

# ANALYZING THE IMAGERY OF A FAMILIAR CHANUKAH POEM

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

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## Analyzing The Imagery of A Familiar Chanukah Poem

I would like to share a beautiful insight from Rav Matisyahu Solomon relating to the popular Chanukah liturgical poem, Maoz Tzur. Perhaps the most familiar stanza of this poem (owing to the well known song using these words) is the stanza beginning Yevanim nikbetzu alay azai b'yemay Chashmonim (The Syrian-Greeks gathered against me in the days of the Chashmoneans). The song then relates that they made breaches into the walls of my source of strength (u'fartzu chomos migdalay). It continues that a miracle was performed for the sake of the shoshanim. The word shoshanim literally means roses. The poet metaphorically calls the Jewish nation "shoshanim".

Why, we may ask, was the name "shoshanim" seen as a particularly appropriate way to refer to Klal Yisrael at this time in history?

Rav Solomon's basic theme is an idea mentioned by Rav Yeruchum Levovitz in his work Daas Chochmah U'Mussar. Rav Yeruchum writes that if we are to seek out one theme that Moshe Rabbeinu constantly repeats throughout his life, it is the theme that Klal Yisrael should not assimilate with idolatrous societies and learn from their ways. Moshe's greatest fear was that after his death the nation of Israel would learn the ways of their non-Jewish neighbors and be pulled into the trap and the lifestyle of the nations of the world. Moshe first mentions this theme as soon as the Torah is given and he does not let up until the very day he dies.

Rav Yeruchum cites chapter and verse to prove his point. Here are just a few of many examples: "Don't make a covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land lest they cause you to sin to Me." [Shemos 23:33]; "Take heed lest you make a covenant with those who dwell in the land." [Shemos 31:24]; "When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the Land before you; and you shall destroy... and you shall demolish... but if you do

not drive out the inhabitants of the Land before you, those of them whom you leave shall be pins in your eyes and thorns in your sides..." [Bamidbar 33:51-55]. These same themes are repeated by Moshe again and again and again.

Unfortunately, in spite of all these warnings and exhortations, Klal Yisrael did not do a very good job of keeping away from assimilation with the nations. The history of both the early and later prophets is replete with examples of spiritual backsliding on the part of the Jewish people due to having learned from and copied the abominations of other nations. This occurs over and over in the Book of Yehoshua, in Shoftim, in Shmuel, and in Melachim. Not only did "the masses" of Jews learn from idolators, even Jewish Kings learned from them, to the extent that some of them tried to eradicate Judaism from the nation. Ultimately, the Jews paid the price of this spiritual backsliding and were exiled from the Land.

After seventy years, the Jews were put back into the land, having seemingly learned their lesson, only to return to their wayward behavior and to again learn from the Hellenists in the time of the Second Temple. Concerning this constant historical challenge to the preservation of unique Jewish identity, Dovid HaMelech [King David] says, "And they intermingled among the nations and they learned from their ways" [Tehillim 106:35].

If there is a way to sum up the essence of the battle between Klal Yisrael and the Yevanim [Syrian-Greeks] at the time of the Chanukah story in twenty-five words or less it is by describing this very issue. The Yevanim's battle with the Jews was not a physical battle to eradicate our people. Their vision was not that of Haman in an earlier era nor that of Rome in a later era. The Yevanim were not interested in killing Jews. The Greeks did not destroy the Beis HaMikdash even though they were certainly militarily capable of doing that. Their goal was not to destroy the Temple, but to de-sanctify it. They wanted to take Jewish culture and adulterate it. Their vision was to Hellenize Judaism and to blur the differences between Greek and Jewish culture. It was not a battle for the lives of Jews. It was a battle for their souls -- a cultural war.

Perhaps this is what the Mishneh is alluding to in Tractate Middos [2:3]. When detailing the layout of the Har Habayis [Temple Mount], the Mishneh mentions a ten hand breadth high fence known as the Soreg, just inside the perimeter of the Har Habayis. The Mishneh comments that the Soreg contained thirteen breaches that were made by the Greek Kings. The Mishneh says that the Jews were successful in mending the fences and instituted a corresponding number of prostrations, where visitors bowed when passing these places. The Rabbis enacted that when a Jew came to the Har Habayis and saw the mended fences, he should bow down in grateful thanks to the Master of the Universe for the successful defeat of the Syrian-Greek empire.

The Tosfos YomTov comments that the purpose of the Soreg fence was to separate the Jews from

the non-Jews. When people of other nations came to the Har Habayis (which they had the right to do, as found in King Solomon's prayer at the Temple dedication [Melachim I 8:41-43]), they had to know their limits. If they wanted to join the Jewish nation, they could convert. But they did not have to. They could donate to the Temple and make offerings, but from "the other side of the fence", a small but symbolic separation between the Jews and the nations.

When the Greeks were successful in conquering Eretz Yisrael, what did they do? They did not destroy the fence or jump over the fence. They made breaches in the fence, in effect saying we are not different. We are no different from you and you are no different from us. We want to intermingle with you, and we want you to assimilate with us.

The mending of the fences was the symbol of the victory of the Jews over the Greeks. Therefore, how appropriate it is, for the liturgist to write - in describing the challenge that the Greeks presented to the Jewish nation: U'fartzu chomos migadalie [And they breached the walls of my Temple]. U'mi'nosar kankanim, na-aseh nes la'shoshanim [And from the left over vials of oil a miracle was performed for the 'roses'].

Why 'shoshanim' [roses]? The pasuk in Shir HaShirim [2:2] states, Like the rose (maintaining its beauty) among the thorns, so is My faithful beloved among the nations. Rashi there explains that the Jewish people are compared to roses. They live in a hostile environment. The delicate rose is in constant danger, lest the thorns puncture and pierce its beauty, destroying its pristine appearance. The Jewish people is under constant pressure to assimilate, and to replace Jewish values with those of the larger society around us.

This was the praise of the Jews who defeated the Greeks. They preserved their pristine beauty in the face of the hostility of the Yevanim who were trying to puncture and destroy their spiritually delicate essence.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Miketz are provided below:

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