YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**CHANUKA 5781**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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Dedicated in memory of Abraham Gontownik z"l   
on the occasion of his twenty-first Yahrzeit, 

The Gontownik Family

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**The Global Impact of Chanuka Upon Humanity**

**Rav Moshe Taragin**

Jewish festivals mark watershed moments in our national history. They celebrate both events that advanced our historical mission as well as pivotal moments in our evolving relationship with God. However, holidays also commemorate events that affected the general human condition and contributed to the evolving human spirit. For example, Pesach commemorates our liberation, but also the descent of God into human history and the revelation of fundamental messages, such as Providence and Reward and Punishment. The *Al* *Ha-Nissim* addition for Chanuka alludes to the global impact of Chanuka: “*U-lekha asita shem gadol ve-kadosh be-olamekha*.” God’s Name was sanctified and expanded across the world as a result of the events of Chanuka. Chanuka’s national impact is unmistakable, but its global impact for mankind in general is more subtle and less discernable.

Historically, the emergence of the Greek empire marked the first time Judaism was challenged by a competing system of civilization. In the past, our religion had confronted barbaric cultures of cannibals and blood drinkers who worshipped molten images. These crude cultures provided minimal challenge to a Torah-inspired life of meaning, human dignity, and social welfare. By contrast, Greek society was first to radically improve and organize the world. Advances in science and mathematics lent predictability to a world, which for ancients had seemed random and intimidating. The word “cosmos” is a Greek word that means “order” and reflects the ability to organize and rationalize a previously vast and random universe. Greece also developed a rudimentary form of democracy, which insured a degree of fair and equitable government. Advances in art and culture enriched the aesthetic quality of human experience.

This was the first time that Judaism faced off against a different “civilization” – one that offered dignified human experience.

Interestingly, in its pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, Greece acknowledged the Jews as the source of wisdom. Approximately 150 years before the Chanuka conflict, Alexander the Great visited the same mountain upon which much of the Chanuka drama would unfold. When he encountered Shimon Ha-Tzadik – the reigning *Kohen* *Gadol* – he paid homage to the person whose nighttime visitations had assured each of his military victories on the road to unprecedented Greek expansion. Alexander recognized the centrality of the Jewish Temple and the Torah in the development of Greece.

Additionally, about a hundred years before Chanuka, the Greek king of Egypt, [Ptolemy II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy_II_Philadelphus), supervised the translation of the Torah into Greek, once again reflecting the great thirst in Greece for Torah inspiration. The initial stages of the encounter between Greece and Israel thus were not adversarial, but rather solicitous; they were not hostile, but rather friendly and collaborative.

As the Chanuka story unfolded, a critical phase of this encounter emerged. Greece potentially offered major contributions to humanity at large. Would these great achievements of human wisdom continue to be inspired by the Torah and the Higher Divine Will? Or would these impressive developments detach themselves from Judaism and develop autonomously from the Torah?

The *gemara* in *Megilla* (9b) cites the rational of R. Shimon ben Gamliel, who (about 300 years after Chanuka) authorized the crafting of Torah scripture in the Greek language: Yefet, Noach’s son and ancestor of Greece, possesses beauty and substance, but Yefet’s knowledge must stream within the tents of Shem – our Jewish ancestors. Greece offers vital contributions toward human progress. However, these ideas must be framed by the theology and moral spirit of the Torah of the Jews.

Though impressive, the Greek belief system is morally and religiously flawed. Greek gods are distant, not intimate; a Greek god does not serve as a moral model for human character development. Greek culture is anthrocentric, fixing Man as the center of his universe, while gods are designed to serve human interest. Greek religion does not include commandments and does not cast Man as a *metzuveh* *ve*-*oseh*, a person summoned to a higher Divine will. Finally, Greece doesn’t advocate charity for the weak and vulnerable; if anything, it views the helpless as inferior and barriers to human progress. Absent these crucial theological and moral components, Greek’s accomplishments would distort the development of humanity.

Chanuka marked an important crossroads of human history. Would Greece continue to enrich humanity as it evolved under the overall spirit of Torah, sustained in this world by the Jews? Or would Greece succeed in severing the Jews from their Divine system and influence the human spirit independent of the tents of Shem?

The Greeks did not aim to convert the Jews to a different religion, nor did they plan a murderous frontal assault. Their primary decree demanded that the Jews carve the pledge, “We no longer are affiliated with the God of the Jews,” upon their cattle. They sought “*le-hashkicham Toratekha*,” to terminate the influence of Torah and disassociate the Jews from their Divine relationship. Our triumph during Chanuka reinforced the tents of Shem, sustained the overriding presence of Torah, and enabled Greece – and ultimately Rome – to revolutionize human experience.

The Chanuka story doesn’t just entail a cultural encounter, but also constitutes an important moment in religious history. Greece had abandoned the vulgar and repulsive world of ancient paganism. Greece’s gods were not physical and were not fashioned from “wood and stones”; instead, they were ethereal beings who inhabited the soaring cliffs of Mt. Olympus. Major inroads along the path to monotheism had begun. However, Greece still hadn’t discovered the second tenet of true monotheism – that a single, unified God is responsible for the entirety of reality. Though the world appears diverse and dichotomous, all creation stems from one single and indivisible Being. Greek mythology contains a literal pantheon of approximately 75 gods. They were polytheists – theists in the sense that their gods were spiritual rather than physical, but “poly” in the sense that multiple deities existed. Which direction would religious consciousness take? Would the march toward monotheism continue, or would Greece redirect and distort the process? The triumph of Chanuka assured that monotheism would continue to persevere.

The *midrash* describes that Alexander the Great requested of Shimon Ha-Tzadik that an idol be positioned in the *Mikdash*. Shimon Ha-Tzadik resisted; a site of God’s presence cannot admit the vulgarity of idols.

The triumph of Chanuka assures that monotheism will continue its growing influence. About 500 years after Chanuka, the Roman Empire turned toward Christianity, while 750 years afterwards the Arab world turned to Islam. At this stage, most of the world converts to various flawed and corrupted forms of monotheism, but although they are adulterated versions of monotheism, they are certainly closer to true monotheism than ancient pagan models. Greece is responsible for launching this slow evolution, and the Jewish Chanuka victory assured that this process will achieve a monotheistic conclusion.

We tend to imagine Chanuka in uniquely nationalistic and Jewish-centered terms. However, Chanuka also marks a major advance in the human spirit. The Greeks transformed their world, and much of our modern world is still predicated upon discoveries and wisdom of ancient Greece. Certainly, modern forms of monotheism trace themselves to the “shift from paganism” already evident in Greece. Each of these important developments is bolstered and framed by the true source of wisdom – the Torah of the Jews. Our defeat of Antiochus assured that Divine will on this earth would continue to shape human development.