YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**CHANUKA 5783**

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Dedicated in memory of Abraham Gontownik *z"l*

for his twenty-third *yahrzeit*, the 29th day of Kislev,

and in honor and in celebration of the recent birth of

Jean Rose (Zina Riva) Gontownik, daughter of Lilly and Ezra.

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**Chanuka: Inside vs. Outside**

**Rav Nechemia Raanan**

The victory of the Hasmoneans over the Greeks was not only a military victory, but also a spiritual one. In this *shiur*, we will examine the roots of the spiritual battle against the Greek culture of that time, and its implications for our own era.

**Studying “Greek wisdom”**

The Gemara prohibits studying "Greek wisdom" and tells us this ban was introduced in the wake of a specific event:

Our Sages taught: When the members of the Hasmonean monarchy were at war with each other, [Hyrcanus](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Chorkenos) was inside [the besieged Jerusalem], while [his brother] Aristobulus was on the outside. And every day [the people inside] would lower down money in a box from the Temple walls, while those on the outside would send up sheep [to them] for the daily offerings. There was a certain elder there who was familiar with Greek wisdom, and he said to [those besieging Jerusalem]: “As long as [the Jews inside the walls] occupy themselves with the [Temple] service, they will not be delivered into your hands.” The next day, they lowered down money in a box, but [those on the outside] sent up to them a pig. When the pig reached the midpoint of the Temple wall, it stuck its hooves into the wall and [Eretz Yisrael](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Cisrael) quaked over an area of four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs. At that time, [the Sages] said: Cursed be the man who raises pigs, and cursed be the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom. (*Bava Kama* 82b)

The reason for the prohibition is not stated explicitly, but it is clear that "Greek wisdom" can lead in problematic directions. A different view of the prohibition is offered in a different source:

Ben Dama, son of Rabbi Yishmael’s sister, asked Rabbi Yishmael: “For a person such as myself, who has learned the entire Torah, what is [the *halakha* with regard to] studying Greek wisdom?” Rabbi Yishmael responded with the following verse: “This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall contemplate it day and night” (*Yehoshua* 1:8). Go and find a time that belongs to neither the day nor the night, and [you may] learn Greek wisdom then." (*Menachot* 99b)

Here, the reason for the prohibition is stated clearly – but unlike the implied message in *Bava Kama*, what bothers R. Yishmael is not the study of Greek wisdom in and of itself, but rather the principle of "*bitul Torah*" – i.e., the fact that the time spent on Greek wisdom would be better used for Torah study.

The Gemara in *Menachot* goes on to cite another opinion:

And this [statement of R. Yishmael] goes against the opinion of R. Shmuel bar Nachmani, as R. Shmuel bar Nachmani says in the name of R. Yonatan: This verse represents neither an obligation nor a mitzva, but a blessing. The Holy One, blessed be He, observed Yehoshua and how very precious the words of Torah were to him, as it is stated: “[And the Lord spoke to Moshe face-to-face] …and his servant Yehoshua, son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the Tent” ([*Shemot* 33:11)](https://www.chabad.org/9894#v11). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Yehoshua, since the words of Torah are so precious to you, [I bless you that] “this book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth....” (*Menachot* 99b).

While R. Yishmael understands the verse stating "this book of the Torah shall not depart…" as establishing a constant obligation to study Torah, R. Shmuel bar Nachmani understands it as a hope, a wish, a blessing – such that studying Greek wisdom would not involve *“bitul Torah*.”

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani is not alone is suggesting that that there is no inherent problem in studying Greek wisdom. The Rambam devotes extensive attention to philosophy, in the wake of Aristotle's works, and offers his views in *Moreh Nevukhim*. How is this approach to be reconciled with the decisive declaration in *Massekhet Bava Kama* – "Cursed is the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom"?

**"As long as they occupy themselves with the [Temple] service, they will not be delivered into your hands"**

One way of resolving the difficulty is to propose that the determining factor is one's intention in studying Greek wisdom. The particular elder in the story in *Bava Kama* sought to bring the Temple service to an end – and succeeded in this effort, in a most shocking and detestable way (by causing a pig to be sent for the daily sacrifice). The identity of this elder has become muddled. Something in his Jewishness has been desecrated; he no longer feels himself to be Jewish – because a Jew would never propose such advice.

The moment the pig digs its hoofs into the wall, Eretz Yisrael quakes over an area of four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs. On the other side of the wall is the Temple, and bringing the pig inside will bring down the wall; it will destroy Jewish identity. This is the abomination of studying Greek wisdom: it is an attempt to bring down the wall, to cause the distinctive Jewish faith and worldview to be lost.

Once we understand that it is the engagement in Greek wisdom from an "outside," detached, desecrating stance that is forbidden, it is easier to understand the words of R. Yishmael, who relates to the question only from the point of view of *bitul Torah*. When R. Yishmael is asked whether it is possible to learn Greek wisdom, the starting point is "a person such as myself, who has learned the entire Torah.” The question emerges from someone whose Jewish identity is firmly rooted and clearly defined. What would be such a person's motivation in studying Greek wisdom? It would seem that this is a learned scholar who simply wishes to broaden his intellectual horizons. In this case, there is no categorical prohibition against studying Greek wisdom; the problem is finding a time that is neither day nor night – i.e., a time that does not fall under the blanket obligation to study Torah.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Thirteen breaches, and prostration before them**

Another rupture of the boundary between "inside" and "outside" can be seen in the Mishna’s description of the "*soreg*" (barrier) on the Temple Mount:

Inside of it [the wall of the Temple Mount] was the *soreg* [a low fence around the Temple, beyond which entry was prohibited to those who were impure], ten *tefachim* [handsbreadths] high. There were thirteen breaches in it, made by the Greek kings, and when they were repaired, thirteen corresponding prostrations were enacted. (Mishna *Middot* 2:3)

What is the significance of a breach in the *soreg* on the Temple Mount? Ultimately, the Greeks broke all the way through to the Holy of Holies; why, then, did they take the time and trouble to create thirteen breaches in the *soreg*?

The *soreg* bore an inscription in Greek that prohibited non-Jews from entering. It would seem that this was precisely what the Greeks were opposed to, and it was for this reason that they violated the *soreg*. Immersed in their universal culture, the Greeks could not accept the idea of barriers and separations. They could not reconcile themselves to the idea that there were places non-Jews could not enter. This drove them to destroy the outer wall, and along with it the barrier – both physical and spiritual – separating the holy from the profane.

The concepts of sanctity and purity are inherently bound up with separation and distance, degrees and levels. This is clear in Mishna *Kelim* 1:6-9, where we find ten levels of sanctity within Jerusalem, leading up to the Holy of Holies. The Greeks break through the *soreg* because they are unwilling to accept its existence. To their minds, nothing is more special or more holy than anything else, and *Am Yisrael* is no different from any other nation.

While this explains why the Greeks violated the *soreg*, we still need to understand why they took the trouble to create **thirteen** breaches. To answer this question, let us consider another place where we encounter the number thirteen:

R. Yishmael says: Great is the mitzva of circumcision, that thirteen covenants were sealed with regard to it… (Mishna *Nedarim* 3:11)

The number thirteen expresses the special bond between *Am Yisrael* and God – as reflected, inter alia, by the thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy. It was this that the Greeks aimed to destroy; they wanted to nullify the unique status and essence of *Am Yisrael* in relation to the other nations – a uniqueness expressed, first and foremost, in our bond with God.

When the Hasmoneans managed to prevail over the Greeks, they repaired all that had been desecrated and destroyed, and closed the thirteen breaches in the *soreg*. Moreover, they ensured that this would be remembered for future generations, by "enacting thirteen corresponding prostrations"; the transition from outside the *soreg* to the inside entails a move to a higher level of sanctity, which is expressed by prostration.

The Greeks sought to nullify sanctity, to do away with the separation between inside and outside and to create a reality in which everything is on an equal level. Their greatest destruction was therefore carried out on the Temple and its environs – such as breaching the *soreg* and desecrating the Temple’s oil. They enacted decrees against observance of the *mitzvot* in general, and circumcision in particular, for precisely the same reason. They wanted to eradicate Jewish identity and sanctified times, and deliberately targeted practices that characterize *Am Yisrael*'s uniqueness as God's nation.

**Entrance vs. breach**

The repair for these actions of the Greeks goes beyond closing the physical breaches, and even beyond prostration at the sites where the breaches were made. Full repair entails a transition from the world of "breaches" to the world of "openings.”

The Mishna in *Eruvin* (1:8) teaches us that

Any breach [in a partition around a caravan encampment made out of riding equipment] that is approximately ten cubits wide is permitted [and does not invalidate the partition as an *eruv*] because it is like an entrance. If [there is one that is] greater than ten cubits, it is prohibited [to carry within the enclosed area].

The Mishna draws a distinction between an "entrance," which measures less than ten cubits in width, and a "breach," which is wider. Why would a breach wider than ten cubits invalidate the partition? What is the meaning of this difference between an "entrance" and a "breach”?

It seems that there is a fundamental distinction between the two definitions. A "breach" exists where there is no difference between the outside and the inside: the partition, for all intents and purposes, no longer exists; it is nullified. In the case of an "entrance," on the other hand, there is a defined "inside" and a defined "outside.” Thus, the transition between the two areas still has significance; the partition still exists.

This distinction sits well with the episode of the breaches in the *soreg*. The Greeks sought to do away with the *soreg* and thereby make the inside and outside of this partition equal. A gate in the wall, on the other hand, separates the inside from the outside, expressing the special sanctity of that which is inside the wall.

**"A light for each individual and his household"**

The idea of the gate as the proper response to the breaches of the Greeks is brought into sharper focus by the following *beraita*:

The Sages taught: It is a mitzva to place the Chanuka lamp at the entrance to one’s house on the outside. (Shabbat 21b)

In other words, the response to the efforts of the Greeks is not an inward-turning seclusion. One might have thought that the solution would consist simply of closing the breaches – i.e., re-establishing the "inside" as distinct and separate from the "outside.” But the repair effected by the Chanuka lights involves more than just a clear separation between the two domains. It also entails a new way of looking outward, at the relationship between inside and outside. It involves an encounter with the outside.

This outward gaze has a requisite precondition, and that is the existence of an entrance, a gateway. This entrance expresses the fact that there is, first of all, a house: "a light for each individual and his household." First we have to recognize that there is such a thing as a house; there is a concept of "inside," as distinct from what is on the "outside.” This “inside” has its own special identity, expressing the special covenant that God forged with *Am Yisrael*. Only after we recognize this can we emerge from the house, to place the light at the entrance on the outside. This is the proper approach to the relationship between "inside" and "outside": neither extreme seclusion, nor, of course, breaches.

Openness is the ability to emerge from the place that is "I" – my house, the domain of the covenant, the domain of faith and holiness. It is from within this domain that I emerge outward. I encounter the outside when I come out of my own house. I have my own intimate space where I belong to a certain context, and it is specifically on this basis that I emerge and encounter the outside world.

At the same time, the *beraita* goes on to qualify this basic law:

At a time of danger, he places it on the table, and that is sufficient [to fulfill his obligation]. (*Shabbat* 21b)

There are times when it can be dangerous to go outside, since one's essential uniqueness and context may be jeopardized. Sometimes stepping outside can bring a person to a situation of "breaches" and violations of his inner identity. In such conditions, there is no room for openness. The proper approach is to close oneself in: "he places it on the table, and that is sufficient." One has to first consolidate the context of covenant and sanctity; he must ensure that his foundations and essence are sufficiently sturdy and clear. Only after the concepts and definitions of his inner world are stable and firmly established does it become possible to take them to “the entrance of his house on the outside": emerging outside can now enrich his inner world, and he in turn can enrich his environment.

What does this mean in practice? There may be certain historical periods when the winds outside blow strongly and there is a real danger that they may extinguish the light of anyone who ventures outside, erasing his unique, personal identity. Likewise, there may be periods in an individual’s lifetime when he needs to seclude himself inside, because his spiritual world is not sufficiently consolidated; his identity is not yet fully formed and firmly grounded. At such times, he should remain "inside," protected from the storm, until he is ready to head for "the entrance to his house, on the outside." The dominant approach at some points should be seclusion and privacy for the sake of building one's religious and spiritual identity – the necessary basis for any venturing outside.

We find the following metaphor in *Tehillim*: “Planted in the house of the Lord, in the courts of our God they will flourish (*Tehillim* 92:14-15).

When we are "planted in the house of the Lord," then we are able to flourish and produce fruit "in the courts of our God.” The precondition is that we are indeed "planted" – that we are deeply rooted in our spiritual world and powerfully connected to it. Only then can we hope to emerge and place the light at the entrance to our homes on the outside, thereby illuminating from the inside outward to others, while at the same time enriching our own world with that which is to be found on the outside.

(This sicha was given on Leil 26 Kislev 5778. Summarized by Tzachi Rauch.)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. As noted, R. Shmuel bar Nachmani disagrees, maintaining that even *bitul* *Torah* is not a problem here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)