



The Jews, The Greeks and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Chanukah celebrates Jewish uniqueness. The Chashmonaim fought against the inroads that Greek religion, culture and wisdom had made amongst the Jewish people. In this sense, their victory, symbolized by the small but steady flame of the *menorah*, represents the fact that the eternal light of Torah will outlast all the opposing outside forces.

If taken to the extreme, this message can lead to an isolationist mindset. One can argue that we successfully fought against the Greeks and defeated them militarily and spiritually. The spoils of the war are that we can now lead our ideal Jewish lives as “a nation that dwells alone,”¹ interacting as little as possible with the world around us. In this telling, the lesson of Chanukah is to disconnect and disengage from other nations in order to develop the pure spirit of Torah.

By contrast, Rav Kook developed a more nuanced approach to the issue of engagement with the outside world. Even as he forcefully highlighted the unique nature of the Jewish people and their Torah,² his writings on Chanukah find space for a positive engagement with the world around us.

This engagement is bidirectional. On one level, we need to import the best elements and modes of expression from the outside world into Jewish thought and life. This process can bring to the fore certain aspects of the Torah that were hitherto in the backdrop and can aid in expressing the timeless Torah values in a contemporary and compelling fashion.³ For Rav Kook, this is what Chazal sought to do with the Greek culture of their time. Instead of a categorical

rejection, they noted the beauty of Greek language and expression and sought to harness these elements to better understand and teach Torah.⁴

On the flipside, Chanukah teaches us the value of exporting Torah ideas to the public square. The Talmud relates that ideally the *menorah* is to be placed outside of the house such that it can light up the street.⁵ It is only when the non-Jews in the thoroughfare become antagonistic to the Jewish people and it becomes dangerous to light outside that we are allowed to move our *menorot* indoors.

Rav Kook explained that the *menorah* represents the light of Torah.⁶ Whenever the non-Jewish world is receptive to listening, we have a responsibility to shine the light of Torah on the issues of the day. We must be confident that “[Torah] is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations,”⁷ and continue to teach and lead until the Torah’s light impacts even the last straggler in the street. It is only when the non-Jewish public becomes hostile to the Jewish people that we reluctantly bring the Torah indoors and it becomes a private light for our community alone.

It is no coincidence that in the Land of Israel the custom of many Jews is to light the *menorah* outdoors. According to Rav Kook, it is when we are back in our Land with our own sovereign state that we regain the self-confidence and opportunity to proudly espouse the light of Torah to the world. This is part of the messianic vision in which the nations of the world will look to the Jewish people as leaders of spirituality and morality, and as models for how to live meaningful lives.⁸

In this regard, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, zt”l, embodied Rav Kook’s message of Chanukah. On the one hand, he had a firm conviction in the uniqueness of the Jewish people and of the Torah which he projected in his writings and talks. Simultaneously, though, he practiced these positive forms of engagement with the outside world in an optimal fashion. He was fluent in the “Greek” of our day and used his knowledge and eloquence to relay the Torah to Jews in a contemporary and relevant manner. And he proudly and self-confidently projected the Torah’s vision into the public square of ideas, reaching millions of people across the globe and inspiring them with the Torah’s vision. This Chanukah, may we too be inspired by the teachings and examples of Rav Kook and Rav Sacks.

1 Bamidbar 23:9.

2 *Ein Aya* Shabbat 2:12.

3 *Ein Aya* Shabbat 2:5, 2:13; *Orot HaKodesh* 2, page 403.

4 *Ma’amarei HaRe’iyah*, page 476-477.

5 Shabbat 21b.

6 *Ma’amarei HaRe’iyah*, page 150-151.

7 Devarim 4:6.

8 For similar themes, see Rav Kook’s address at the opening ceremonies of the Hebrew University (*Ma’amarei HaRe’iyah*, page 306-308).

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Bronstein is a faculty member of Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim and Yeshiva University.

We need a new generation of Jews committed to the dialogue between sacred and secular if Judaism is to engage with the world and its challenges.

RABBI SACKS

