**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden**

**as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,   
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,   
who have left us in the past 7 years.   
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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**Shiur #16:**

**The Holiday of Chanuka**

**Part II**

**The Holiday of *Bein ha-shemashot***

**The Mystery of the Unique Time   
for the Mitzva of Kindling Chanuka Lights** II

**A Time that is Neither Day Nor Night**

In our previous *shiur*, we tried to clarify the nature of the struggle against Yavan (Greece) which is reflected in the problematic nature of *bein ha-shemashot* (twilight), based on an analysis of the correspondence between a twenty-four hour day and Jewish history.

Using this model of understanding, we may apply this idea to a short but important Talmudic passage. In this passage, we see how *Chazal* themselves provide us with the key to decoding the connection between the unique time for kindling Chanuka lights, the period of *bein ha-shemashot*, and the essence of Greek culture and our struggle with it:

Ben Dama the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister once asked Rabbi Yishmael: May one such as I, who have studied the whole of the Torah, study Greek wisdom?

He thereupon read to him the following verse: "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night" (*Yehoshua* 1:8). Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and study then Greek wisdom. (*Menachot* 99b)

How are we to understand Rabbi Yishmael's answer to ben Dama? It is commonly read as a simple no: seeing that there is an obligation to study Torah day and night, other things may be studied only when it is neither day nor nigh; but since such a time does not exist, nothing may be studied other than Torah.

However, based on the idea we have raised, we may content that Rabbi Yishmael responds to his nephew with a precise answer: "Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and study then Greek wisdom." This is a serious answer that defines a precise time that is appropriate for studying Greek wisdom. It is period of twilight, which reflects the complexity of Greek wisdom. This is knowledge that belongs to the time of *bein ha-shemashot*. The time for studying Greek wisdom is the same as the time that *Chazal* established for the *mitzva* of kindling Chanuka lights, born out of the encounter between Greek and Jewish cultures!

The time of *bein ha-shemashot* is a time of confusion, of a mixture of light and darkness. During *bein ha-shemashot*, as stated earlier, there is, on the one hand, light that allows one to see; but, on the other hand, it is precisely partial light that may mislead, because people think that they see, but in truth, their vision is neither sharp nor clear.

So too, Greek wisdom is a mixture of light and darkness. It is not like the Torah, which illuminates like the sun. Indeed, the Talmud states that "the face of Moshe is like the face of the sun" (*Bava Batra* 75a). At the same time, it differs from the darkness of idolatry. "Greek wisdom" is wisdom that grows out of contemplating the world in partial light that illuminates it as if from within itself, without the light of prophecy that is cast upon it from the outside. It may lead man to impressive achievements in understanding the world, but it is also liable to bring man to a partial, limited and narrow perception, causing one to erroneously believe that one understands everything with perfect clarity.

Therefore, one must relate to it as a phenomenon of mixture, the importance of which must not be dismissed outright, but which, on the other hand, must not be adopted as is, as if it were the full picture as it might pretend to be.

**Dimming the Eyes of Israel**

Thus far, we have identified Greek culture as the illumination of *bein ha-shemashot*, as a mixture of light and darkness. However, from the words below, it seems that *Chazal* relate to the kingdom of Greece specifically as darkness:

"Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*Bereishit* 1:2).

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish interpreted the verse in reference to the exiles…

"And darkness" — this is the exile of Yavan which made Israel's eyes dim with its decrees, for [Yavan] said to them: Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no part in the God of Israel. (*Bereishit Rabba* 2, 4)

Even though this statement of the Midrash appears to contradict what we have established thus far, when we consider it more deeply, it may fact deepen our understanding in the same direction.

The Midrash explains that Greece dims the eyes of Israel, and so it is accurate to say that Greece is not characterized by a static reality of darkness, but rather by a dynamic process of dimming. Obviously, the process of dimming does not take place during the total darkness of the night, but rather at the time of the transition from light to darkness — the time of *bein ha-shemashot.*

What is the dimming effect that Greek culture has upon Israel? We have already explained that the spiritual darkness of this period stems from the removal of the *Shekhina* and the vanishing of prophecy, which finds expression in the things that are found in the First Temple, but do not reappear in the Second Temple. All of these changes, however, are caused by God, and the Greek Empire rises up on the stage of history when these phenomena are already extant. Thus, the rise of Greece cannot be the cause of these phenomena. If so, what does Greek culture itself contribute to the process?

Greece's cultural message to Israel is summarized by the Sages in the statement brought in the above-mentioned *midrash*: "Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no part in the God of Israel." Greece completes the process of pushing the *Shekhina* out of the world, in that it denies the period of light when man merits inspiration from above, causing Israel to forget the period of sunlight when the God of Israel dwells in His Temple, reveals His word to His prophets and illuminates their ways; in this way, it dims the eyes of Israel.

It is true that it is God who removes His light, but even during this period of removal, the people of Israel are supposed to be connected through their memory and their identification to the period of light. The paving of new patterns of life in the period of the removal of the *Shekhina* is supposed to be done based on the connection to the period of light and its legacy, so that out of this connection, the light will once again shine with all its intensity in the future.

Greek culture, on the other hand, represents the perception of the reality of *bein ha-shemashot* as the exclusive reality. It grows on acquaintance with the light of *bein ha-shemashot*, which, in the absence of a revealed source of light, man experiences as light that stems from within the world, and not from beyond it.

For this reason, Greek culture denies the period of the sun and its virtues, and works to dim the eyes of Israel and make the Jewish people forget, thus detaching them from the light of the past and from their Father in heaven. The statement that they have no part in the God of Israel comes to define this new reality in which there is no longer a heavenly source of light, but rather everything stems from human faculties. This is the heart of the struggle between Yavan and Yisrael.

The identification of the dimming attributed to Greece as a process of the evening hours, as we inferred from the Midrash, is explicit in the words of the *Zohar Chadash* (I, 39b):

For Rabbi Yehuda said: The Greek exile darkened the faces of Israel like the bottom of a pot.

And regarding their great distress and oppression, what is written? "And the dove came in to him in the evening" (*Bereishit* 8:11).

What is "in the evening"? An hour of relief did not shine upon them as at first, and righteous men were killed, and the day dimmed, and the sun set, and they could not stand owing to the great pressure applied to them, as it is stated: "Woe to us, for the day declines, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out" (*Yirmeyahu* 6:4).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The dimming of the face of Israel is not likened to the night, but rather to the darkening of the declining day, to the stretching of the evening shadows, to the experience of dimming that accompanies the sun’s sinking below the horizon of our vision.

**What is Meant by Studying Greek Wisdom?**

Let us return to the Gemara that discusses the appropriate time for studying Greek wisdom. Two fundamental principles that characterize the proper approach to Greek wisdom emerge from the Gemara, namely: the proper opening conditions that make it possible to approach Greek wisdom ("one such as I, who have studied the whole of the Torah") and the proper time ("a time that is neither day nor night").

The first principle relates to the Torah. It is stated not by the one who provides the answer, but rather by the one who poses the question, as background for the question, thus describing the background for the entire discussion. The question arises specifically with ben Dama, who has already studied all of the Torah. The devotion to studying the entire Torah before turning to Greek wisdom reveals the fundamental superiority of the Torah over wisdom, from which stems the priority that is given to it. The proposed order, which goes from studying the entire Torah to studying wisdom, indicates the inner relationship between the two: Torah study assumes that wisdom and light are revealed to man from a Divine source beyond reality.

This stands in contrast to the hidden underlying assumptions of Greek wisdom, which perceives man as the absolute standard for intellectual clarification. Therefore, it is impossible to start from wisdom, which cannot create something from nothing; rather, one must begin with receiving light from its source.

Recognizing that there is a heavenly source for all knowledge also places human wisdom in its exact place: the encounter with Greek wisdom may only take place based on a full and clear identity, like that of ben Dama, whose entire fiber is Torah. In such a situation, the encounter with Greek wisdom does not stem from a problem of identity, but out of rootedness in Torah. As we have seen earlier, the light of *bein ha-shemashot* maybe taken in the proper proportions only by someone who is well acquainted with the light of day.

The second principle appearing in Rabbi Yishmael's answer is his defining the proper time for occupation with Greek wisdom. Obviously, setting the time is not a technical component. The unique time under discussion determines the appropriate attitude toward wisdom that stems from man, based on awareness of its nature and limitations.

The nature of human wisdom is like the nature of the illumination of *bein ha-shemashot.* We have already mentioned that the illumination of twilightis limited, and that its low intensity makes it impossible to see everything; nevertheless, it is liable to deceive a person into believing that the full picture is in one’s hands, as if it were the middle of the day. It should, therefore, be kept in mind that this limited light creates a blurry and insufficiently sharp picture that is liable to lead also to mistakes.

In similar fashion, the wisdom that grows from below is wisdom of limited vision that is liable to mislead. A person's attempt to understand with one’s own faculties what is true, what is appropriate and just, what is good and desirable, is an attempt that one should engage in, but one must certainly not rely on it exclusively. This attempt may bring closer, but it may also distance; it may teach, but it may also mislead. One must, therefore, proceed with humility, in touch with what has been revealed in the Torah, as a continuation of that revelation.

Therefore, alongside the experience of darkness that accompanies the removal of the light of day at the time of sunset, there is also a new kind of light during the period of *bein ha-shemashot.* Ben Dama, who is filled with the full light of the day, with his studying of the entire Torah, may come armed with this light to the time of *bein ha-shemashot* and study Greek wisdom at that time. Rabbi Yishmael instructs ben Dama: "Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and study then Greek wisdom."

This is not merely the issuance of an allowance; Rabbi Yishmael's instructions imply that after studying all of the Torah, there is added value to studying Greek wisdom in the proper measure. *Chazal* teach elsewhere as well that if someone declares that "there is wisdom among the nations, believe him" (*Eikha Rabba* 2). There is what to learn from the wisdom of the nations, but this may happen only out of rootedness in the Torah, about which it is stated that if someone declares that "there is Torah among the nations, disbelieve him" (ibid.).

**“A Brightness Was Round About It” – This is the Kingdom of Yavan**

As stated earlier, Greek culture itself is a phenomenon of *bein ha-shemashot*, a mixture of light and darkness. To further develop this assertion, let us see the words of the *Zohar Chadash* in *Parashat Yitro* (38b), which expound the Vision of the Chariot seen by Yechezkel as alluding to the four kingdoms:

"A stormy wind" (*Yechezkel* 1:4) — this is the kingdom of Bavel.

"A great cloud" — this is the kingdom of Madai.

"With a fire flashing up" — this is the kingdom of Edom.

"So that a brightness (*nogah*)was round about it" — this is the kingdom of Yavan.

For round about them there is brightness, but there is no brightness in them, for about them it is written: "round about it," because none of the other kingdoms are as close to the path of faith as they are.

Several important principles are found in this source. The brightness that Yechezkel sees in his vision is identified here with the kingdom of Yavan. Greek wisdom is described here, on the one hand, as close to the path of faith, more so than the other cultures, while on the other hand, with respect to its nature, it is described here as external knowledge that only touches the brightness, unlike inner wisdom that is illuminated from within. Greek wisdom marks humanity's progress toward the faith of Israel, in comparison to the pagan world that precedes it,[[2]](#footnote-2) but that wisdom does not reach the essence of things and their inner meaning.

*Nogah* is also the name in the literature of *Chazal* for the planet Venus.[[3]](#footnote-3) Venus is visible to the eye precisely at the time of *bein ha-shemashot*, after sunset but before the sky fills with stars. Venus stands out during the "time of Greece."[[4]](#footnote-4)Of course, Venus is not the source of the light that illuminates the earth at that time, and in fact, like the earth, it too is illuminated by the light of the sun. At this time our world is illuminated by the light of *bein ha-shemashot*, which does not come from a clear external source, and is perceived, as it were, as found in the world itself. In this sense, the appearance of Venus brings to mind the image of the Greek spiritual world, in that it appears precisely at that intermediate, borderline, mixed-up time, at a time when the world is still illuminated, but the source of that illumination is no longer visible.

Another step in clarifying the meaning of Greek culture as likened to brightness is connected to a broader perspective on the prophet Yechezkel's Vision of the Chariot. In the wake of this vision, Kabbala relates to four shells (*kelipot*), which denote the forces of evil in this world.

One of them, the least evil among them, is located on the border between good and evil, a place where good and evil intermingle. What is the problem with this border? First of all, one who walks along the border is in danger of crossing over to the other side, the evil side, by mistake or in the wake of seduction. So too, the border itself is not a narrow line, but a mixed-up expanse in which good and evil intermingle, such that one's very presence in this expanse involves an element of evil. This border between good and evil is what divides between holiness and impurity — the secular world. The mundane world, precisely because of its neutrality, opens the door to another problem — detachment from God. Greek culture is what establishes at the center of human culture the world of man as standing on its own, paving the way for the creation of secular culture.

The shell that marks the intermediate domain is referred to in Kabbalistic texts as *kelipat nogah*, "the shell of brightness." Like the time of *bein ha-shemashot*, so too the shell of brightness is connected to the seam between light and darkness, between good and evil, the domain in which they bleed into each other.[[5]](#footnote-5) The connection of the time of *bein ha-shemashot* to the planet Venus, to the secular domain and to the *mitzva* of kindling Chanuka lights brings us back again to the special affinity of Greece towards this period, and to the spiritual contact of the daily *bein ha-shemashot* with the historical *bein ha-shemashot*, as explained above.

Alongside the dangers of the shell of brightness and all that it involves, its unique location, precisely on the border between good and evil and not in the depths of evil, promises the potential of a rectified appearance. It may be illuminated by the good, by the holy, and in so doing it may provide them with both foundation and extension. The culture and thought that comes close to the path of faith, after having been refined of its dross, may join with the path of faith and widen it. With the proper understanding of the time of *bein ha-shemashot*, it may become a continuation and expansion of the day.[[6]](#footnote-6)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See there in the continuation an allusion to the miracle of Chanuka:

   "And in her mouth an olive leaf freshly plucked' (*Bereishit* 8:11)” — Had the Holy One, blessed be He, not roused the spirit of the priests who would light the lamps with olive oil, the remnant of Yehuda would have perished from the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As we have already noted above, in Greek cosmology, the gods are given a more human face, this too being a form of progress. Progress going beyond that may be found, for example, in the translation of concrete mythology into more abstract philosophy among the educated, a process that purifies many of the pagan concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, BT *Shabbat* 156a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Venus is the brightest planet visible from the earth, resulting from a combination of its proximity to the earth, its proximity to the sun, and its size; therefore it is often possible to identify it in the sky during the period of *bein ha-shemashot*, after sunset but before the stars can be seen. Venus may be seen close to the sun, but when the sun is visible in the sky, its light swallows up the light of Venus. Since it appears close to the sun, shortly after the sun sets, Venus too sets behind the horizon. Therefore, Venus is visible in the sky precisely during the period between day and night, the time of *bein ha-shemashot.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Rav Kook's comments about *bein ha-shemashot* as a symbol of optional matters (which belong to *kelipat nogah*): “Since night alludes to the actions of the wicked, and day to the actions of the righteous, if so, twilight*,* which lies between day and night, alludes to optional matters." (See *Ein Aya*, *Berakhot* 1:4.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Ein* *Aya* (*Shabbat* 2:13) in the direct context of the matter at hand:

   Also those acquisitions that are useful in the service of the true light of the Torah, taken from the treasures of the encounter with the Greeks, from those opinions that are close to the path of faith, are refined and purified in the fire of the true Torah, to remove from them all of their dross; this is a supreme good from God, to prepare everything to provide benefit in the end.

   See also par. 278, there, in a more general context: "Twilight is a transition from the past to the future, connecting the mundane to the holy, and indicates the influence of the holy on the mundane by way of its connection.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)