevertheless still a single system. Postmodernism is just like a kaleidoscope: a unified instrument whose purpose is to produce endless diversity. In fact postmodern theory itself teaches us that the world is a huge chain of signs, each of which points to some other sign. Since the chain has no end, it is infinite. It is the totality.