

Sparks

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Chanukah

The Drama of Light and Darkness

I was once sitting and learning Torah with the Hollywood Actor, Kirk Douglas, when suddenly he turned to me and said, "You know, Rabbi, I love being Jewish."

"Oh, yeah? Why?" I asked.

"Because being Jewish is dramatic!"

I was surprised by his unusual answer and thought to myself, "I guess for these big time actors, everything is showbiz." Instead, I said, "Dramatic? I am sorry but I don't get the connection."

"Rabbi, I know drama, and let me tell you, Jewish life and Jewish history is dramatic. In fact, there are several archetypal themes to all films, and they are all from the Bible. Here, let me show you what's drama."

Kirk then jumped out of his chair and began to improvise a dramatic scene.

"Now, watch this. Let's say we are shooting a scene and it's about a guy named Jerry who is going to get some bad news about his mother. How do we make it dramatic? We would not have Jerry sitting at home reading a newspaper, when suddenly the phone rings and someone breaks the news to him that his mother is fatally ill. No, that's not interesting-that's not dramatic. So, this is how it's done: First, Jerry is at a party. No, better yet, he's at a party in his honor-it's a big company event and he's about to receive an important award. Now imagine he is wearing a tuxedo, he has a martini in his hand, and he is socializing with his friends at the reception before the event. He cracks a joke, and then, in the middle of the laughter, someone hands him a note."

At this point, Kirk became Jerry, masterfully acting out the entire scene as Jerry casually glances at the note, a pained look appears on his smiling face, and as he chokes out in response to his friends' inquiring looks, "It's my mother."

After a few theatrical moments of silence, Kirk perked up and said with a big smile, "Now that's drama! Get it Rabbi?"

"Kind of."

"Drama happens in the sharp contrasts of life - between happiness and sadness, failure and success, defeat and victory, darkness and light. And that is the story of the Jewish people. It's dramatic."

Kirk was right. And, in fact, all the Jewish holidays connect us with the drama of Jewish history, the sharp turns and striking contrasts of which inspire powerful clarity. Remembering what *was* in the past awakens us to see what *is* in the present and what *can be* in the future. In fact, the holidays empower us to recognize how God's love is with us all the time.

Celebrating Inner beauty

The word *Chanukah* is associated with the Hebrew word *chen*, which means "grace". When you meet people with *chen*, you realize there is something very attractive about them. But *chen* is not the same as "pretty," which is *yofi* in Hebrew.

We have all had the experience of meeting someone whose face seemed beautiful only to have such a first impression quickly wear off as we heard that person complain, criticize and spew out negativity. Similarly, we have all had the experience of meeting someone not at all attractive at first glance, but who became beautiful when he or she broke into a smile or demonstrated kindness and warmth.

That sort of experience demonstrates the difference between *chen* and *yofi*. *Yofi* is an external beauty. *Chen* is inner beauty.

The word *Chanukah* is also associated with the Hebrew word for "education" which is *chinuch*. King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs (5:19) praises the Torah for bringing *chen* upon all who study it. In other words, Torah education draws out your inner beauty, a beauty that is a function of your relationship to God which also depends on how well you relate to yourself, your friends, your community and the world. Through true loving relationships and spiritual harmony, our inner godly beauty shines out to the world. And the more you discover your own inner beauty of *chen*, you discover the *chen* of all people from the universal soul that we all share.

The word education comes from the Latin word *educare*, which means to "draw out." To educate, therefore, means to draw out something that fundamentally is already there. In the process of education, you actually become aware of yourself --- your soul shines. You grow, you transform and become the real you. Rather than simply memorizing a bunch of information, you absorb ideas that draw out the inner you and reveals who you really are in relationship to G-d.

The conflict between the Jews and Greeks was really about the tension between "*Chen*" and '*Yofi*'-inner beauty (the beauty of the soul as a part of G-d) and external beauty. This is why the Midrash states: Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish explained the verse in Genesis: ...and darkness [on the face of the depths]. "This refers to Greece who darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees, in which they said to them: 'Write upon the horn of a bull -- that you do not have part in the God of Israel...'" (Midrash Genesis Rabba 2:4)

The Greeks wanted to sever our relationship to G-d and thereby extinguish the light of *chen*. To them only *Yofi* -- was real and worth worshipping. They were experts in seeing and expressing the stunning symmetry, harmony and physical beauty of the world through art and the study of science. Judaism also values the physical world. It honors art and science but only as long as it is subservient to the spiritual. In fact the numerical value of the Hebrew words for "art" [omanut, 497] and "science" [mada, 114] is equal to

that of the word Torah [611].) *Yofi* without *chen* is like a body without a soul. It is dead and rots. There is no life to the external beauty of *yofi* (art and science) when pursued independent of Torah and the spiritual beauty of *chen* that it generates.

The Torah states in Genesis 9:27, "May God beautify Yefet and he will dwell in the tents of Shem." Yefet, the son of Noah, is the ancestor of Greece, and Shem is the father of the Semites -- Israel. The blessing of Yefet is only within the tent of Israel; only when it is subservient to the values and ideals of Torah.

The Talmud teaches that a beautiful spouse, a beautiful house, and beautiful objects expand a person's mind. Once I was visiting a friend who was in the throes of deciding whether to take a year after college to learn in Yeshiva or get to work and build his career. Spending a year in Yeshiva study would have meant a boost to his spiritual life, but a significant drop in his bank account. He quoted to me the above thought from the Talmud. "I think I could probably have a more beautiful house if I get moving with my career," he told me. "If I could make a lot of money, I could afford more beautiful furnishings. So why should I go to Yeshiva?" I replied: "The Talmud says those things will expand your mind. You have to decide how you are going to fill your expanded mind. If you have little to fill it with you will feel very empty. Physical beauty is only valuable when it serves the purposes of a Torah life."

The Midrash Shachar analyzes the word "Zion (Israel) spelled tzaddik - yud- vav- nun," and breaks it into its two components tzaddik - yud, vav, nun. The first letter, the *tzaddik*, represents the holy righteous Jew, while the last three letters, *yud*, *vav*, *nun*, spell out 'Yavan,' the Hebrew word for Greece. Israel and Greece -- Torah, Art and Science -- must ultimately be united but the righteousness of Torah must take the lead.

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