

BEAT THE GREEKS

by Gad Erlanger

Until the time of the destruction of the First Temple, the world did not recognize systems of thought based upon isolated observable data. Aristotle claimed, however, that observable data were, in fact, the only basis for arriving at correct conclusions -- he "denied everything other than what could be perceived by him" (Nachmanides on Leviticus 16:8). The timing of this conclusion was most unfortunate. For as long as perpetual miracles had transpired in the Temple in Jerusalem, the senses themselves had borne witness to their own fallibility. But now this Temple no longer stood. The Second Temple lacked this Divine clarity. Those visible miracles did not take place there.

Aristotle posited the existence of an active intellect moved by factual data in the material world. Man can arrive at reasonable and true conclusions only by activating the intellect through a consistent application of the rules of logic to cause and effect. These ideas had a far-ranging impact on metaphysics.

Unlike his predecessors, Aristotle succeeded in redefining systematic thought itself, using logic alone to formulate, through deduction and induction, conclusions about reality. According to Nachmanides, he claimed that whatever was not comprehensible to his own thinking, was not true! Therefore, in addition to what was defined by him as logical reality which gives a clear and true picture of what existence is all about, logic set out to determine what was false. In effect, Aristotle had freed the mind from further concerning itself with the spiritual knowledge still widely known at that time among the nations.

The reign of Alexander, Aristotle's disciple, granted full legitimacy to this disregard for the existence of spiritual worlds and the responsibilities which they entail. The mechanistic paradigm of Western thought owes its origins to Aristotle. The results are akin to a gleaming office tower reaching to great heights but without any foundation. For who needs a foundation if it cannot be seen?

...In sport, Greece was able to idolize beauty in terms of the physical form. The physical was acclaimed for its own sake, without reference to the inner real needs. Politically, Greece gave us democracy, with its belief that physical presence in itself gives a person inalienable political rights, without ascribing any particular weight to inner wisdom. Reality proceeded along a new line based on numbers, the "rule of the majority."

Culture War

Once Alexander had established his empire, the world view of his mentor Aristotle held sway

without restraint. Matter was seen as reflecting only itself. The demand that man forego some worldly material pleasures for the sake of developing inner qualities was largely irrelevant to this system.

The traditions of the Jewish People, based upon giving the physical world a Divine form, were offensive to it. The Greeks took four fundamental tenets of Judaism -- Sabbath observance, circumcision, family purity, and the sanctification of the new moon (in the Land of Israel) -- and rigorously forbade their observance.

Observing the Sabbath attests to the fact that the world does not function automatically, on its own. The Creator activates it, and depending on His will, this activity can be curtailed or resumed. The very word "automatic" stems from the Greek automos, meaning self-activating. It denotes activity that occurs by chance, without intent, dry and self-activated. According to the Greeks, the world always existed in this form, and so it would remain. Thus, Sabbath observance was outlawed because of its inherent acknowledgment of God as Creator of the world.

Circumcision, the physical manifestation on their very flesh of God's covenant with Israel, was also to be forbidden. For the Greeks, circumcision was interpreted as a blemish to the body, which they glorified. Thus, circumcision was outlawed.

The observance of the laws of family purity was deemed to run contrary to reason. According to the world view of the Greeks, physical pleasure should always be experienced on its own terms without regard to a spiritual dimension -- so this observance was outlawed.

The setting of the festival times by the beis din (court) in Jerusalem according to its determination of the new moon was forbidden by its very nature. Any such accord between the timing of a holy festival and the timing of a material heavenly body was incompatible with Greek thought altogether. Thus, sanctification of the new month was outlawed as well.

In all these cases, it is clear that the Greek approach negated the Torah outlook on the material world. The Torah demands the inclusion of the spiritual, of Divine wisdom, into matter. This raises the corporeal to the level of a vessel for Divine service. But the Greek approach accepted the given facts at face value. It invalidated all manipulation or modification of material reality. To the Greeks, according the corporeal world a spiritual dimension was pointless. This perspective led them to ban Torah study altogether, as Torah, especially the Oral Law, teaches the significance of the spiritual, and its implementation, in the world of the material. The Greeks hoped to reduce this concept to a footnote in history...

Miracle of Oil

The Temple in Jerusalem was one of the principal targets of Greek forces. Although outstanding in its beauty, its external magnificence was not fashioned for its own sake, as an end in itself. The Torah commands us to infuse the performance of mitzvot with beauty. Thus, the mantle which covers the

Torah scroll and, even more so, the places of worship should all be beautifully designed. In the Temple, the menorah, the altar, and the table were all made of pure gold -- and were regarded by the Greeks as works of art.

In accordance with their philosophy, the Temple's vessels had to be preserved because of their artistic value. But before preserving them, they wanted to desecrate them in the eyes of the Jews by slightly damaging them. Their collaborators, the Jewish Hellenists, suggested that at least they should be touched by a ritually impure person, thus disqualifying them for use in the Divine service of the Temple.

At the end of the war, the Maccabees learned that the Temple had been defiled, and they proceeded to make preparations to re-sanctify it. The rekindling of the menorah was one aspect of this process. This service required pure olive oil extracted for this particular purpose...

The Sages of that generation saw a distinct sign from Heaven in the miracle of the oil. Once again it was obvious on the empirical level that matter is not the master. He Who determines a rate of combustion so that one cruse of oil burns for only one night, can also will it to burn for eight. Materia has its Divine potential which became clearly reflected, in parallel to the authentic ritual loyalty of the victorious Maccabees. The Sages saw in this the full realization of the victory of the world of the spirit over the world of matter.

To ensure that the lesson be remembered, they established a permanent practice of rejoicing and thanking God each year during these eight days. On eight-branched menorahs, Jews in every land would light one additional candle each evening at nightfall, after returning from work, placing the menorah in a window overlooking a public domain or at the opening of their house, to publicize this miracle of the spirit.

The main theme of the festival of Chanukah (which means "dedication") is the publicizing of this miracle in the rededication of the Temple. In the prayers, additional stanzas of gratitude and acknowledgment are added, the most well-known being Hallel (Psalms 112-118), which is recited only on festivals.

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