

Judaism and Science: The Lessons of Chanukah

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On the 25th of *Kislev* (this year, the night of the 4th of December), we begin to celebrate the festival of Chanukah. Chanukah is one of the most beloved holidays among the Jewish people, yet few are aware of its inner meaning.

It is common knowledge that Chanukah commemorates the victory of the Jewish people over their Hellenistic oppressors and, in particular, the miracle that occurred in the Holy Temple: After the Greeks contaminated all the oil, a single cruse of uncontaminated olive oil was discovered, which in spite of its small size, miraculously produced enough oil to light the *Menorah* for eight days, the amount of time needed to press and ship ritually pure oil to the Temple. But what is the deeper meaning of the war with the Hellenists and the miracle of the oil and what impact can it have on our lives today so many years later?

Chanukah as a war of cultures

An in-depth evaluation of the events of Chanukah reveals that the war between the Jews and the Greeks was first and foremost a spiritual war—a clash of cultures. At odds were Torah and Greek philosophy—two entirely different conceptual schemes of human life. To fully understand the significance of the miracle of the oil, we have to see it in context of this battle of the spirit.

In Kabbalah, oil symbolizes wisdom. The defilement of the oils by the Greeks represents the clouding of our original Jewish mode of thought by Greek philosophy, creating an unbridgeable gap to be opened between our intellect and our faith. The uncontaminated cruse of oil therefore symbolically represents a concentrate of pure Jewish thought that remained (and still remains) immune to the devastating influence of Greek philosophy. Just like the small quantity of oil in the cruse, this concentrate of Jewish thinking may seem at first small and inconsequential, but miraculously, it too can illuminate a great deal of human experience.

The sages explain that given the manner in which the Temple sanctuary was built, the *Menorah* did not illuminate its inside, but rather most of its light was cast outside. In more spiritual language, they say that it is not God's sanctuary that needs light from the *Menorah*, for God Himself is all light, rather it is the outside world that needs the light of the *Menorah*. Thus, the *Menorah* is the vessel that symbolizes the spreading of the word of God to even the farthest and darkest corners of humanity and human nature, while the oil that burns in it and emits the light symbolizes the type of wisdom that can be



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seen by everyone. In the time of the Macabbees, the oil that burned in the *Menorah* was able to illuminate the world enough that there was no choice but to accept the presence of a ritually and theologically independent Jewish entity in the Land of Israel, an entity that survived for many years.

Rectifying Western thought

In the blessings on the Chanukah candles, we say: “for the miracles that you performed for our fathers, in those days—at this time.” The message of celebrating Chanukah today is that what was true then is still true (and perhaps even more so) today. Though the success of the Macabbees led to the formation of an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel, a state that remained intellectually and ritually unique in a sea of Hellenism and Greek philosophy, ultimately, from a secular perspective, it was the message of Greek culture that was triumphant on the global scale.

Still, the miracle of finding a cruse of pure, uncontaminated oil calls upon us today to search for the ancient Jewish wisdom that can shed Divine light and rectify the seemingly endless volumes of philosophy and science whose source lies in the ancient Greek tradition. This mysterious and pure flask of Jewish wisdom has the ability to reconnect humanity’s intellect with its faith. When utilized correctly it sheds new light on every topic.

To fully appreciate the importance of tying the two together we have to take a closer look at the downside of Western thought. What is so problematic about the mind space developed out of Greek philosophy that an entire festival of light is dedicated to the struggle against it?

Indeed, we can strengthen this question by adding that modern science, perhaps the most important offspring of the ancient Greek tradition, has produced most beautiful fruit: from the enhancement of knowledge to the increase in life expectancy, science has affected our lives profoundly. But science is much more than its products; purely scientific thought has most negative side effects, and it is because of these that we have been in a constant struggle with it ever since the time of the Maccabees.

Dulling the (spiritual) senses

The main problem with scientific rationalism is that it dulls man’s spiritual senses—senses that by their very nature function beyond the rational mind. These senses can be divided into two psychological categories. The first, more base type, are associated with the animalistic urges in man. These crass senses also spawn various false superstitions and self-serving religious ideologies. But, the second is extremely spiritual and are suited to grasping spiritual knowledge and truisms that lie beyond the borders of our rational mind. While rational thought can help subdue our base, animalistic urges, at the same time, if adopted exclusively, it can also suffocate the soul’s everlasting attempts to study and understand spirituality, and most importantly to unite with its source in God.

In other words, though science has helped free us of superstition, by attacking the credibility of our higher spiritual senses, it has figuratively tossed the baby out with the bathwater. Scientists, perhaps partly because of over enthusiasm, partly because of hubris, have overstepped the rational boundaries of science and entered the realm of the spiritual.

As a general rule, science is able to provide engaging answers to questions about *how* things work, but questions of purpose, i.e., for what purpose does something work in the first place and questions of reasons, such as what is the reason for existence, these questions do not fall within the scientific framework. When information and knowledge about the world and our lives originate solely from science, we get used to seeing the world as a pointless machine and our actual ability to ask spiritual questions deteriorates. The product of the purely rational stance that places science above all else is a society of highly intelligent people, but with an inner rift between their mind and soul.

The crux of the challenge that classical Western culture presents us with does not lie in science itself. The problem is with the undeserved status that it has held since the wars of the Maccabees against the ancient Greeks. To this day, the rational mind continues to be Western culture's unquestioned authority, and scientists have become the priests of a new religion. The result is scorn and disdain at any attempt to offer new and daring ways of thought that climb out of the box of rational thought to heights science cannot even dream of. For this reason, victory over the wisdom of Greece does not mean the end of science. On the contrary, it means placing science in its proper place as a tool of the intellect, which, when illuminated correctly can certainly be used to augment our understanding of creation and the Creator. This last idea foreshadows the unification of Torah with science, one of the critical elements in the redemptive process.

Chanukah and *Kislev*

Historians differ as to the dates and duration of the war of the Macabbees against the Hellenists. In any event, the sages fixed the 25th of *Kislev* as the first day of Chanukah. This is the day on which, after their victory over the Greeks, the Macabbees found the flask of pure olive oil sealed with the stamp of the High Priest. Though the cruse had enough oil to last only one day, it miraculously kept the *Menorah* lit for eight. We celebrate by lighting oil lamps for eight days. Thus, there is an intrinsic link between Chanukah and the month of *Kislev* that we need to contemplate. As we shall now see, the month of *Kislev* and its own symbolism provide us with important insights for finding the wisdom needed today in order to illuminate Western culture with the light of God and the Torah.

The bow

It is well known that Judaism prohibits consulting necromancers and their like, including astrologers, because of the incorrect mechanical and deterministic picture of reality that they promote. Nonetheless, Jewish sages throughout the centuries, beginning with our patriarch Abraham, have recognized the wisdom contained in astrological symbolism. Thus, contemplating the significance of each month's zodiac sign, its *mazal*, can offer us insights into the nature of that month, particularly when the months referred to are the months of the Jewish calendar.

The *mazal* of Kislev is *keshet* "the bow" (or "the archer," Sagittarius). There are a number of different meanings associated with the bow. We will see three of these meanings: the bow as a bow of war, the bow as a rainbow, and the bow as a symbol of logical inference. Each separately, and even more so all three together, is a model for illuminating the Western world with the presence of the Almighty and with the wisdom of the Torah.

Prayer

First of all, the bow is a weapon used to shoot arrows. Unlike the main weapon of war, the sword, which is used in hand to hand combat, the bow is a long-range weapon fired at an enemy that many times cannot even be seen because of his distance. Therefore, the bow is not a precise weapon and cannot be controlled as well as a sword.

Because of this, the bow is described in the *Zohar* as a weapon of faith. The archer shoots the arrow but then must place his faith in the Almighty, that He will guide it to the target. For this reason, the sages use the bow as a metaphor for petitioning God to answer our needs during prayer; it is as if we are shooting our words out into the air, full of faith that God will guide them [i.e., will accept our prayer] so that they have an effect.

How is this related to Chanukah? Prayer in general and supplicative prayer in particular is founded on the belief that the laws of nature are not the last word in life and that the relationship between man and God supersedes them. Prayer transcends the deterministic picture of the physical world that science seems to draw for us, a picture in which man is simply the victim of his circumstances.

With this interpretation of the bow as supplicative prayer, we are not opposing the scientific description of the world directly. Instead, we are exercising our understanding that faith is stronger than nature and by extension reveals an aspect of the world that science cannot contradict. With prayer, the Creator can be approached in a way that side-steps, ignores, and leaps over all the natural laws discovered by science. As a corollary, prayer begins where man ends; prayer is an admission of human limitations and shortcomings and is therefore the strongest in-your-face adversary to Greek humanism which appoints man the measure of all things and preaches that he is free to shape his destiny.

Covenant

The second meaning that the bow alludes to is the rainbow in the sky, the symbol of the covenant between God and Noah (in Hebrew, the word for “rainbow” is simply “bow,” *keshet*), which according to some opinions was made on the first day of the month of Kislev. The rainbow lifts us above the image of the bow as used in warfare to a higher spiritual level where the essence is one of creating a connection, even a covenant, with God.

The appearance of the rainbow reminds us that even the natural world has a purpose. Imprinted on nature’s laws is the seal of the Supernatural Almighty that created them and sustains them at every moment. Therefore, nature is always filling us with hope that indeed all of our toil and all of our troubles will be fruitful in bringing about a rectified state of life on Earth. The mystery and magic of nature as revealed in the rainbow are a symbol for the meaning that lies beyond the laws discovered by the rational mind. The rainbow as a symbol resonates that mankind accepts the fundamental truth of the scientific description of nature, yet at the same time we yearn to connect with God in a covenant that binds the soul with the Creator of those natural laws.

Inference

The third and highest way to illuminate science is based on the etymology of the word “bow” (*keshet*), which in Hebrew stems from the same root meaning “inference” (*hekesheh*). The sages explain that the words: “I have placed My bow in the clouds” (Genesis 9:13) mean that by contemplating the rainbow, a natural phenomenon, one can infer something about God Himself. The bow as inference seeks to heighten our sensitivity to the omnipresence of God in every single facet of reality. Since God is present in everything, any correct rational explanation, no matter how partial, can still help us connect with God.

As an example, let us look at the rainbow itself. When the rational mind studies the rainbow it reveals that its myriad colors are the result of white light dispersed through water. But, when Jewish wisdom is applied to the scientific interpretation it sees that science has discovered is natural example of how a remarkable variety of phenomena (colors) can originate from a single unity (colorless light). Likewise, the seemingly separate and distinct phenomena that make up reality all truly originate in the One God, the essence of the essential statement of Jewish faith: “God is One.” The rainbow indeed displays an astounding inference to God. This is the illuminating mindset of the pure flask of Jewish wisdom called Kabbalah and Chassidut, which takes the scientific explanation and reinterprets it as an example for understanding the absolute Oneness of God.

Sweetening scientific explanations in this way constitutes a total victory over the single-mindedness of the Greek rational mind as it has evolved into the modern

scientific rational mindset. As the rational mind continues to discover more and more about our physical reality, we are reminded by the miracle of Chanukah, of how one small cruse of oil, one drop of the ancient wisdom of Judaism, can kindle the flame of knowledge and light of God. Chanukah calls us to listen to the hidden depths of Judaic thought and ritual in order to discover how they can, here and now, illuminate science.