Universalism v Particularity: The Theological Conflict behind the Chanukah story

Chanukah Today
I have a confession to make. It is always at this time of year that I miss the 'Christmassy' feel from home. Of course coming from a religious orthodox home we never celebrated Christmas - far from it, but the sound of those heart-warming songs on the radio, the feel of the holiday season and the festive mood that seemed to permeate every aspect of life was certainly not lost on me. And though I don't think there is anything wrong with enjoying the cultural feel good factor of another religion's celebrations, if our own religious celebration gets swallowed into that of the other to the extent that it is indistinguishable, that is a grave loss. How much are we to take from other cultures or religions? Is there a moment in our appreciation of the 'Other' that we lose the essence of our own particularity? When does appreciation become assimilation? Are we to shut ourselves out from the world around us so as not to become 'influenced' by the other, or are we to engage in the world whilst rigorously maintaining our own sense of identity and uniqueness? How best can we become a 'light unto the nations'?

 Chanukah is perhaps the Chag that should speak to us most profoundly today. At a time when our particularity as a Jewish people is threatened greatly by three factors - universalism, globalisation and assimilation, Chanukah comes to remind us of our role as a Jewish people. Its historical and theological underpinnings teach us many pertinent lessons that are important to hear in our generation.

Athens and Jerusalem
Tertullian the second century Christian theologian famously asked the question 'what has Athens got to do with Jerusalem?' by which he meant there is no relationship between Greek philosophy, as the search for rational universal truth, and the faith of the scriptures.

Leo Strauss the twentieth century Jewish thinker, more than eighteen centuries after Tertullian, composed an essay entitled 'Athens and Jerusalem'. He highlights two opposing aspects of philosophy; that of Athens and Jerusalem - or in other words Reason and Revelation. He believed that whilst Athens and her Greek philosophers embodied the ultimate paradigm of finding truth through man's reason, Jerusalem, as manifested through Judaism, represents the search for truth via revelation. The Jerusalem paradigm is a strict, unquestioning, humble obedience to Divine rules, law and way of life.

Is this presentation of Athens and Jerusalem correct? Does Judaism truly adhere to a strict revelatory paradigm that undermines man's intellectual quest and instead places emphasis on the ritualistic element, and as some believe a focus on the realm of miracles and mysticism? Are we as Jews to remain 'outside' of the intellectual, instead aligning ourselves with only the metaphysical aspect of truth? Are we to 'guard' ourselves from the outside world and abstain from expanding our knowledge and intellect for fear we may expose ourselves to the Athens paradigm?

I believe that the festival of Chanukah presents a fascinating answer to this dilemma. In order to understand the Jewish response we must begin by looking at the Ancient Rabbis' discussion in the Talmud as to what comprises the miracle of Chanukah:

What is 'Hanukah? The rabbis taught: "On the twenty-fifth day of Kislev 'Hanukah commences and lasts eight days, on which lamenting (in commemoration of the dead) and fasting are prohibited. When the Hellenists entered the sanctuary, they defiled all the oil that was found there. When the government of the House of Hasmoneans prevailed and conquered them, oil was sought (to fuel the holy lamp in the sanctuary) and only one vial was found with the seal of the high priest intact. The vial contained sufficient oil for one day only, but a miracle occurred, and it fuelled the holy lamp for eight days in succession. These eight days were the following year established as days of festivity, on which psalms of praise and acknowledgment (of God's wonders) were to be recited. (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b)

1 Leo Strauss's view is far more complex than can be expounded here, as is the definition of what is 'Greek' or 'Jewish' thought. I am simplifying the terms 'Athens and Jerusalem' in order to differentiation between two paradigms that represents different means of relating to the Man-God relationship.
The sages seem to suggest that the sole reason for celebrating this festival is due to the miracle that was performed by God in ensuring the oil lasted eight days as opposed to one. The festival celebration centres on the miraculous nature of our existence. Its focus is ‘Jerusalem’; faith, miracles and the mystical. The Rabbis make no mention of the physical battle, there is no reference to the Maccabees. The Historical perspective plays little if any role in the enduring celebration of this event in the eyes of the ancient sages. There is a strong polemic here on the part of the Rabbis to reject the human agency in history. Greek philosophy placed man at the centre, their focus was on all things beautiful - the human body, the human intellect, sculpture, architecture, even the political society. Their belief was that man could cognitively grasp through his mind the confines of his existence. There was nothing science or philosophy could not solve. Theirs was a supreme reverence for man. Many Jews at this time were deeply influenced by the appeal of Hellenistic culture. Its anthropocentrism appealed to many, for it assumed that nothing was mystery and therefore man could control his fate. The Rabbis by way of rejecting this philosophy resort to a totally deist - God orientated-view of history and events. By emphasising the miraculous and mysterious they are drawing us back to a ‘Jewish’ as opposed to ‘Athenian’ grasp of reality.

But the Talmud is not the only source for our understanding of Chanukah. The Al Hanissim prayer seems to contradict the view in the Talmud:

And [we thank You] for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, for the saving acts, and for the wonders which You have wrought for our ancestors in those days, at this time——

In the days of Matityahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean, and his sons, when the wicked Hellenic government rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will. But You, in Your abounding mercies, stood by them in the time of their distress. You waged their battles, defended their rights, and avenged the wrong done to them. You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah. You made a great and holy name for Yourself in Your world, and effected a great deliverance and redemption for Your people Israel to this very day. Then Your children entered the shrine of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courtyards, and instituted these eight days of Chanukah to give thanks and praise to Your great Name. (Tefillat Al Hannissim)

This prayer was most likely composed later than the Talmudic discussion, and so we see a very different emphasis. Here the miracle refers to the battle, not to the cruse of oil. The emphasis here is on the role of man who against all odds defeats the enemy. In this account God is not found in the realm of mysterious or miraculous, but rather working hand in hand with humanity here on earth. If in the Talmud redemption comes from above without any help from man, here the redemption is bought about from below, by man with the help of God. This tension is highlighted further in two more historical accounts of the event - the Book of the Maccabees2 and Josephus3. In both of these accounts there is no mention of the Divine miracle of oil, though there is mention of it becoming a festival for eight days. It is clear that without the audacity of Judah the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans, taking matters into their own hands, the Jewish people may very well have been wiped out.

Centrality of Man or God?
The role of man here is central to the motif of redemption and hence what I want to suggest is that perhaps there was an element of Greek culture that permeated the mindset of the Hasmoneans at the time. This was the first time in Post-revelation Jewish history that man took the matter of redemption into his own hands. The ‘Chassidim- Pietists’ of that period, were determined to simply ‘ignore’ the threat of the surrounding Greek culture. They sat in their homes, praying for a miracle, hoping that the great and mighty hand of God would save them in their hour of need - they prayed for redemption from above. The Hasmoneans by contrast recognised the reality of their situation. They understood that redemption had to come from below. If they did not act soon the rich and unique Jewish culture and religion would disappear forever. Their battle was not just a physical battle but a spiritual one. They were fighting for religious freedom. They knew that the universal appeal of Greek culture and thought would soon sweep away most Jews. And yet they used some key principles taught by the Greek’s in their battle. The individualism and autonomous right of man to control his destiny played a major role in the Hasmonean’s decision to battle

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2 The book of Maccabees 2. 10:3
3 Josephus: Antiquities 12:316-325 [7.6-7]
against the Greek army. The Maccabees realised that the time had come for man to play a central role in history.

What Tertullian did not understand, was that Judaism stands between two worlds. It belongs neither solely to 'Jerusalem' - the world of mystery and metaphysical truths, nor to 'Athens' - the world of pure reason and humanism. It stand as a bridge between the two. Judaism functions through the paradigm of Brit - Covenant. It requires both human reason, logic and total attachment to the reality of the world, but equally it must recognise the limitation of the human, both physically and cognitively. Brit is a paradigm that makes space for the battle of man and the miracle of God. It ensures that whilst fighting, our eyes remained fixed above on the divine. It ensures that Man does not become a god and that God does not become man, but that they each in their own realm work together to ensure the rectification of the world.

**Chanukah and Religious Freedom**

The Rabbis of the Talmud understood that the Hasmonean victory could lose its religious significance and become aligned with the Hellenistic theology of Man's greatness, and hence they emphasise the Divine component of the Festival. Equally, later Sages recognised the unparalleled significance of the battle as the first instance of covenantal redemption, and hence emphasise the human component of the redemption. They all agreed however, that what was at stake in the Jewish confrontation with the Greek culture, was our very essence - the particularity of our religious practise and beliefs, and no matter what that was what we had to fight for.

In a world that wants to assimilate the many into the one, the particular into the universal, the national into the global, the Jewish people must be the first to say 'no'. We must teach the world today, more than ever, that pluralism does not mean the loss of the my unique culture and religion. Only total religious freedom, and a deep appreciation of my own unique legacy will allow me to appreciate and value that of another. If Chanukah just becomes a 'Jewish' Christmas we have lost the very message it is meant to convey. There is much we can gain from our encounter with the 'other', and we must not be afraid of engaging in the world and learning from other cultures and religions, just as the Hasmoneans seemingly learnt from their Greek counterparts. Equally, however, we must ensure that we maintain our very individual unique character and not get swallowed into the global and universal cultures whose appeal can be quite magnetic. In many ways the kindling of the Chanukah lights is reminder of all these ideas. Though our light may be modest, it is ours alone - simple, powerful and beautiful. Though man has created it, lighting it autonomously, the power of fire is a Divine gift.

**Fire from above Fire from Below:**

I want to end with one final idea that I believe reflects on many levels what we have outlined above. The entire Chanukah story is inextricably interwoven with the notion of fire and light. The very first time we see fire as a man-made asset in the Torah is during the episode of Bavel. There we are told:

3 And they said one to another: 'Come, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. 4 And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'

*(Bereshit 11)*

As I have discussed in a previous article, the entire Bavel narrative is about the challenge of diversity in a universal culture. The moment that men work together to create something progressive and innovative, is the moment their unique individuality is threatened. Like the Greeks that followed them, they wanted to make a 'name' for themselves. They lived in a world where man, not God is central. A world where man conquers the heavens and brings them to earth, not to create a better world, but rather to possess the heavens, own them and control them, so they have naught to fear. Yet in order to do so, everyone must be the same, think the same (one language and one word), and adhere to identical beliefs and goals. It is a world that does not tolerate difference, where the particular is swallowed into the universal. God’s response - scatter the people; change their language - stop innovation.

After this incident Avraham is chosen and almost by means of a tikkun - rectification, God’s promise to Avraham to be a father of many nations (a father of diversity) - is confirmed in the covenant of parts (brit ben habetarim) with fire. Fire represents the very notion of covenant - there is nothing that stands as a greater

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3 This was the message of the first battle fought by the people of Israel against the Amalekians. Whilst they fought on the ground Moshe was stood on the top of the mountain his hands held towards heaven. It was a battle fought through the paradigm of Brit.

4 It is fascinating that the text here alludes to darkness falling upon Avraham and the imagery of fire - much like that of the Midrash we will look at below. Here the imagery of fire is linked explicitly to the notion of brit.
paradigm of the man - God relationship than that of fire. The Rabbinic sages point to this in a fascinating Midrash:

When the sun sank at the termination of the Sabbath, darkness began to set in. Adam was terrified, [thinking,] 'Surely indeed the darkness shall envelop me' (Ps. cxxxix, 11): shall he (the serpent) of whom it was written, He shall bruise thy head (Gen. in, 15), now come to attack me! What did the Lord do for him? He made him find two flints which he struck against each other; light came forth and he uttered a blessing over it; hence it is written 'Blessed be You who created the lights of the fire'.

(Genesis Rabbah 11:2)

As the days gradually shorten Adam naturally fears that the end of the world is near. The darkness symbolises a lack of knowledge and hence fear, and with fear of the unknown comes vulnerability; man is open to the serpent - sin and certain knowledge. In order to allay his fears and give him a sense of control God bequeaths to man two flints, from which Adam manages to create fire. He realizes the alternative, namely the annihilation of the given. He is not enchanted by the supernatural, metaphysical substance of all there is; even the gods are part of, rather than the cause if the universe.

In contrast, the Biblical mind is deeply aware that the ultimate, God, is beyond the given. What is given is not ultimate but created by Him Who is not given. Nowhere in the Bible is the reality of universe questioned, but at the same time a certainly prevails that for all its greatness the universe is as nothing compared with its Maker. But what are the foundations of nature? To the Greeks who take the universe for granted, nature, order is the answer. To the biblical mind in its radical amazement nature, order are not an answer but a problem: why is there order, being, at all? The world is not the all to the Bible, and so the all could never come to denote the world. Biblical man is not enchanted by the given. He realizes the alternative, namely the annihilation of the given. He is not enchanted by the order, because he has a vision of a new order. He is not lost to the here and now, nor to the beyond. He senses the non-given with the given, the past and future with the present.

(A.J. Heschel: God in Search of Man)

On Chanukah we light eight candles. Whilst seven represents the nature, the natural and understandable, eight represents the supernatural, metaphysical, the part of reality that is mysterious, removed from the rational and logical. Seven is Athens, eight is Jerusalem. But in lighting the candles, we are attributing significance to both these paradigms - both to Jerusalem and Athens. In reading the Talmudic discussion and

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6 Ein Aya Brachot B:1
7 By contrast the Ancient Greek myth of Prometheus (A Greek semi God), whose request to the Gods to give humans fire is met with refusal for fear the human will become too powerful. He sets out to remedy the situation himself and steals fire from the sun, brings it to mankind, and shows them how to use it for their own needs. Though these ancient texts possess similarities, it is the difference between them that is telling. In the legend of Prometheus man is passive, he is simply the recipient of a Divine gift. In the midrash, though God gives man flints (?), he must work in order to create the fire. Greek thinking progressed from the myths of the ancient Gods, claiming that there was very little difference between the Gods and Man and hence the gap between them slowly diminished. However one thing still stood central in their thought - Once man was given the gift of light and fire, they themselves become a kind of God.
chanting the Al Hannissim prayer we are recognising that redemption of this world comes from above and below.

Let's not forget that Chanukah only bought about a partial, not total, redemption, the religious freedom granted to the Jews only lasted a short time, and yet we still celebrate it every year throughout the generations. Why? Because Chanukah represents far more than the marginal historic victory of that time. It celebrates human agency in a Divine world, man's innovative capacity to create everything from fire to meaning in true covenantal style - making space for man and God. It celebrates the uniqueness and richness of our religious legacy and future, and above all it celebrates man's ability to fix a broken reality through the Divine covenantal relationship and bring light fire and hope to a dispirited world.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag 'Urim' Sameach