



# Can We Learn from the Greeks?

A major component of the Chanukah story is Greek culture, which was the essence of the battle. The Greeks sought to force the Jews into living according to their culture and the *Maccabim* fought to preserve Jewish culture and way of life.

Conflicting sources exist regarding our tradition's attitude towards Greece. On the one hand, our Sages equate Greece with "darkness."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, numerous sources indicate a far more positive attitude towards Greek culture. The Mishnah (Megillah 8b) teaches that a *Sefer Torah* can be written in either Hebrew or Greek. The Gemara (Sotah 49b) relates that in Israel one should speak either Hebrew... or Greek. The Zohar (Shemot 237a) describes Greece as being a population "who are close to the path of *emuna* (true belief)." So which is it? Darkness or light?

Our tradition clearly sees real beauty in Greece and Greek culture and their mastery over various aspects of the physical world is significant. However, the Torah has defined parameters for that significance. In Parashat Noach (9:27), "G-d gives beauty to Yefet," (Yefet is the progenitor of Greece) "and He will dwell in the tents of Shem." That beauty only takes on meaning and importance in the context of a G-d-centered world as connoted by the "tents of Shem." Physical beauty and man's mastery over the world tend to drag people into a man-centered society which champions the greatness of man. While we can be proud of all our accomplishments, anything we do outside the context of G-d does not have any real significance. In fact, without G-d, we function in complete darkness and achievements have no value. However, when channeled towards G-d

and within the context of a G-d-centered world, that darkness changes to light. The most physical activities can become the most holy when used in the service of G-d. A fascinating representation of this idea emerges when we add the letter *צ*, which symbolizes righteousness, to *ג*, Greece. This combination creates the word *צ"ג*, which represents the Land of Israel and the highest level of spirituality.

**“Greek society represented complete darkness. They accomplished a lot but did so within a man-centered culture which used these accomplishments to champion the greatness of man”**

Greek society represented complete darkness. They accomplished a lot but did so within a man-centered culture which used these accomplishments to champion the greatness of man. However, they were very close to true light. Their beauty and creativity could proclaim the glory of G-d in a G-d-centered world. Thus, their language has a place in Jewish ritual and life.

That was the battle of Chanukah. Is the physical world an end to itself or a means to the ultimate goal of spirituality and a connection to G-d?

We remember this when we use a beautiful, physical *Menorah*, using the most beautiful, physical olive oil, to do a *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukah

candles, and by using the physical for the spiritual we shine away the darkness of a physical world devoid of G-d and spirituality.

The geographical location most suited to fulfilling this delicate balancing act of using the physical for the spiritual is the Land of Israel. The Or HaChaim (Vayikra 19:23) teaches that the act of planting, a mere physical act anywhere else in the world, becomes a *mitzvah* when done in the Land of Israel. The Chatam Sofer (Sukkah 36a) agrees and goes even further, teaching that any physical trade involving social welfare or building up the Land becomes a *mitzvah* in Israel.

But whether one lives in Israel or in the Diaspora, the message of Chanukah and our battle against the Greeks is clear. The way to properly balance the physical and spiritual in our lives is to make sure our own lives are G-d-centered and not man-centered. We must strive to make Torah study and *mitzvah* observance the focal point of our existence and not something which we simply do on the side. Let us make sure we involve ourselves in the physical world for the ultimate goal of spirituality and closeness to G-d.

(Major components of this article are based on *Patterns in Time* by Rabbi Matis Weinberg.)

<sup>1</sup> See Bereishit Rabbah 2:4 and 44.

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