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## THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING SECULAR CULTURE

Dedicated by Dr. David and Barbara Hurwitz  
in honor of their children and grandchildren



ישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary

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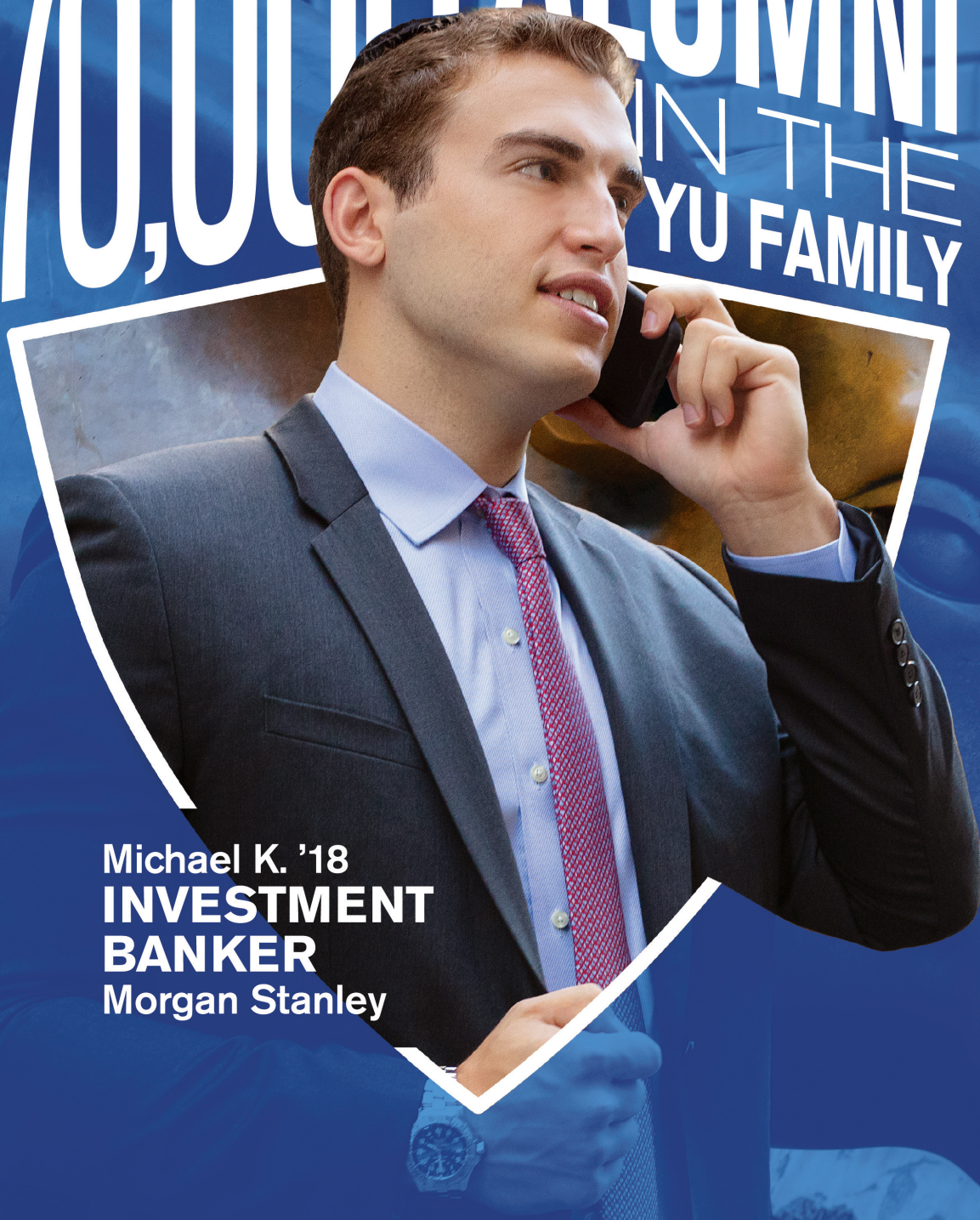
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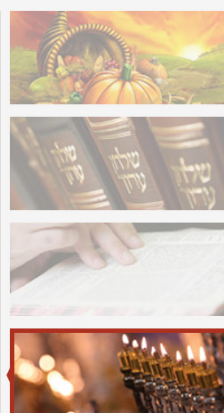
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and great grandchildren**

# TORAH, CULTURE AND THE COMMUNAL HAVDALAH

Shabbos Chanukah lives in the familial religious experience as an emotional, inspirational, and highly stressful weekend. Often, as families prepare for Shabbos, they leave themselves very little time on Friday to light the candles, sing *Maoz Tzur*, distribute the presents, and then make their way to shul for Mincha. Yet once the harried onset of Shabbos passes, the combination of Chanukah—which profoundly celebrates our communal identity—and the sacred atmosphere of the Shabbos home, creates a spiritually saturated day of rich family tradition. At the conclusion of Shabbos, the competing priorities of Chanukah candles and Havdalah are often addressed differently in the home and in the shul. The *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 681:2, writes that in shul, the Chanukah candles are lit before Havdalah. At home, the *Mishnah Berurah* 681:3 writes that many have the practice to recite Havdalah first.

R Moshe Soloveitchik (cited in *Nefesh Harav* pp. 222-223) accounts for this discrepancy by explaining the nature of *pirsumei nissah* (publicizing the miracle) in the synagogue. In our homes, the kindling takes place within the confines of our private space, and the *pirsumei nissah* is reflected on those outside the home who view the candles. In shul, the congregation itself forms a community worthy of its own experience of *pirsumei*

*nissah*. For this reason, we have a custom to light the menorah in shul between Mincha and Maariv, when the congregation is in the middle of its “gathering” for services. On Motzaei Shabbos, we obviously must wait until the conclusion of Maariv to light the candles, because we cannot light on Shabbos. But after Havdalah, no further prayers are recited by the congregation. Once Havdalah is recited, on a halachic level, the congregation disbands into a collection of individuals, no longer comprising a larger entity. Yet while anticipating Havdalah, the congregation retains the status of community. Therefore, explains Rav Moshe, we light the candles before the formal Havdalah in order to do so while the congregation has the status of a halachic community.

This interpretation conveys a fundamental principle regarding the idea of community in Jewish life. The community is not simply a common space for individuals to gather in their own service to G-d. The community is a living entity that is defined by its shared values and shared pursuits. Only while we are bound by our shared obligation in Havdalah are we classified as a singular unit regarding the lighting of the menorah. Our common goals, ambitions, and immediate engagement ultimately defines us as a community. As individuals, we each have a sense of

our personal religious goals, and the approach to societal engagement that is right for us. But these decisions are not only personal. Engaging with contemporary culture and its values impacts the community around us. It isn't exclusively a personal or familial decision, and it influences the tone and identity of our larger community. Parents are familiar with what happens when the first member of the class procures some new technological device — it affects the way many others will now address these challenges.

Part of what defines our community is Havdalah — the degree to which we preserve and nurture our uniqueness from the world around us. This issue of *Torah To Go* explores the relationship between our community and our surrounding culture. While each individual and family must consider their personal approach, we must also recognize that our collective identity is impacted greatly by those personal decisions. The discussions in this volume are intended to address these issues substantively and honestly. May we each find the strength to navigate these complex issues with courage and conviction, and may our individual choices help shape a community of nuance and depth.







## PREFACE—GREEK CULTURE: A STUDY GUIDE

**R**av Shamshon Refael Hirsch, *B'Ma'aglei Shanah*, Chanukah no. 1, has a very poignant description of the underlying struggle in the Chanukah story:

היתה אז ההתנגשות הראשונה בין שתי השקפות חיים, שתי תרבויות שונות אשר עד היום הזה הן מתחרות ביניהן על השלטון בעולם: היוונית והיהודית. אלו שני היסודות הרוחניים אשר תרבויותיהם ומפעליהם מהווים את תולדות ההתפתחות של האנושות כולה בפעם הראשונה הם נפגשו בימי מתתיהו בארץ יהודה, ומאז ועד היום נטוש המאבק בין שתי ההשקפות הללו המתחרות על השלטון הרוחני בקרב ישראל.

*Chanukah represents the clash of two doctrines, two views, two civilizations, capable of molding opinions, training and educating those who until this very day compete for the mastery of the world. Hellenism and Judaism: These are the two forces whose effect upon the nations mark the historical development of mankind, and which surfaced in Judea for the*

*first time in the days of Mattathias. Hellenism and Judaism: when examined in depth they are the two leading forces which today again are struggling for mastery in the Jewish world.*  
(Translation: *Collected Writings*, Vol. 3 pg. 200)

R. Hirsch's observation that this culture clash existed in his time still rings true today. In surveying rabbinic literature on this topic, much of the focus is on the intellectual aspects of Greek culture, such as philosophy and literature. These discussions include questions such as whether it is appropriate to take time from Torah study to study Homer, or whether we should be concerned that reading Aristotle will lead us off the path of Torah. Yet there is another area in this culture clash that also deserves our attention — popular culture. We are probably more familiar with stories of people who dropped out of the Thursday night Talmud class to watch Thursday Night Football than we

are of people who dropped it to study literature. We are likely more concerned about our children's exposure to the behavior of celebrities than we are to our children's exposure to Greek mythology.

This section of *Torah To Go* will focus on this aspect of the culture clash and how it applies to our community. The study guide below will help provide some general sources and discussion points about how our rabbis related to popular culture, and some of the issues we struggle with today.

## Topic 1: Integrating Greek Culture

### Source 1a: Bereishit 9:27

יִפְתָּ אֱלֹקִים לְיִפְתָּ וְיִשְׁכֵּן בְּאֶהְלֵי שֵׁם וְיִהְיֶה כְנָעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ.  
*May God expand Yefet, And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;  
And let Canaan be a slave to them.*

### Source 1b: Megillah 9b

יפת אלקים ליפת יפיתו של יפת יהא באהלי שם.  
*"May God expand (yaft) Yefet." The beauty (yofi) of Yefet will  
be in the tents of Shem.*

The Jewish people are descendants of Shem and the Greeks are descendants of Yavan, the son of Yefet. The Gemara introduces the concept of the beauty of Yefet as a source that a Torah can be written in Greek. The Gemara seems to endorse Greek influence even on our most sacred text. While other statements of Chazal seem to cast a negative light on Greek language (Mishna, *Sotah* 49a) and the translation of the Torah into Greek (*Masechet Sofrim* 1:7), there is a statement of Chazal that addresses a fundamental issue with Greek culture:

### Source 1c: Bereishit Rabbah 2:4

וְחֹשֶׁךְ, זֶה גְלוּת יוֹן, שֶׁהִחֲשִׁיכָה עֵינֵיהֶם שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגִזְרוֹתֶיהֶן, שֶׁהִיָּתָה  
אוֹמֶרֶת לָהֶם, כְּתָבוּ עַל קֶרֶן הַשּׁוֹר שָׂאִין לָכֶם חֶלֶק בְּאֶלְקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.  
*"And darkness" — this is [a reference to] the exile of Greece,  
which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees, as it said to  
them, "Write on the horn of a bull that you have no share in  
the God of Israel."*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. If Greek culture leads to a kingdom and people who impose their viewpoints on the Jewish people, why did our rabbis praise their culture as a culture of beauty?
2. What do you think is meant by the imagery of the Jews being forced to deny their faith on the horn of a bull?

### Source 1d: R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Shmuot Ra'ayah* pg. 84

היונים שידעו חכמות, את התורה תרגמו ליונית, היונים חפצו את  
התבוללות ישראל בעמים אמרו כתבו לכם על קרן השור ליוסף נאמר  
בכור שורו הדר לו ... היונים חפצו שישראל יחזיקו בשיטת יוסף להיות  
בין העמים ולהתבולל ביניהם ... אבל לא הבינו את שיטת יוסף ואמרו  
כתבו לכם כי אין לכם חלק באלקי ישראל. לא הבינו שיוסף התכוון  
בשיטתו שישראל יהיו מורי הדרך לכל העמים שיש אלקי ישראל.  
*The Greeks, who had familiarity with wisdom and had the  
Torah translated into Greek, desired the Jews to assimilate  
among the nations. They said, "write on the horn of a bull,"  
referring to Yosef upon whom it was said, "Like a firstborn  
bull in his glory" ... The Greeks wanted the Jews to embrace  
the doctrine of Yosef, to live among the nations and assimilate  
with them ... but they didn't understand Yosef's doctrine and  
said, "Write for yourselves that you have no share in the God of  
Israel." They didn't understand that Yosef followed a doctrine  
that the Jewish people should be a guide to the nations that  
there is a God in Israel.*

### Source 1e: R. Menachem Ben Tzion Sacks, *Menachem Tziyon to Parashat Noach*

בעזבו את התבה ראה לפניו נח עולם חרב ושמים ... הוא הגיע למסקנה  
שהעולם החדש זקוק למיזוג של שם ויפת לסינטיזה של תורתו ומוסרו  
של שם יחד עם המדע והאמנות של יפת בכדי להתגבר על כחו של חם  
ולרסן את הכנענים לכן הציג לעולם תכנית של יפיתו של יפת באהלי  
שם והדגיש את המילה וישכון להבליט שעל יפת לדעת ולהכיר את  
מקומו כי הוא רק שכן אצל שם ובשום אופן איננו בעל הבית אל יעז  
השכן לגרש את בעל הבית.

*When Noah left the ark, he saw before him a world that was  
destroyed and devastated ... He reached the conclusion that  
the new world needed a combination of Shem and Yefet — to  
synthesize the Torah and ethics of Shem together with the  
wisdom and culture of Yefet in order to overcome the power of  
Cham and to hamper the Canaanites (and their idolatrous  
influence). Therefore, he presented to the world a program of  
the beauty of Yefet in the tents of Shem. He stressed the word  
"veyishkon" — let him dwell — to emphasize that Yefet should*



know and recognize his place that he is only dwelling with Shem, but under no circumstances is he the host. The guest should never have the audacity to expel the host.

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. R. Kook and R. Sacks both stress the importance of ensuring Torah's primacy before allowing Greek culture to "enter the tent." What do you think are examples of cultural elements that belong in the tent and elements that do not?
2. R. Kook and R. Sacks both highlight the dangers of assimilation when engaging with culture. R. Kook is based on a source (1c) that discusses an overt attempt at assimilation while R. Sacks is based on a source (1b) that doesn't discuss overt attempts at assimilation, and the danger seems to be when Jews embrace that cultural desire to assimilate. Does the culture around us pose a greater threat from overt attempts at assimilation or from an inner desire to assimilate? Why?

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think wasting time is considered a form of scorn?
2. How should one determine whether an event is considered a gathering of scorners or simply a means of relaxing and recharging?

#### Source 2c: Avodah Zarah 18b

תנו רבנן ההולך לאיצטדינין (רש"י- מקום שמנגחין את השור) ולכרכום (רש"י-מצור ועושין שם שחוק וליצנות) ... הרי זה מושב לצים ועליהם הכתוב אומר אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך וגו' כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו הא למדת שדברים הללו מביאין את האדם לידי ביטול תורה.

*Our rabbis taught: One who goes to stadiums (Rashi: places where they engage in bullfighting) or to camps of besiegers (Rashi: a siege where they engage in frivolity and cynicism) ... this is a company of scorners and on them, the verse states, "Praised is the person who did not follow etc. Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, etc." We see that these types of activities lead to wasting time from Torah study.*

#### Source 2d: Rama, Orach Chaim 316:2

המשסה כלב אחר חיה בשבת הוי צידה וי"א דאף בחול אסור משום מושב לצים. [פרי מגדים- ואפשר אם פרנסתו בכך אין איסור, רק אם לטיול הוא עושה אז הוה מושב לצים.]

*If one sick a dog after an animal on Shabbat, it is considered trapping. There are those who say that even during the week it is prohibited because it is a "company of scorners." [P'ri Megadim: It is possible that if one is doing so for livelihood, there is no prohibition and the concern for "company of scorners" only applies when one is doing so for leisure purposes.]*

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. Is there a difference between the forms of entertainment mentioned by the Gemara and Rama and the forms of entertainment that are popular today? Why or why not?
2. Are there positive aspects of today's forms of entertainment that could be used to argue that it is not considered a "company of scorners"?

## Topic 2: Moshav Leitzim: Are We Wasting Too Much Time?

#### Source 2a: Tehillim 1:1

אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך בעצת רשעים ובדרך חטאים לא עמד ובמושב לצים לא ישב. כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה.

*Praised is the person who did not follow the advice of the wicked and did not stand in the path of sinners and did not sit in the company of scorners. Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, and he studies that teaching day and night.*

#### Source 2b: Rabbeinu Yonah, Commentary to Avot 3:2

אבל הכתוב שאמר ובמושב לצים לא ישב לא דבר מן הלצנים שאמרנו כי זה או בכלל חטאים או בכלל רשעים האמורים בראש הפסוק הוא. אלא מושב לצים קרא הפך ממה שכתוב אחריו כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה. על העושים ישיבה של קבע על דעת לדבר בדברי הבאי ובוטלין מדברי תורה.

*The verse that states, "and did not sit in the company of scorners" is not referring to people engaged in cynicism; those are included among the "wicked" and the "sinners" mentioned in the verse. Rather, the "company of scorners" referred to in the verse is in contrast to what it says afterward, "Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his desire, and he studies that teaching day and night," referring to those who set aside time to discuss frivolous matters and waste time that could be used for Torah study.*

### Topic #3: Idolizing and Following Entertainers and Sports Figures

#### Source 3a: Mishlei 27:21

מִצָּרְף לְכֶסֶף וְכוּר לְזָהָב וְאִישׁ לְפִי מִהֲלָלוֹ.

*For silver — the crucible, for gold — the furnace, And a man is tested by his praise.*

#### Source 3b: Rabbeinu Yonah, Sha'arei Teshuva 3:148

ונאמר (משלי כז, כא): "מצרף לכסף וכוור לזהב ואיש לפי מהללו" פירושו: מעלות האדם לפי מה שיהלל, אם הוא משבח המעשים הטובים והחכמים והצדיקים תדע ובחנת כי איש טוב הוא ושרש הצדק נמצא בו, כי לא ימצא את לבו רק לשבח את הטוב והטובים תמיד בכל דבריו, ולגנות את העבירות ולהבזות בעליהן, מבלי מאוס ברע ובחור בטוב.

*It says "For silver — the crucible, for gold — the furnace, And a man is tested by his praise." The explanation is that the assessment of a person is determined based on what he praises. If he praises good deeds, wise people and righteous people, you know and determine that he is a good person and the roots of righteousness are found within him, because his heart can only find a way to praise good and good people on a consistent basis, and to denigrate sins and those who don't despise evil and choose good.*

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. Many of today's entertainers have talents that are worthy of praise, but are not good role models in their personal lives. How do you think Rabbeinu Yonah's comments apply?
2. Can one make a determination about the character of an individual based on who he or she is following online? Why or why not?

#### Source 3c: Berachot 8a

אמר ר"ע בשלשה דברים אוהב אני את המדיים.

*R. Akiva said: In three areas I like the Medes.*

#### Source 3d: R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, Ben Yehoyada, Berachot 8b

בשלשה דברים אוהב אני ... קשה והא כתיב לא תחנם ודרשו רז"ל בגמרא דע"ז דף כ' לא תתן להם חן ופירש רש"י שלא יאמר כמה נאה נכרי זה ונ"ל בס"ד דכאן רוצה להלהיב את לבות ההמון יותר ע"י דברים אלו שיקחו ישראל קל וחומר ומה המדיים נזהרים בזה כל שכן ישראל שהם עם חכם ונבון.

*In three areas I like ... This is difficult because it states, "Lo Techanem," which our rabbis (Avodah Zarah 20) interpret as "Do not give [the idolaters] praise." Rashi explains that one should not say, "look how wonderful this heathen is." It seems to me that here [R. Akiva] wanted to instill in the hearts of the people that through these, the Jewish people should learn that if the Medes are careful about these, then certainly the Jewish people, a nation of wisdom and insight, should do so as well.*

#### Source 3e: R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, To Ro'i, Berachot 8b

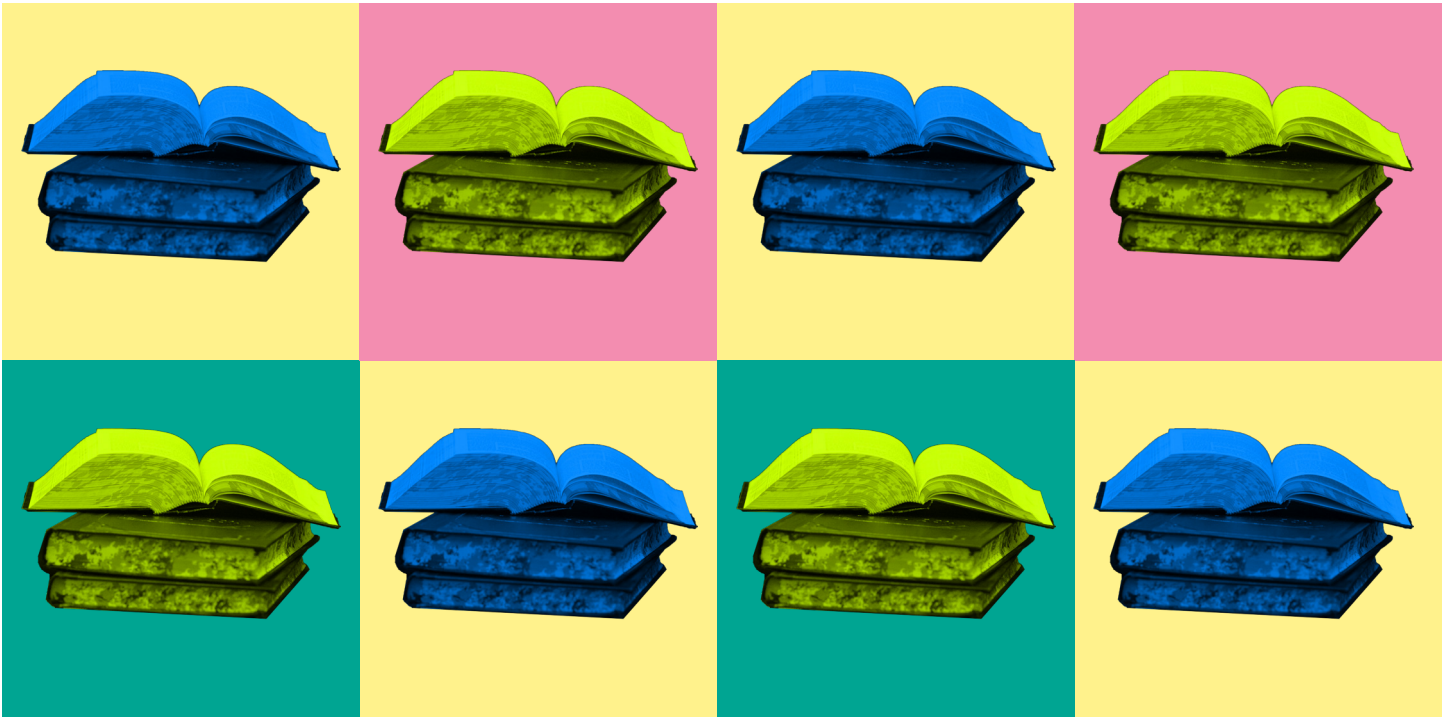
בשלשה דברים אוהב אני את המדיים קשיא לי הא איכא משום לא תחנם ... ויותר נראה שכמו שמותר להודות לד' ... הכי נמי מותר לספר בשבחן אם הכונה היא כדי שיהיה לנו מקום לימוד ומוסר.

*In three areas I like the Medes. This is difficult because of the prohibition of "Lo techanem" ... it seems that just as it is permissible to praise God [for providing the individual with talent or beauty] ... so too, it is permissible to praise them if one's intent is teach ethics and morals.*

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. How are the comments of R. Yosef Chaim and R. Kook similar? How are they different?
2. What are some examples of ethical and moral lessons that can be learned from pop culture?





## THE ROLE OF POP CULTURE IN TORAH GROWTH AND EDUCATION: A CONVERSATION

**C**hanukah accentuates the threshold between the Jewish home and the public domain. Both the position of the menorah and the timing of lighting relate to the ritual act of observance, as well as to the distinction between our own internal home environment and the outside world. We ideally light the menorah in the doorway of our home, or minimally at a window through which we can project the light out into the street. The lighting takes

place specifically during a period of time when people are “in the street.” The religious and cultural crisis that ultimately led to the Chanukah story has much to do with the challenge of living a unique Jewish life within the larger environment of the outside world. Total isolation is virtually impossible, while complete integration has shown to be an almost certain path toward assimilation. Clearly, our capacity to survive and thrive within the framework of a

society that is characterized by its own ideals and culture is contingent upon our ability to discern and filter, embrace and reject; to relate to the complexity and nuance of the world around us.

In no area of societal engagement is this more complex than popular culture. Popular culture emanates from the population that creates, nurtures, and sustains it. We are part of that population, and therefore

exposed to much of its substance. Its influence is inevitable, yet also incredibly challenging. How do we relate to the popular culture around us? How do we determine which elements are opportunities for the edification of our religious life, and which threaten it? How do we create a framework of engagement that relates to the reality within which we live, yet also rises above it when the standards are not appropriate to our values? How do we teach our children that certain elements of the culture may prove enjoyable and enriching, while others are hostile and incongruent with our way of life? How do we place limits on our exposure without projecting inconsistency and hypocrisy to those around us? The discussion that follows explores the religious and communal dynamics that frame these questions.

### **What are the challenges and opportunities that you see in our community's relationship to pop culture?**



**RABBI FELDMAN:** Our Yeshiva is known for, among other

qualities, balancing an appreciation of the wisdom and culture of all of humanity with an absolute commitment to the principles of Torah, which is necessarily exclusive of much of what is present within that culture. Accordingly, by that reality, it is the relationship with culture itself that is both the challenge and the opportunity.

The significant problem of objectionable content is well known

and understood, and is of course a concern. But the term “pop culture” requires greater definition. Often, in discussing the parameters of engagement, we talk about “low culture” and “high culture.” I don’t know if I’m qualified to define these terms, but I would not use the particular medium or genre as defining what is low culture and what is high culture. I would rather define high or low culture based on what the product seeks to evoke, or even more subjectively, what the unique personality of the individual consumer takes from the experience.

To illustrate, Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zatzal*, in his *Teshuvos (Igros Moshe II, 79)*, is dismissive of the possibility of any redeeming value in theatrical pursuits, noting, among other objections, that they reduce our aversion to the seriousness of murder and the value of human life. This is an understandable and in fact documentable concern: the U.S. Army has trained soldiers to overcome a resistance to killing the enemy by exposing them to war movies; this resistance to killing was also far less common once such movies had permeated the general culture. Undeniably, such depictions have the capacity to dehumanize the other and disconnect the viewer.

And yet other reactions are possible too. The late film critic Roger Ebert notably compared movies to “a machine that generates empathy,” claiming that they “let ... you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears [and] help ... us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.” Also, “The great movies enlarge us, they civilize us, they make us more decent people.”

While his focus was on film, he could have just as well been commenting on any medium depicting the human condition.

So which is it? Presumably, both descriptions are possible. Further, a person’s reaction joins the intent of the producer with the sensitivities of the consumer, making the eventual response a highly individual outcome that transcends the vessel that contains the product.

High culture, accordingly, would be that which elevates and edifies, while low culture desensitizes and demeans. This classification might not be a binary reality inherent in the artistic output, but can be descriptive of the unique experience that occurs to the consumer, which can vary widely from the experience of a different consumer.

Of course, the intent of the creator does play an outsized role, which adds to concerns inherent in whatever might be called “low culture.” Objectionable content may not only be incidentally present, but may represent the purpose of the production, greatly intensifying the already significant obstacles therein.

This, again, is a classification that exists outside of medium and genre. With all due respect to Marshall McLuhan, the medium may be the message, but not absolutely so. While one medium or another may be more or less conducive to a particular type of experience, it is also true that every medium has unique capacities in how it communicates, and in the hands of a thoughtful artist can enhance any message.

Likewise, the same applies when addressing “pop” culture. The manifestations of culture can be at



once popular and also high, low, or any place in between. Shakespeare, in his day, was the ultimate in popular culture. [Similarly, the oeuvre of Alfred Hitchcock has generated many hundreds of pages of scholarly analysis.]

The crucial question then is not whether the product was designed for the masses, or appreciated by them, but rather what effect it has on its beholder. This, in turn, is greatly shaped by the eye of that beholder, as well as by his ear, mind, and soul.

Every individual needs to understand himself and what he extracts from his interaction with any form of culture, popular or otherwise. The strength and character of our internal foundation will greatly impact what such engagement brings, and thus define both the challenge and the opportunity.

Regarding sports, I'm in a minority on this question because I am more cautious about sports than I am about some other aspects of general culture, which I think is a less common attitude. I should mention first that many wonderful *bnei Torah*, many outstanding *talmidei chachamim* who are far beyond me, have benefited greatly from their appreciation of sports, and have found a place for it in their spiritual lives that fits well with their overall character.

Every individual needs to understand himself and what he extracts from his interaction with any form of culture, popular or otherwise. The strength and character of our internal foundation will greatly impact what such engagement brings, and thus define both the challenge and the opportunity.

That being said, I do think it is important to be aware of the risks that are attached to sports fandom. The admiration of professional athletes generally focuses on skills and abilities that do not have inherent moral or spiritual value, and then draws us into idolizing of individuals who may not have any other traits worthy of emulation by *bnei Torah* (of course they may indeed be upstanding and admirable people, but that is not a necessary prerequisite for athletic skill).

Again, many spiritually sensitive people have found great inspiration and moral insight from their engagement with the sports world. However, as with all cultural intake, this is contingent on the consumer's own inherent moral framework, since the game will generally not provide such messages or highlight them naturally.

I have heard many *rebbeim* modify the statement of the Talmud that one can be recognized "*b'koso, kiso, u'b'kaaso*" (in one's [uninhibited] intoxicated state, in one's spending priorities, and in one's state of anger," *Eiruvin* 65b), to include "*b'kaduro*," i.e. one's character can be discerned by how they behave on the basketball court. This is certainly true. However, the competitive environment does not always reward refined *midos*; thus, the context is valuable as a reflection of character, but not naturally as a

training ground for such development. Nonetheless, many *bnei aliyah* have found opportunities within both to display and to mold refined character, and we all benefit from their efforts.



#### RABBI

**BASHEVKIN:** Let's start with a given. We're talking about communities that

are already engaged in outside culture. Whether its subscriptions to the Wall Street Journal, television, art, movies, or theater, many in our community engage with culture in different ways. I would like to leave aside a halakhic discussion, since, as far as I know this is not being published in the Purim edition, and such a discussion is woefully out of my scope of expertise. Sadly, much of outside culture is.

I want to start by highlighting an important distinction in the question. A February 1949 article in Harper's, titled "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," by Russel Lynes, introduced to a wider audience the distinctions within different forms of culture. Namely, there are two major poles in culture. There's elite culture like fine art found in museums, and lowbrow culture like television, comics, and movies. During the "early years" of the Modern Orthodox community, there was much discussion about the encounter and integration between elite culture forms like literature and art with the world of Torah. People were rightfully fascinated when Rabbi Soloveitchik could marshal Kierkegaard and Hume within Talmudic discussions, and they would boast that their rabbi also had a PhD. By and large, the thought leadership within our community ignored pop culture, deeming it too

pedestrian and low-class. Of course, outside of the leadership, much of the community drifted toward the pleasant distraction of pop culture and left more highbrow discussions of “integration” and “encounter” to rabbis with PhDs. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein noted, “The children in Centrist summer camps today do not waste away their summers because they are busy mastering Bach or Euclid.”

So, if pop culture is a reality within our community, where does that leave us? As noted, there is a challenge and an opportunity. And, as is often the case, I think they may be one and the same. Peter Drucker, a noted management consultant, famously remarked, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Sure, a company can have impressive change-management plans, but if it does not address the underlying culture in the institution nothing will really change. For too long, Modern Orthodoxy has been trying to beat culture with strategy. They re-examined the sources, they issued white papers, they convened conferences. But all our strategic plans were always devoured by the voracious appetite of culture. Our yeshiva league, our bar and bat mitzvahs, our Netflix account.

The challenge of pop culture is that it is very sticky, very contagious, and blissfully distracting. If the only pop culture in our community is sports, movies, and television, we are going to be left with a Modern Orthodoxy that is just a shell without substance. The opportunity, however, is to develop and mimic many of the positive trappings of pop culture within a Torah context. Though I often joke that given the attention it gets, you would think Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote

about the ontological importance of floor hockey in his *Halakhic Man*, I do think that our yeshiva sports leagues are a great case study for this. The culture surrounding the leagues, standards of behavior, and sportsmanship is a great opportunity to develop positive and sticky culture for our community. Many of our high schools and youth organizations are leading the way in this regard. They are all developing great experiential programming, means of affiliation, and just good old-fashioned shtick that can compete with the gravitational pull of pop culture. No forum, symposium, panel session, or conference is going to stem the tide of pop culture. The way to countervail the messaging of pop culture is to develop a better one of your own.

### **Should Torah education incorporate pop culture references (from sports, movies, etc.)? Is there a right way and wrong way to do this?**



**RABBI FELDMAN:** This question represents a particular challenge for

educators and others who influence public discourse. The use of our personal sense humor, as well as of mass-produced sources of humor or entertainment, can be powerful tools for pedagogy; when employed well, not only does an educational message get across more effectively, it can endure for a lifetime. At the same time, there are inherent risks that are magnified exponentially when a rebbe or any teacher of Torah is involved.

Using our own sense of humor, a

cherished and invaluable natural resource, can nonetheless be dangerous when not carefully disciplined. A remark that seems casual when uttered by the average person is devastating when spoken by a respected teacher. Further, a teacher must be concerned that his or her less serious remarks can potentially create a climate of negation of others that the students will pick up on. If a teacher makes remarks about others that appear to be disparaging, even if it is granted that the remarks may be justifiable from his or her perspective, the effect on his or her students’ respect for others, as well as their perception of how a Torah scholar relates to others, can be severely affected. This topic is addressed very effectively in Rabbi Shalom Carmy’s important article, “You Taught Me Musar and the Profit On It” (*Tradition*, 42:2, Summer 2009). It is instructive in this regard to read the responsum of the *Chavvos Yair* (#152) that the *Chafetz Chaim* printed in the back of his sefer, in which the author contextualizes and explains the statements in the Talmud that appear to challenge our perceptions of what is expected in terms of mutual respect among scholars.

Regarding the referencing of popular culture, the benefits are similarly surrounded by risks. The teacher, as a mature and sensitive religious personality, is hopefully careful to structure his or her own cultural engagement with discrimination and balance. However, this may not be accurately perceived or appreciated by his or her students, who may lack the same ability of discernment. This is particularly true in that the attitude portrayed toward media consumption is often conveyed as all or nothing; i.e., we either abstain from engaging

with popular culture, or engage with it indiscriminately. While the simplicity of such an approach may be appealing, its premise makes it harder for a teacher to maintain a nuanced approach in public. This is all in addition to the fact that a Torah teacher has a need to maintain an appropriate level of dignity (see Rambam, *Hil Talmud Torah* 4:5), at the same time attempting to create an atmosphere where his or her students will reap the positive benefits humor can provide.

Beyond this concern, it is also important that any reference be used to enhance the message, rather than tailoring the lesson to the reference, which has the effect of cheapening both the content and possibly the image of the speaker as well. If I may cite Rabbi Shalom Carmy twice in one response, he illustrated the difference quite effectively in another one of his articles, “Homer and the Bible” (*Tradition* 41:4, 2008).



**RABBI BASHEVKIN:** Generally, I think there are two types of religious

experiences. One is a religiosity that reflects your life, your experiences, your worldview. It is a religious world that understands what your workplace may feel like and what your Sunday mornings look like. This is a religious affiliation that, to use an over-used descriptor, feels relevant. There is a second form of religious experience that is nearly the opposite. Not because it is irrelevant, but because the power of such religious experiences derives from their other-worldliness, rather than reflecting the quotidian world where you live. This may be a darkened *tisch*, a moving

*kabbolas Shabbos*, or an energetic Beis Medrash. It is not the world you live in everyday and that is exactly what makes it so captivating.

When I think about incorporating pop culture references, I think about these two types of religious experiences. For the former experience, where religiosity is a function of relevance, then pop culture, like economic terminology or the latest headline, is crucial to connecting to your audience. The danger, I think, is when our reliance on making religion relatable comes at the expense of showing how it is also aspirational. Many of the most powerful religious moments emerge because they transport the participants to places where clichéd sports references and dated 90’s movie quotes are no longer important.

Torah learning can be a mirror and a ladder. When used as a mirror, a well-placed movie quote or sports reference can remind the listener that Torah reflects and reaches the world we live in. But Torah also needs to be used as a ladder. It allows us, however briefly, to transcend the banality of our routines and responsibilities and, for a moment, feel eternity. Pop culture used right will sharpen the reflection in the mirror. But if used haphazardly and sloppily, it will erode the rungs of the ladder.

As an aside, for those who do plan on incorporating pop culture into their shiurim, please allow me to append this this handy check-list:

1. Do I really know how to pronounce the name of the actor/movie star/television personality I am about to cleverly reference, or is it just a name I have seen in print or overheard my children say, and I now plan to butcher



Listen to Rabbi Feldman analyze a topic in Bava Kama using the recent Banksy painting shredding story.

the pronunciation so badly that the entire audience doesn’t know what I am referring to?

2. Am I referencing a show that anyone in the audience has ever heard of, or in my sad and desperate attempt to assert my relevance am I actually just highlighting my irrelevance?

3. Is this example so over-used and cliché that most of the audience knows exactly where I am going with the analogy from the moment I start?

**Nowadays, aside from professional sports games and Hollywood movies, there is a culture of content that is shared in the form of memes, GIFS, and amateur content. Sometimes this is called “low brow pop culture.” Is there any distinction in incorporating this new form of content as opposed to other types of content, such as sports and movies?**



**RABBI FELDMAN:** As mentioned above, the format doesn’t have to dictate the



character of the message. Sometimes tools like these can be very effective, especially since they are low-budget options, both for the creator and the consumer, who don't have to invest money, or more important, time, to appreciate them. The constrained formats can also be very conducive to creativity.



**RABBI  
BASHEVKIN:**  
Most discussions  
about how we  
integrate pop culture  
into Torah learning relate to topical  
integration.

First, what is topical integration and did I make up that term just now? Yes, yes I did.

Leaving the genesis of this term aside, I believe topical integration can refer either to shiurim that use some pop culture phenomenon as a comparative value to Torah, or pop culture examples that explain or highlight Torah scenarios. An example of the former would be any shiur titled, “[Insert name of popular movie/video game/sports]: A Torah Perspective.” Here, pop culture is being used to contrast some Torah value. So maybe it is Fortnite and Torah or Snapchat and Torah or The Avengers and Torah, but pop culture is being used to highlight some Torah value. Similarly, in the latter example of topical integration, pop culture is used to highlight a halakhic process or scenario. So perhaps you use the Simpsons to consider a halakhic dilemma or analyze whether Seinfeld was, in fact, obligated to wear the puffy shirt, but pop culture can provide a situational lens to consider Torah questions.

The topical integration of pop

culture into shiurim began as something very interesting, but the overwhelming development of online communication and programming should force us to look at new ways we should be interacting with culture. Namely, as I have written about once in these very pages, we should focus less on topical connections (Torah AND Sports/Movies/Television etc. etc.) and instead consider much more carefully the medium of the internet and the opportunities it presents.

The next generation of creative Torah presentation will not just be about who could find a connection between the latest show or trend and Torah, but who could integrate the medium of such trends into Torah presentations. Simply put, the innovation of pop culture is not just about its messages — it is about the medium.

Let me give two concrete examples.

YUTorah.org is a fabulous case study in Torah innovation. On October 26, 2009, Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz uploaded a shiur to YU Torah titled, “Ten Minute Halacha – Microwave Kashrus.” What was the innovation of that shiur? It wasn't the first time someone spoke about kosher microwaves. It probably wasn't the first time someone spoke about microwaves for 10 minutes. But it was probably the first time that a discussion of kosher microwaves was marketed using a “Ten Minute” headline. That is not a *chiddush* of messaging, it is a *chiddush* of medium. It presented classic Torah within a new medium — in this case, a catchy, bite-size time frame. The sensibility of this new medium was quickly proven by imitators who gave you the ability to learn about kosher microwaves in a variety of timeframes from 20 minutes all the way down to two minutes.

But the lesson from this model is the power of harnessing a medium that speaks to your audience.

Another example is the proliferation of Jewish memes shared online. Now before people start sending angry letters to the editors, I am aware that some of these memes can be inappropriate and they certainly do not require a *Birchas HaTorah* before looking at them. But that doesn't make them insignificant. As I discussed earlier, Modern Orthodox communities have a culture problem. We have spent too much time on strategy and not enough time building culture. A dear friend who was raised in a Hassidic community once told me that the most important lesson our community should be learning from the Hassidic world is how to create great fun Jewish culture among our children. Now sharing “Shtark Jewish Memes” may not be the sole



when someone tells you a deep dvar at the purim seudah

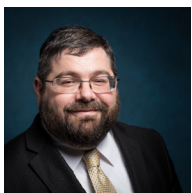


\*\* Old school Rosh Yeshiva congratulates his Modern Orthodox son on completing rabbinic ordination\*\*



answer to this problem, but it is likely a part of it. For too long, too much of our community has not been smiling in their official photographs — and a resilient community needs a sense of humor. Such memes and GIFS provide the slice-of-life smiles that help communities cultivate a warm and accepting self-awareness with a smile. Of course, they can go overboard or cross lines. But so can anything else. A Jewish community that embraces such a medium does not have to become duller. If anything, it opens more entryways for more people to fall in love with the oddities, quirks, joy, and inspiration of the Jewish community.

**What do you think are the most exciting opportunities and developments in the way we create and share Torah ideas in 2018? What concerns you most?**



**RABBI FELDMAN:** Here again, concerns arise in tandem with opportunities. And

also again, the concerns have been discussed extensively and effectively elsewhere.

In terms of opportunities, they may also be termed *mechayyim* — obligators. It is now possible to carry around in the palm of your hand literally *kol haTorah Kulah*. You can access anything anywhere, and while that is a danger when it comes to problematic content, it is a miracle when it comes to Torah content. If you have an hour or a minute sitting, standing, or walking, you can fill that time with valuable learning.

This development allows for advances of both quantity and quality. I often think about how my grandfather wrote *sefarim* 50 years ago, and probably wondered how widely distributed he could ever hope for them to be. I can't imagine he ever dreamt that someday, thanks to Hebrewbooks.org and other sites, someone in Hong Kong with a phone could call them up in a second, and may even be directed there by a search.

Further, there is the collaborative nature of what is now possible. Torah study has always been an extended conversation that spans across the generations. The fact that technology now preserves aspects of that conversation, disseminates that conversation more broadly than ever, and allows additions to that conversation to take place in real time, in formats that allow for all kinds of insight and detail to be shared both creatively and instantaneously, is exhilarating and brings new meaning to the mandate of *yagdil Torah v'yadir* — the spreading and glorification of Torah.



**RABBI BASHEVKIN:** I will begin by discussing my concerns, so I can

close with my optimism.

For all of the value of building culture, there are some very real issues. Culture in general has gone through many stages. Scholars have noted that in the last few decades post-modernism has seeped into our cultural language, rejecting many of the once sacrosanct grand narratives of life as trite and clichéd. Our television shows have become more ironic and cynical. Gone are

the days of sitcoms with sentimental happy endings; instead we have self-referential shows that exhibit witty irony and biting cynicism about our lives. David Foster Wallace famously warned of the corrosive effects of cynical culture:

*Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists.*

*Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage.*

Advertisements, television, and perhaps most of all snarky social media, eschew sentimentalism for a sharp quip and a clever retort that allows people to avoid clearly articulating what really moves them. As Wallace said elsewhere, "hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human."

Most of our communal concern about social media has revolved around pornography and, undoubtedly, it poses an immense threat on our conceptions of intimacy and family.

I love a well-placed joke, a funny caption, a clever meme, but sometimes I wonder if people are losing their capacity to experience sincerity. I am nervous that sincere expressions of religiosity will soon be instinctively greeted with knee-jerk eye-rolls.

A subtler but perhaps more troubling concern is the ascent of irony and cynicism in our religious discourse. There are several examples of this on Facebook, where groups such as “Sounds Yeshivish But OK,” boasting nearly twenty thousand members, share memes, pictures, and GIFs that seem to mock and deride any hint of sentimentalism about Jewish devotion and practice. I feel comfortable leveling this criticism because I myself am a product of this culture and interact with it every day. I love a well-placed joke, a funny caption, a clever meme, but sometimes I wonder if people are losing their capacity to experience sincerity. I am nervous that sincere expressions of religiosity will soon be instinctively greeted with knee-jerk eye-rolls. We cannot allow our culture to become cynical. Maybe I sound yeshivish advocating such a position, but that’s ok.

Whatever ills may be emerging from these developments, they have thankfully been mostly overshadowed by some very exciting developments. People are sharing Torah online in frankly jaw-droppingly creative ways. Communities of educators, students, and friends are beginning to form online cohorts that transcend geographic and economic boundaries and have become genuine communal places to share Torah and ideas in innovative ways.

Here is one exciting example that gives me hope for Torah in 2018.

Jan Mieszkowski, a professor of German and comparative literature at Reed College, began sharing on Twitter brief comparative breakdowns of different philosophies and philosophers.



Jan Mieszkowski  
@janmpdx

Following

Philosophy begins in  
Aristotle: wonder  
Kierkegaard: dread  
Camus: despair  
Sartre: your local cafe

1:15 PM - 6 Aug 2018

Reb Joey Rosenfeld, in a brilliant example of recognizing an emerging medium, began using a similar format for Torah ideas.



joey rosenfeld  
@jorosenfeld

Torah is:  
Arizal: primordial  
Ramban: name of god  
Besht: letters  
Maharal: enlightenment  
R. Nachman: ancient  
R. Tzadok: creative heart  
Nefesh HaChaim: studied  
Baal HaTanya: divine garment  
R. Kook: infinite  
Leshem: perpetually unfolding  
Gra: everything  
R. Salanter: instruction



joey rosenfeld  
@jorosenfeld

Prayer is:  
R. Kook: perpetual  
R. Nachman: conversation  
Baal HaTanya: meditative  
Mitteler Rebbe: contemplative  
R. Aharon HaLevi: ecstatic  
Nefesh HaChaim: functional  
Maharal: dependency  
R. Nossin: creative  
Baal Shem Tov: unity  
Rav: urgent  
Arizal: mechanical  
Dovid: everything

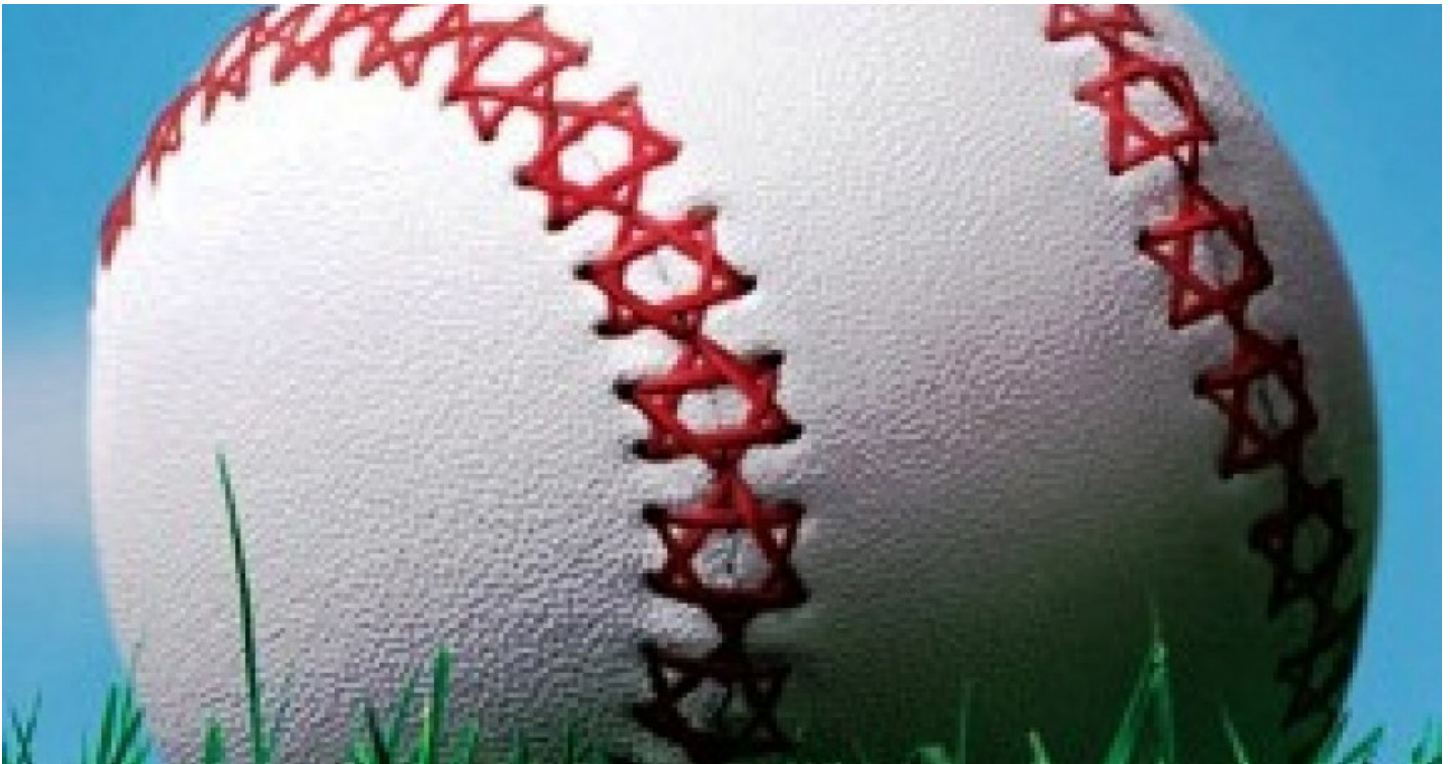
The creativity of his execution of this idea cannot be understated,

though its wider reception remains underappreciated. Aside from the creativity of the pieces themselves, each one sparks substantive Torah conversations, as readers squabble with his summaries or suggest other distillations for personalities he did not cover. And, much like Ten Minute Halacha, this innovation has also garnered its fair share of flattering imitations.

What a time to be alive! Content is being shared in such exciting new ways, which only opens more possibilities for reimagining the ways in which we share Torah. For all our creativity, I still believe that nobody has sufficiently unlocked how to share Torah through video. That, I believe, is the next frontier. The secular world has found ways to get millions of people interested in philosophy through the lens of pop culture (see, for instance the Wisecrack or Nerdwriter channels on YouTube), but the Jewish community remains far, far behind within this medium.

The world is always evolving, but so is Torah. Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin writes that just as creation is renewed every day, so too Torah is renewed each day (*Tzidkas HaTzadik* #216). And I am excited to see what renewals tomorrow will bring.





## **MACCABEES, WARRIORS, GIANTS, AND BRAVES: SPORTS AND RELIGIOUS ATTENTION<sup>1</sup>**

**I**n February 2011, the Green Bay Packers faced the Pittsburgh Steelers for the National Football League Championship. Super Bowl Sunday is close to a national holiday in America, with the accompanying ceremony and ritual often eclipsing the game itself. These traditions include hours and hours of pregame broadcasts, analysis, and introduction. Shortly before kickoff the networks air a briefer video introduction that tries to capture the emotions and import of the game.

This one was truly impressive. In less than two minutes, with somber narration from the actor Michael Douglas, archival imagery, and a musical score that stirred the soul, viewers were treated to a crash course in American history and its values. “But through it all, generation after generation we never give up,” Douglas intoned, as pictures of D-Day and Iwo Jima filled the screen. With clips from JFK and Martin Luther King as a backdrop, he wondered where our history would have led “If he [JFK]

never asked what we can do?” and “if he [MLK] didn’t dream?” Just in case the viewer might be distracted by nachos and tailgating, thus missing some of the subtleties in the message, the narration transitioned to its more explicit climax. “Tonight, here we are united to see their journey... These two teams have given us the chance for one night not only to dream but to believe... This is a celebration of their journey, of our journey.” Of course, all American history — including our sacrifices, wars, and most noble

ambitions — are leading to a football game. Not to worry, the narrator assures us that it is not just an athletic contest. With all the appropriate gravitas he declares, “this is so much bigger than just a football game.”

Is it? Can it? Should it?

Before even approaching the Torah perspective on athletics and society, we might wonder if there is a broader cultural corruption in our cheering spectator sports. Is there an unhealthy obsession and is there a severe misappraisal of value? There is a clear alternative to Douglas’ proclamations. One of those same football teams recently caught headlines for their role in healing their grieving city. The same Pittsburgh Steelers took the field a mere day after the Synagogue massacre. Here, the game announcer delivered a very different perspective on the role of sports. He said, “Hopefully, today football can provide a small escape for this city.” Nothing more grandiose and no claims for greater consequence or good. Just a distraction and outlet, comfortable in its own whimsy and insignificance.

The vernacular already hints to some of the lurking dangers. A supporter of a team or player is most commonly referred to as a “fan,” short for “fanatic.” It’s rarely a label for a balanced or cerebral approach to much of anything.<sup>2</sup>

The dearth of Torah sources that directly address sports fandom is also likely an indication of some of the almost indefensible absurdity of these pursuits. However, there are a number of general references that have been interpreted to provide further caution against an over-emphasis on sports.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe, in his classic work *Alei Shor*,<sup>3</sup> speculates on the use of

the term “*avodah zara*” to describe idol worship. “Zar” is not generally a reference to an idol or false God. It is most often translated as the strange, or foreign. Rav Wolbe contends that, in fact, it is the introduction of an unnatural, false, or unjustified influence that defines this cardinal sin. When the central focus of life and effort is artificial or meaningless, the distortion is devastating. Sports often uses religious terminology that help blur the line between theocentric behavior and something else entirely.

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch<sup>4</sup> offers an etymology to the biblical concept of “*arachin*.” This is an area of law that involves the appropriate valuation of people and life. Rav Hirsch points out that there are multiple words used in Tanach for value and worth. He asserts that A-RA-CH shares roots with A-RA-G, the act of weaving. Just as weaving is based on relative positions and an intertwining, the specific connotation of *arachin* is something of **relative** value. [This is as opposed to words like “*damim*” and “*shaveh*,” which imply a more objective worth.] In the context of the *arachin* commandments, the value is relative to the service in the Mikdash. But there is a broader implication in viewing value as contextual rather than independent. Here the Torah instructs us (a) to ascribe value to the things we encounter, and to consider this valuation as a mitzvah, and (b) to understand that these assessments are always most accurate when placed in comparison to other acts or objectives.

Put together, these ideas would seem to argue strongly against any significant emotional or time investment in the fortunes of an athletic contest. The risks are real

and almost self-evident. Beyond the elements of wastefulness (resources like time and money) and capricious foolishness, there are the added pitfalls of service and devotion to external powers and a complete confusion of what is valuable and what is valueless. All these dangers are risk factors toward a life unfulfilled and particularly threatening for the devoted servant of God.

Many would stop here and go no further. This is a formidable argument against spectator sports. Why even entertain the notion of their prominent place in any serious growth-focused society, given the severe challenges they present?

First, sports provide a projection of certain positive values and a showcase arena for a true learning experience. The Gemara<sup>5</sup> identifies an opportunity to learn traits like modesty and honesty from the behaviors of cats and ants. Apparently, there is an educational process that can emerge from less likely and obvious teachers.<sup>6</sup> Further, Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldwicht<sup>7</sup> (and others) extend this license to even more dubious sources for learning. The Gemara<sup>8</sup> describes a process whereby repentance (performed out of love and not any other compulsion) actually transforms sins and errors into merit. How does such an ambitious metamorphosis transpire? How can repentance be any more than an eraser? Rav Goldwicht suggests that the human powers and even virtues (!) that can be revealed through pursuing sins can serve a person well and can be channeled as catalysts to greater achievement and productivity. Perhaps there is a physical strength or industriousness (to cite just two examples) that

emerge only in the world of sin, and linger through teshuva to motivate more wholesome behavior. If this can be true of observing bugs and of using sin to grow, it must certainly apply to a baseball game or track meet. There are certain values that are conveyed through sport, and these can indeed be learning opportunities. Teamwork and social cohesion are prime examples. Focus, determination, and perseverance are others. Before we decried some of the parallels between sports imagery and organized religion, we might also acknowledge the pervasive use of sports metaphors in language and descriptions (almost exclusively positive) of all human endeavor. Sports are a grand metaphor for success and particular moral and ethical objectives.

More generally, man constantly craves significance and always attempts to identify with greatness. Sports glorifies the great, even as it poorly defines it. Sports celebrates achievement and attests to human accomplishment. The drive and ambition that pervade the sports world easily serve to inspire human greatness in arenas where it is even more needed. At Mt. Carmel, Eliyahu summons a divine revelation to

prove once and for all the superiority of God. Abravanel<sup>9</sup> wonders why the miracle chosen is the heavenly fire that consumes the Jews' animal offering. Aren't there, quite literally, an infinite number of ways that God could choose to announce Himself? Aren't some far more grandiose and eye-catching? Frankly, aren't some far more convincing? Abravanel posits that this community was not struggling only with questions of philosophy or belief; even if such a God were to exist, they wondered, wouldn't He be the ultimate proof of human insignificance? Could He care about and engage in human enterprise? Therefore, God does not just reveal Himself, He reveals His everlasting desire to respond to our efforts and actions. The miracle does not only show us God; it demonstrates human potential and influence. The revealed God swoops down and attributes significance to an otherwise lowly effort and offering.

Does God do the same for a touchdown run or buzzer-beating 3-pointer? Seemingly no, athlete triumphant gesticulations notwithstanding. But there is something inspiring in a primal way when we encounter the outer reaches

of human performance. The 4-minute mile and Cal Ripken's consecutive game streak. Record-breaking feats and seeing things we've never seen before. These are reminders to rethink our own capabilities and motivators toward accomplishment in areas that matter much more.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps we are overthinking the issue and attributing too much to a couch potato watching the World Series or a tailgater eating a hotdog in freezing temperatures before a Jets game. If so, there is the more simple fact that sports provide that very diversion referred to at the beginning of this discussion. We need outlets that are wholesome, especially those that can be occasionally uplifting. We need a release from life's pressures and to relax in ways that are not harmful or dangerous to body and soul. All work and no play makes Yaakov... something less than completely healthy. Is play the same as watching play? Certainly not. But sports can motivate and animate indirectly too. Even when not communicating profundity and life lessons, it can recharge and invigorate by giving a benign break from pressure and stress. This too can justify some, if not all, of our sports entertainment



There is something inspiring in a primal way when we encounter the outer reaches of human performance. The 4-minute mile and Cal Ripken's consecutive game streak. Record-breaking feats and seeing things we've never seen before. These are reminders to rethink our own capabilities and motivators toward accomplishment in areas that matter much more.



consumption. Especially in contrast to the messaging and effects of so many other forms of passive recreation and interactions, sports would seem to be an attractive alternative.

Nevertheless, the initial concerns are real and left unaddressed by unfiltered and indiscriminate viewing habits. Therefore we conclude with two modest proposals.

First, like so many of our relationships with the world at large, moderation will be a critical factor in success or failure. It is highly probable that some sports viewing can be productive, something more excessive neutral, and a gluttonous feeding frenzy devastating. Less can be more, and even an attempt at moderation can reframe the approach in extremely helpful ways. Parents can and should involve themselves in this process of moderation for their children. This is an area that youth will struggle with. Both the complexities involved with where to draw such a line and the impulse control required to enforce limits on viewing habits and emotional attachment suggest a greater parenting role. This is a very good thing and consistent with the responsibilities of child rearing.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, perspective and intent matters too. If we do not contemplate the role that sports play in our lives, we are highly unlikely to tumble upon the most wholesome dimensions or any eternal truths. Rather, we will become ensnared in the worst of sports culture and victimized by its most damaging influences. We would be well served to more purposeful viewing habits, even if that purpose is just to have a break. Such an approach would quickly redefine some of the most important aspects of our sports experiences, particularly the what,

when, and how often. We may not be required to change **if** we root, but we may want to adjust **how**.

In Breslov chassidus there is an acronym that is meant to guide another of our appetites, that for food. *Ma'achal*, or food, is a representation of **matai**, **eich**, **kamma**, and **lama**. These are four questions that are meant to define our relationship with food: When? How? How much? Why? Even just asking these questions provides a framework for a healthier lifestyle and greater efficiency and success. So too for sports, the same structure can offer a road map for viewing, cheering, and even celebrating — always with an ever-present focus on a greater goal and good.

## Endnotes

1. The scope of this essay will be limited to the following of sports and being invested in the athletic performance of others. A good number of the points will easily apply to participation sports as well, but that will not be the primary focus.
2. Another prominent divergence from the mindful to the mindless can be found in the curious and unique phenomenon of American collegiate athletics. There is no historical or geographical parallel to the phenomenon of institutions of higher learning being so commonly associated with sports. On other continents, competitive university sports are a hobby or diversion, never a primary focus. In the U.S., 39 of the 50 states compensate a university football or basketball coach as their highest paid employee. This does not include the salaries of coaches at private universities. While it is true that these salaries are primarily a reflection of the revenues generated by sports and not an independent value statement, it is still an indication of a bizarre societal priority scale.
3. Volume one, pp. 152.
4. Vayikra 27:2.
5. *Eruvin* 100b.

6. Significantly, this passage itself is subject to a vociferous debate, not unlike our discussion regarding sports. Some commentators question the value in looking too closely at role models who are less pure and consistent. There are simply too many negative traits we can observe in the cat and insect. Others go further and interpret the Gemara as describing a poor learning process that preceded our Torah-based system of growth and that was rendered insignificant and undesirable by it. Nevertheless, the simple reading does imply an opportunity to learn and grow through the scrutiny of physical acts and prowess.

7. *Asufat Ma'arachot*, Yamim Noraim, pp. 61-63.

8. *Yoma* 86b.

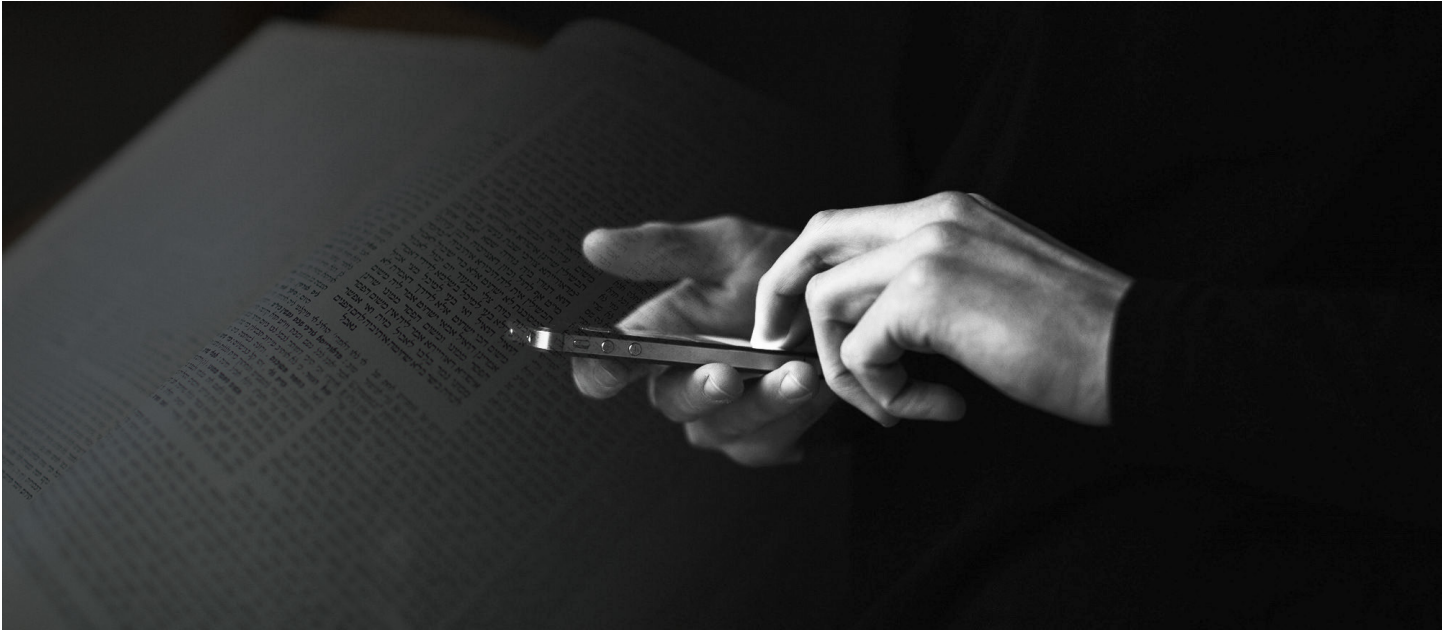
9. Kings I, 18.

10. It should be noted that some of these objectives are undermined when sports deviate from the moral to the barbaric. This too is beyond the scope of the article, but a fuller treatment would have to address the moral implications in cheering boxing and modern football. The parallels to Roman gladiators and circuses are troubling.

11. Further, there is an opportunity for both modeling and bonding here. One of the additional benefits of sports fandom is the intergenerational connection and communication it traditionally engenders. Parents who are involved with the supervision of their children's sports following will have the opportunity to connect with them in wholesome and wonderful ways.



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## **CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL CULTURE: A CHALLENGE TO OUR COMMUNITY, OUR CULTURE AND OUR TEENS**

**C**hanukah marks the victory of the Maccabim who famously rallied under the banner “*Mi LaHashem Elei*” in defiance of the challenge of Hellenism. The Maccabean revolt was triggered by the policies of Antiochus IV, who, in a sharp departure from his father’s more mild and accommodating policies, imposed a radical program to force the Hellenization of Judea. Aside from the political context and the inherent religious conflict between the Jews of Judea and the Syrian Greeks’ radical Hellenization, the events

of Chanukah are an opportunity to examine an age-old question: when is cultural integration positive, and when it is best resisted? Even while acknowledging the positive contributions of Greek culture, our traditional sources mostly focus on the insidious threat that cultural integration posed to Judaism and to Jewish survival.<sup>1</sup> In every age, as cultural paradigms shift, we must consider a similar question, discern a worthy threat brewing in our midst, and consider what correctives are needed.

Certainly, finding fault lines or paradigm shifts in cultural developments is challenging. It’s common for many adults to consider the challenges of any new generation with mild contempt. Just being distant from the realities that kids face makes it easy to justify dismissing their challenges as comparably insignificant. Anyone can finish the sentence “When I was your age ...” with numerous conclusions, from serious to humorous, to convey that kids nowadays have it easy. A paradigm shift, however, is defined

by a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumption, and this means that the realities before and after the shift are essentially different.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, when digital device distraction has become a near ubiquitous cultural concern, we can identify a number of major shifts in our contemporary reality that have the potential to challenge both the behavior and the ethics of our community.<sup>3</sup> I would like to explore a few specific features of our contemporary culture, emerging from the digital age, and how they are even more prominent and problematic in the emerging “teen culture.” These include personal relationship building, membership and group affiliation, and general mental health. Teenagers spend an average of seven to nine hours a day dedicated to device time. Multiple social media platforms replace in-person prosocial relationships.<sup>4</sup> Our teens are growing up with new assumptions about their relationships, their loyalties, and themselves. These experiences are part of a profoundly challenging set of norms that teens must navigate as they develop their increasingly counter-cultural identities as Orthodox Jews.

### **Understanding Culture vs. “Teen Culture”**

What is changing about the experience of culture for our teens? An investigative report, published by *The New Yorker*, explored the fact that the word “culture” was named the most popular word queried in the Merriam Dictionary search engine. This spike in searches for the definition of the word culture, it was suggested, reflects a new need to understand how the word Culture (capital C) was changing.

The traditional definition of Culture as aspirational self-betterment was shifting toward its use to describe a commonality, a trend in ideas or behaviors of a specific sub-group; as it is used in “teen culture, rap culture, campus culture, culture of privilege, etc.” This type of culture inducts you into a group and is absorbed through osmosis in the group’s experiences. In contrast, the institutions of “high culture” are aspirational and support those who consciously work toward self-betterment. And these institutions still persist, as does the self-conscious ladder of cultural improvement. However, when language changes, it signals a paradigm shift.<sup>5</sup>

What is the impact of such a widespread popular redefinition of culture? How might this shift impact the way Orthodox teens consider their own ethical and behavioral norms? Our teens, born after 1996, are part of Generation Z and the iGeneration.<sup>6</sup> This generation represents the pendulum swinging away from the “Millennials.” The Millennial Generation confronted the shifting sands of their personal, financial and global security in the wake of 9/11 and the economic crises of 2000 and 2008. When it comes to Jewish identity, millennials predominantly self-reported that being Jewish was very important to them.<sup>7</sup> GenZ/ iGen children, on the other hand, were raised in a substantially different world. While millennials are described as self-absorbed and unrealistic, GenZ members are “conscientious, hard-working, somewhat anxious and mindful of the future.”<sup>8</sup> These GenZ characteristics are clearly positive personal traits. Those researchers using the label iGen are describing both the “i” of the internet as well as the “i” of a high degree of

individualization that characterizes the increasingly personalized user experience of the internet and all digital platforms. From music choices to online shopping and news stories, our online browsing histories are a data mine refined for algorithms that reflect our personal preferences. So while market researchers are tracking the social economic trends of this demographic in order to harness and retail to their needs and interests, we ought to consider how these trends might impact identity formation for our teens, as their online experience is increasingly shaped to meet their expectations.

### **Customization: Echo Chambers and Silos Can Hinder Development**

It is well established within developmental psychology that part of the “job” of a teenager is to find the boundaries in their lives, test them, and in “testing” these demarcating lines, developing their own sense of right and wrong.<sup>9</sup> For most teens, this expresses itself normatively, as they collect experiences and encounters with both ideas and people, familiar and new, and approach them all with a newfound lens of curiosity. Through this process of self-reflection and individuation, teens often try on idealism, skepticism, enthusiasm or contempt as they attempt to explore all the contours of their world, whether intellectual, social, or emotional.<sup>10</sup> Teens may find themselves reshaping their relationships as they develop answers to personal identity questions: Who am I? What do I stand for? Who do I agree with? Whether with parents or peers, this doesn’t always indicate rebellion; instead, it is a



key part of solidifying their growing independence. What happens when online platforms are customized to reflect their personal interests and “likes,” and neatly avoiding sites, news items or issues that they “dislike”? It creates an echo chamber of the familiar, where they engage primarily with customized content that essentially prevents them from encountering a broad range of ideas, experiences, or other content that they may not agree with or “like.” Therefore, it is important that the iGen expects to experience a constant series of “new and better.” Every purchase is a “new generation” that not only replaces old features with new ones that are faster, brighter, and more engaging, but that also includes a higher level of customization. Instead of the World Wide Web being a portal to a broad range of culture, news, etc., it is increasingly a carefully curated and customized platform that reflects only the popular trends that we have chosen to react to over the course of our internet surfing. The comfort and convenience factors aside, this is essentially narrowing our online communities, and creating silos of “friends” and echo chambers of ideas. Certainly everyone online needs to contend with whether the benefits outweigh the costs of digital distraction.<sup>11</sup> However, these customizing algorithms may target teens disproportionately, since they are potentially even more vulnerable to the negative impacts. Quantitatively, teens spend much more time online, whether gaming or on social media platforms, and qualitatively, these curated communities become their online identities that are reinforced in these silos and echo chambers.<sup>12</sup> Even teens are worried about the impact of their digital “addictions.”<sup>13</sup> Whereas

the Millennial Generation has full non-digital communities as well, for the iGeneration these online identities may be replacing real-life communal identities that are relatively less significant in their lives. In discussing the negative impact of digitizing children’s free time, Dr. Steiner-Adair, clinical psychologist and instructor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, reflects that, “children have to know that life is fine off the screen. It’s interesting and good to be curious about other people, to learn how to listen. It teaches them social and emotional intelligence, which is critical for success in life.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, the contemporary “teen culture” is dominated by online identities and online communities that are being shaped by likes and preferences; behaviors that may be more reactive to powerful neurostimulants than to aspirational cultural engagement in the pursuit of self-betterment.

Without a conscious effort to counteract these realities, many teens of the iGeneration will shape personal identities that may be limited by their inability to explore differences freely, and to thereby develop their own opinions with greater breadth and depth. As one blogger put it: “Does digital engagement encourage better decision-making, or merely reinforce prejudice?”<sup>15</sup> Dr. Steiner-Adair adds, “The big disconnect really is the paradox of the age. We are unbelievably connected to each other in ways we’ve never been able to be and yet the quality of our connection has led to an increase in loneliness, in face time, in speaking to one another, in being fully present with each other. All the human attributes that make us fully human in our connections to each other.”<sup>16</sup>

Research in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology is needed to explore antidotes to all of us struggling with digital distraction, especially in support of the prosocial development of identity formation in iGen teens. However, I want to suggest, humbly, that our community seriously considers our responsibility to our teens (and our adults) with the following midrash in mind. The verse is Kohelet (4:12) states:

וְאִם יִתְקַפּוּ הָאֶחָד הַשְּׁנַיִם יַעֲמִדוּ נִגְדּוֹ וְהַחֹוֹט  
הַמִּשְׁלָל לֹא בְמַהֲרָה יִנָּתֵק.

*Also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him. A threefold cord is not readily broken!*

*Kohelet Rabba* explains that the “threefold cord” refers to Shabbos, Torah and *chesed*.

The first strand of this strong cord is Shabbos, which allows us to reconnect to our faith, to Hashem and to each other. Shabbos is a prominent prosocial tool that has become recognized as a technology addiction antidote, singled out as a prime example of establishing “no tech-zones” as part of a family’s routine. Whether at dinner, in the living room, between specific hours, or in the car, it is recommended that families establish these habits to provide their kids (and themselves) a refuge, a mental and behavioral break, during which they can reconnect with each other. Shabbos is a built-in reconnector. It is the anchor of our spirituality, our relationship with Hashem, and asserts the centrality of that faith above the centrality of technology. Of course the neurostimulants that are associated with digital temptations make this a new challenge for some frum kids, and parents must be prepared to create plans around the possibility that their

children may be too connected to their devices to easily disconnect even for Shabbos. Having no-tech zones, or times, throughout the week, can serve as important training spaces for our children to exercise asserting their counter-cultural identities and breaking the bonds that otherwise may develop as part of their regular development.

Second is the strand of Torah, which certainly refers to our commitment to Torah law and Torah ethics, as the barometer of our choices, behaviors, and values:

כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו ובהם נהגה יומם ולילה.

*For [Torah and mitzvot] are our lives and the length of our days and we will reflect upon them day and not.*

#### Ma'ariv prayer

However, in the age of highly curated digital identity, where teens are used to having multiple identities on varied digital platforms, this compounds the need to pursue a Torah ideal of some objective truth, not the virtual “truths” that surround them. Living a Torah life means that we are guided by rules and values that are not affirmed by the numbers of likes in our virtual communities. That we are proud to be counter-cultural in our assumptions requires that we expose the vacuity of the relativism promoted by media coverage of facts and alternative facts, by the growth of fake news platforms, or viral trends as more and more normative. This means that we must proactively educate our children about how, in the age of information, there is also a surplus of misinformation. While it is all at their fingertips, they may need to work harder to develop the discernment necessary to truly pursue truth. We need to model, discuss, provoke and explore

ways to bring our children, and our community, out of the echo chambers that are growing around us and in which we may all feel so comfortable. The iGeneration will likely know their way around the internet much more deftly than we could even imagine — and we must add to their navigation, the skills needed to find the nuance, complexity, uncertainty and confidence to be critical consumers of the “teen culture” that surrounds them. “In” the culture but perhaps not “of” the culture.

The third strand of this threefold cord is *chesed*, acts that require us to give to others. There is no shortage of *chesed* opportunities in our community. However, it is very important for our teens to be connected to our local community in a giving capacity. *Chesed* activities allow teens to see themselves filling a communal need and connects them with parts of our community that they would otherwise not naturally associate with.

In an age where online activities are designed to engage our time and attention, our buying capacity and our affiliations, we must work hard to avoid them replacing some of our core real-life identities and assumptions. These three core values, these three mitzvot, Shabbos, Torah and *chesed*, have the combined power to strengthen a counter-cultural move to secure an Orthodox identity for all of us, and especially for our developing iGeneration.

#### Endnotes

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12. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/>
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15. <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/digital-engagement-in-a-post-actual-world-silos-echo-chambers-and-lies/>
16. <https://dianerehm.org/shows/2013-08-14/catherine-steiner-adair-big-disconnect>



## DISCOVERING CHANUKAH IN THE TORAH

The Ramban, in his introduction to Sefer Bereishit, tells us that, “Everything is written in the Torah, whether explicitly or by allusion.” Given the miraculous nature of the Chanukah story and the fact that a holiday was created because of it, Chazal scoured Scripture to find subtle references to this event. Let’s see some of the references that they found, sometimes hidden and sometimes revealed before our very eyes.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 2:5) explains that the second verse of the Torah, “And the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep,” refers to the darkness of Yavan, Greece. Why is Greece referred to as “darkness”? Because it was the Greeks who darkened the eyes of the Jewish people with its decrees. The next pasuk, however, seems to contradict the previous one when it

says, “And G-d said, let there be light.” The word *ohr*, light, is the 25th word in the Torah, the idea being that the darkness the Greeks brought to the world would be illuminated by the light of the Menorah on the 25th of Kislev, i.e. on Chanukah.

### Chanukah, the Eternal Holiday

The Torah hints to us that Chanukah was not a one-time event, but a holiday that should be celebrated every year in perpetuity. The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 29a) gives us the tools to understand this: “Wherever the Torah uses the word “*tzav*,” command, it means that it is to be carried out immediately and for future generations.” Based on this idea we can discover something about the use of the word *tzav* regarding the lighting of the Menorah. The Torah (*Vayikrah* 24:2) tells Moshe Rabbeinu:

צו את בני ישראל ויקחו אליהם שמן זית  
כתיית למאור להעלות נר תמיד.

*Command (Tzav) the children of Israel to take extra pure olive oil, pressed for kindling, to light the continual lamp.*

This command to light the Menorah also contains a reference to a time when the Beit Hamikdash is no longer standing but still needs to be lit in the homes of the Jewish people — on Chanukah. In the following verse, the Torah says, “*chukat olam ledoroteichem*” — it is an eternal decree for your generations!

Chanukah is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. In fact, Chanukah is not mentioned in Tanach at all! The obvious reason is that the events occurred over a millennium after the Torah was given to the Jewish people. The Gemara (*Yoma* 29a) gives a deeper reason why we don’t find the story of Chanukah mentioned in Tanach:



א"ר אסי למה נמשלה אסתר לשחר לומר לך מה שחר סוף כל הלילה אף אסתר סוף כל הנסים והא איכא חנוכה ניתנה לכתוב קא אמרין.

*Rav Assi said, why is Esther compared to the shachar, the morning? To tell you that just as morning is the end of the entire night, so too the salvation of Purim that occurred through Esther is the end of all miracles. But the story of Chanukah occurred after this event of Esther! What it means is that Purim was the last miracle allowed to be committed to writing as part of Tanach.*

The events of Chanukah happened at the beginning of the period of the Second Beit Hamikdash, after the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah (the Men of the Great Assembly) sealed the Tanach and legislated that no more books could be added to the 24 books already included in it. The Anshei Knesset HaGedolah were the immediate successors to the era of the prophets (*Avot* 1:1). According to the *Bnei Yissaschar* (*Maamarei Chodshei Kislev Tevet* 2:14), the story of Chanukah was meant to demonstrate to the Jewish people that even though the Jewish people no longer merited the gift of prophecy, G-d still performs miracles for His Chosen Nation.

## The 25th Book of Tanach

Chazal indicated that Tanach should only contain 24 books (*Kohelet Rabbah* 12:2), and that all 24 had been designated before the time of Chanukah. Since Chanukah would have been the 25th book, Chazal could not let it be added to Scripture. Fascinatingly, HaRav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld demonstrated this idea from the word Chanukah itself.

The word Chanukah can be broken up into two words: *Chanu*, they rested, and *Kah*, which has the gematria, or numerical value, of 25. This

not only refers to the fact that the Chashmonaim rested on the 25th of Kislev, it also means that even though Chanukah could have qualified to be the 25th book of Tanach, Chazal were the ones who rested from including it.

## Chanukah in the List of Holidays

The Torah lists the holidays in Parashat Emor (*Vayikrah* 23). It begins by discussing Shabbat, which occurs every week. Following this, it describes Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and finally Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret. If we follow the chronological order of the holidays as they appear during the year, Chanukah occurs after Sukkot. The Torah hints to this in the next verses (*Vayikrah* 24, referenced earlier), which discuss the command to take extra pure olive oil, pressed for kindling, to light the continual light (i.e. the Menorah).

This verse is describing the commandment to light the Menorah on a daily basis in the Mishkan and the Beit Hamikdash. However, discussing this command here after listing the holidays, when it could have been mentioned anywhere else, is the Torah's way of including Chanukah in the chronology of the holidays, even though Chanukah didn't occur for another thousand-plus years after the giving of the Torah.

When the verse discusses the Menorah, it commands, "*leha'alot ner tamid*," light a continual lamp. When all the Temple activities ceased after the destruction of the Second Beit Hamikdash, the command to light the Menorah would live on *tamid*, continually, through the Jewish people's lighting of the Chanukah candles (*Midrash Tanchuma, Behalotecha* 5).

## The 25th Stop in the Midbar

After the Jewish people left Mitzrayim, they spent 40 years walking through the Sinai desert on their way to Eretz Yisrael. The Torah lists the number of stops as 42. The Ramban (*Bamidbar* 33:1) tells us that when the Torah introduces these journeys, it says, "Moshe wrote about their travels according to their journeys at the request of Hashem." It did this so that Moshe should know that each destination they reached and encamped in should be recorded to convey the message that deep secrets are contained in each of their destinations.

We already noted that the number 25 is strongly connected to the holiday of Chanukah, and not just because Chanukah appears on that date in Kislev. When we look at the 25th encampment of the Bnei Yisrael in the desert, we see that the verse records it as "*vayachanu B'Chashmonah*," they camped in Chashmonah. These words can actually be read as "they rested in Chashmonah," a reference to the Chashmonaim, a.k.a the Hasmoneans, that fought and defeated the Greeks on the 25th. The word Chashmonah is spelled with a letter *hey* at the end, whereas the Chashmonaim is spelled with an *aleph*. Spelling it with a *hey* reveals the word "*shemonah*" eight, contained within it. This is a hint that the holiday that begins on the 25th will last eight days (*Hamaor SheB'Chanukah, Neis Chanukah* p. 125).

## The Torah Reading for Chanukah

The Torah readings for Chanukah are taken from the Parasha of Naso (*Bamidbar* 7:1-89). They describe the bringing of the *korbanot*, offerings,

by the *nesi'im*, princes, of each of the tribes at the *Chanukat HaMishkan*, the inauguration of the Tabernacle. The inauguration started on Rosh Chodesh Nissan and lasted for 12 days. During each one of those 12 days a different nasi, one per day, brought 21 korbanot.

A seemingly more appropriate reading for the holiday of Chanukah would be something related to the Menorah. What is the connection between the korbanot listed in the Torah and the dedication of the Mishkan and the holiday of Chanukah?

The dedication of the Mishkan is directly related to Chanukah, because according to the midrash, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:2, the construction of the components of the Mishkan were completed in the desert on the 25th of Kislev, the date that centuries later would become the holiday of Chanukah. Although the Mishkan's dedication did not occur until Nissan, it was ready to be dedicated in Kislev, and the rededication of the Beit Hamikdash many years later did fall in Kislev. This rededication is considered to be just like the original dedication itself, as though the Mishkan was standing anew for the first time.

In order to connect the reading of Chanukah with the lights of the Menorah, most communities have the custom to extend the Torah readings of Chanukah past the parsha of Naso, which deals with the Korbanot, directly into the Parsha of Beha'alotcha, which describes the Menorah and its lighting in the Mishkan by Aaron HaKohen.

### **Yosef's Connection to Chanukah**

The parshiyot of Vayeishev, Miketz and Vayigash tell the story of Yosef's rise to power as the second in

command to Pharaoh. Chanukah always coincides with the Shabbat that we read Vayeishev or Miketz. Sometimes it coincides with both. What is the deeper connection between the story of Yosef and the events of Chanukah, which would occur many years later?

Chanukah is about the ability of the Jewish people to face adversity and succeed in overcoming challenges to our core values. In addition, we learn not to succumb to outside forces or feel despair in the challenges we face as a nation. The ability to be in a dark environment and to bring light into that place is a quality we learn from Yosef Hatzadik.

Yosef was the first person to be thrust into exile when his brothers sold him to Egypt. The fact that the Egyptians referred to him as the *Ivri*, Hebrew, informs us that he kept his Jewish identity, and did not become lost in the norms of Egyptian culture. He proved that exile can be beaten, no matter how bleak the circumstances may appear.

Yosef married Osnat, who according to the midrash (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 38) was the illegitimate daughter born to Dina through Shechem and was adopted by Potiphar. With such a background, it would seem like nothing holy could emerge from such a union. Yet Yosef's entire future, his sons Menashe and Efrayim, who become their own tribes of Israel, were born from her. Rav Gedalya Schorr (*Ohr Gedaliyahu, Moadim, Galus Yavan L'Ohr Maaseh Avos Siman L'Banim*) explains that precisely for this reason, the episode of Shechem and Dina is a precursor to the entire Chanukah story.

While in prison for a crime he did not commit, Yosef refused to give in to despair. When the royal baker and wine server were depressed, it was Yosef who

took it upon himself to cheer them up. For Yosef, a little bit went a long way, just like a little jar of oil lasted for eight days. When the world around Yosef was full of falsehood, Yosef stayed connected to the truth and passed that on to his children.

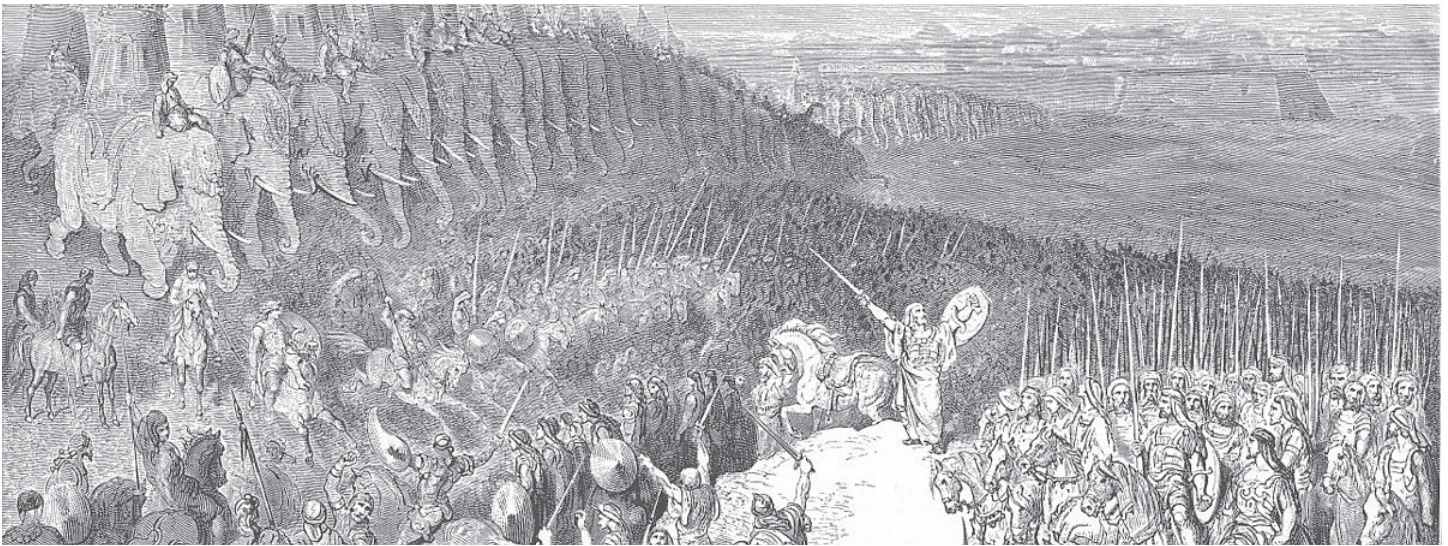
The Jews in the time of the Greek exile did the same. When harsh decrees were placed upon them, they stood up proudly, and confidently declared their identities as Jews. It is for this reason that we connect Yosef and Chanukah, because Yosef teaches us how to survive in the darkest and harshest of spiritual and physical exiles, while remaining connected to the cause.

Chanukah represents the power of light in the deepest darkest moments in the year and in Jewish history. As we stand today at the last moments of the final exile, we can learn so much from the Chanukah story. Just like Yosef didn't despair in the darkness of his time in prison and stayed true to his faith and people, so too, we who are experiencing the last darkest moments of this exile, with all the personal and national challenges that it brings, must hold on tight to the message of the menorah and that small light of hope it contains.

The fact that we can see the Chanukah story hinted at in the Torah, just proves that it was part of Hashem's plan for the world and the Jewish people. How much more so does this apply to these final moments of exile, which are also alluded to in the Torah? We wait for the day when Mashiach comes and shows us how everything was truly part of Hashem's plan for from the very start of history.

May we all learn how to strengthen ourselves in the last moments of this final exile and keep the flame of connection to Hashem, His Torah and the mitzvot.





## THE JEWISH HERO'S JOURNEY

The Chanukah story is brimming with iconic Jewish heroes, most famously the Maccabees. This group of brothers from the Hasmonean family are perhaps *the* classic symbol of Jewish grit, might, and resistance. To this day, they are a go-to symbol across the Jewish world: the only Jewish sports organization is called the *Maccabi World Union*, one of the State of Israel's largest healthcare providers goes by the name *Maccabi*, and of course, the Yeshiva University athletics department shares this name as well. The understanding is that where there is a Maccabee, there is might, but not just the generic brute force kind — rather, the kind whose source is much deeper, that goes beyond physical strength and agile prowess. The Maccabees are

historical heroes because of *why* they took action: מי כמוך באלים י-ה. *Who is like you Hashem?* Their heroism and subsequent choices and actions were rooted in their relationship to G-d. For them, there was no strength, victory or progress that existed without this relationship and belief, and ultimately, that is the essence of every Jewish hero.

While the heroism of the Maccabees is generally tied to fighting assimilation, it is also deeply tied to what I would like to call The Jewish Hero's Journey, what is most commonly known as teshuva. Using the literary framework of cultural mythologist Joseph Campbell, we can see how, essentially, the Maccabees were striving for the same goals that

are found in famous Jewish themes of teshuva.

### A Quick Biography of Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), an American college professor and academic known for his research on myths, legends, and Bible, is famous for creating the “monomyth,” more colloquially known as “The hero's journey.” Campbell spent decades studying, cataloguing, and categorizing stories from history's civilizations both great and small. It was in his most famous work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), that he introduces the hero's journey, the shared systematic arc among thousands of myths,



legends, and stories that have lasted through the ages. Though there are dozens of steps to the monomyth, this article will only use three overarching steps as a means to highlight the heroism of the Maccabees, and ultimately to demonstrate how their journey and heroism are rooted in the journey of teshuva.

## Step One: Call to Adventure

The transition from Jewish influence to Greek influence was a gradual one. Slowly, slowly, yet step by step, the Jews of ancient Israel embraced Greek culture until there was a large faction of Jewish people who identified with this new way of life over the traditions of their forefathers — the Hellenists. Hellenists welcomed the customs and emphases of Greek philosophy, style, and values, to the point where there were cosmetic surgeries available for Jewish men to “undo” brit millah. For the paternal figure of the Chanukah story, Matityahu, a scholar and kohen descending from the Hasmonean family, this indicated the need to take action. With a statue of Zeus in the Beit HaMikdash and basic mitzvah observance outlawed, Jerusalem, which served as the epicenter of national and individual encounter between man and G-d, looked like it would never be the same. In an effort to save his family from this fate, Matityahu moved his family to the small village of Modi'in.

It was only a matter of time until the Greeks found their way to Modi'in, where they publicly demanded that one of the men from Modi'in give a pagan sacrifice. A Hellenist stepped forward to oblige, and that was when Matityahu felt there was no choice but to take action. He killed the man, and then with the help of his sons, killed

the Greek soldiers. Spread of the news was imminent, and so Matityahu knew it was time to answer “the call of adventure,” or rather, the call of his destiny: כל המקנא לתורה העומד בברית ילך אחרי, whoever is ready to defend the Torah, follow me” (Aryeh Ulman). Echoing the words of Moshe Rabbeinu, he created a break between what was and would be a new reality. Those who wanted to observe mitzvot had a destiny to fulfill, a destiny that would choose them if they chose it.

According to Campbell, this first step is one in which the hero departs from the status quo and into the unknown for a greater cause. Matityahu could have continued going along with the day-to-day reality of his times, practicing Judaism in secret and encouraging others to do the same.

Yet there is something incredibly powerful about admission. It separates the actual from the theoretical. Until we put our intentions into words or actions, they are only intentions. Perhaps this is why Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (1138-1204) begins *Hilchot Teshuva* with *viduy*, admission. This is the first step, but not because it's meant to make a person feel bad. After all, teshuva is a choice. Those who choose to embark on the journey of getting closer to G-d and to their truest self realize that they are *worthy* and *capable* of change. It takes more than wanting and yearning to make change happen; first comes clarifying the goal and committing to seeing it through. By standing up to the Greek agenda and stating loud and clear that he was with Hashem, Matityahu created a new reality for Torah-observant Jews. They didn't have to sit back and watch their nation disappear — they could enact change. They could pursue a different destiny.

## Step Two: Initiation

Matityahu's choice was anything but safe. The Maccabees were fiercely outnumbered, and were far less armed than their Greek and Hellenist counterparts. Not long after his revolt, Matityahu passes away, and the torch of leadership is passed onto his son, Yehuda. He headed a guerilla army that started out as 3,000 and at its largest was 12,000 men. They fled their homes, gathering in caves, planning their next steps against an army nearly five times their size. Over years, they wore down the Syrian-Greek brigades using strategic hit-and-run attacks. Without physical power on their side, they had to strategize as intelligently as they could, making every move count, never underestimating the grave possibilities that go along with fighting the world's largest military.

The same is true in our lives. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto discusses how the *Yetzer HaRah* (evil inclination) is programmed to keep us incredibly busy in order to prevent us from reflecting upon and strategically approaching teshuva:

ואולם הנה זאת באמת אחת מתחבולות היצר הרע וערמתו להכביד עבודתו בתמידות על לבות בני האדם עד שלא ישאר להם ריוח להתבונן ולהסתכל באיזה דרך הם הולכים. כי יודע הוא שאלולי היו שמים לבם כמעט קט על דרכיהם, ודאי שמיד היו מתחילים להנחם ממעשיהם, והיתה החרטה הולכת ומתגברת בהם עד שהיו עוזבים החטא לגמרי.

*The Yetzer HaRah labors endlessly upon the hearts of humanity so that he won't have even a moment to reflect and pay attention to the road they are walking down. He knows that if a person paid just a small amount of attention to his own ways, he would immediately regret his [bad] deeds to the point where he would turn away from sin altogether.*

## Mesillat Yesharim 2: 9-10

Life in and of itself is a journey with many options and obstacles, helpers and detractors, opportunities and distractions. Campbell labels this step “initiation” because this is the part of the plot where the hero gets tested over and over again, initiating his self-actualization, gaining new tools and allies to overcome the enemies and challenges. The more Yehuda and the Maccabees focused on their goal, the more difficulties came their way. However, with time, effort, sacrifice, and dedication, they inched closer toward victory, and toward being able to openly practice and celebrate mitzvah observance.

### Step 3: Return

*“Having endured the trials and hardships of the adventure, the hero returns home. But the hero is no longer the same. An internal transformation has taken place through the maturation process of the experience” –Scott Jeffrey*

The Maccabees’ battle against the Greeks comes to an end at the fortress of Antiochus, where the Maccabees overcome the battalions guarding the Beit HaMikdash. They gain control of

the Holy Temple itself and smash the statue of Zeus and rid the area of all traces of paganism. The Menorah is found and they would like to light it, and they do so with a lone pitcher of undefiled oil, still sealed and eligible for use in the Beit HaMikdash. This is only the beginning of change, and there is still a long road ahead, but the journey has come full circle; Jews no longer have to hide in caves or behind closed doors to participate in Jewish ritual and life. They have reached a point where there is hope and possibility for a renewed Jerusalem, one that revolves around Jewish values, where Jews can openly say, *מי כמוך באלים יי*. This time, perhaps, they meant it more than ever, because they were the ones who fought down a hard and trying road to attain it.

The Gemara in *Nedarim* 39b states, “seven things were created before the world was created,” and one of those seven is teshuva. The ability to turn inward and see what we can be, and then turn outward and make it a reality, is part and parcel of our existence. Chanukah is a time when much of our focus is on publicizing the miracle that happened *bayamim haheim* — in those days — and

making them known *bazman hazeh* — in today’s times. Surely this brings much light and joy into our lives, as it should. However, Chanukah can also be a time when we reflect on our own Jewish heroes journeys, remembering who and where we come from and how we have the potential to tap into the strength they had all those years ago. The journey initiates growth, yet the goal of that growth is to bring it back home and use it to influence the atmospheres of our homes and communities for the better, and please G-d, Jewish history as well.

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The Hero’s Journey, available at: <https://scottjeffrey.com/heros-journey-steps/>

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## IGNITING A MARRIAGE THROUGH THE LIGHTS OF CHANUKAH AND SHABBOS

**T**he Gemara in *Shabbos* (23b) embarks on several discussions regarding the intricacies and minutiae of *ner Chanukah*. These include the forms of acceptable oils, candles and wicks, and the lengths we must go to perform the mitzvah, even under difficult circumstances.

The Gemara poses the following dilemma: If one realized late on a Friday afternoon that there was only enough money to purchase one single candle, should it be allocated for Shabbos or Chanukah use?

אמר רבא, פשיטא לי: נר ביתו ונר חנוכה - נר ביתו עדיף, משום שלום ביתו. נר ביתו וקידוש היום נר ביתו עדיף, משום שלום ביתו.

*Rava said: It is obvious to me that when one has a choice between a candle for one's home [on Shabbos] and the candle of Chanukah, the candle of one's home takes precedence because it is for the harmony of the home. If one has a choice between a candle for one's home and [wine] for kiddush, the candle of one's home takes precedence because it is for the harmony of the home.*

Rava declares that the answer is an obvious one — Shabbos candles take precedence. However, contrary to conventional logic, where we may assume that the Biblical sanctity of Shabbos supersedes the Rabbinic requirement of *ner Chanukah*, Rava's rationale is entirely different. He explains that while the Chanukah

light is necessary to fulfill the mitzvah, the Shabbos candles play a far more important and practical role. It is specifically through the light produced by the Shabbos candles that *shalom bayis*, harmony in the home, is achieved.

Rashi's definition of *shalom bayis* refers to our ability to safely function in the dark while avoiding injury (*Shabbos* 23b). The Rambam, however, interprets *shalom bayis* as a reference to marital harmony between husband and wife:

היה לפניו נר ביתו ונר חנוכה או נר ביתו וקדוש היום נר ביתו קודם משום שלום ביתו שהרי השם נמחק לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו.



*If one has the means of fulfilling the mitzvah of the candle in one's home or Chanukah, or the candle in one's home or kiddush, the candle in one's home takes precedence because it provides harmony in the home, for the name of G-d is erased to make peace between husband and wife.*

#### **Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:14**

Rava's ruling is based on a fundamental contrast between the use of the Shabbos and Chanukah candles. While it is forbidden to derive any benefit from the lights of Chanukah, we are encouraged to utilize the lights of Shabbos. It is in the glow of the Shabbos candles that *shalom bayis* exists, where husband and wife can comfortably interact and enjoy a peaceful environment.

Yet it is this curious relationship between light and *shalom bayis* that creates a number of related questions:

1. What is the connection between the presence of light and a peaceful marriage?
2. The role of light seems to extend beyond the marriage itself and into the outcome of the children, as the Gemara (*Shabbos* 23b) states:

אמר רב הונא הרגיל בנר הויין ליה בנים  
תלמידי חכמים.

*Rava said: One who is accustomed to lighting candles will merit children who are Torah scholars.*

Rashi, quoting the verse "*ki ner mitzvah v'Torah or*" — for a candle represents a good deed and Torah represents light (*Mishlei* 6) — explains that this merit is achieved specifically by kindling the lights of Chanukah and Shabbos. What connection is there between kindling lights and the development of children?

3. The mitzvah of Chanukah uniquely includes various tiers of fulfillment:

ת"ר מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו והמהדרין נר  
לכל אחד ואחד והמהדרין מן המהדרין ב"ש  
אומרים יום ראשון מדליק שמנה מכאן ואילך  
פוחת והולך וב"ה אומרים יום ראשון מדליק  
אחת מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.

*The Rabbis taught: The mitzvah of [lighting candles on] Chanukah is [to light] one candle [per] person and his household [each night]. And those who pursue mitzvos [with greater enthusiasm light] one candle for each and every one [in the household each night]. And [as for] those who pursue mitzvos with even greater enthusiasm, Beis Shammai say that [on] the first day [of Chanukah] one lights eight [candles, and] from then on continuously decreases [the number of candles lit each night], and Beis Hillel say that [on] the first day [of Chanukah] one lights one [candle, and] from then on continuously increases [the number of candles lit each night].*

#### **Shabbos 21b**

The mitzvah of Chanukah is fulfilled in its entirety by simply kindling one light for the entire home — *ner ish uveiso*. However, we may strive to capture a higher fulfillment of *mehadrin* by enabling each family member to light one candle, and an even higher level yet of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* by lighting eight candles. Per the debate of Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel, this is achieved when we either decrease one candle each night, or add one candle.

Although every mitzvah can be performed with various degrees of investment and intentionality, thus producing higher levels of *hiddur*, why do Chazal present such a particular roadmap regarding *ner Chanukah* for achieving higher levels of fulfillment of the mitzvah?

4. Why does the highest form of lighting the menorah require the addition or removal of candles each

night as described by Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel? Why not simply light eight candles every night of Chanukah as the ultimate expression of *mehadrin min hamehadrin*?

5. Why, regarding Chanukah, do Chazal place such an emphasis on the household and the members of the family — *ner ish uveiso* — something not seen in other mitzvos?

To answer these questions, it is important to recall that the miracle of Chanukah did not begin with the missing oil and rededication of the Temple. It was first a story of religious intolerance, anti-Semitism, and a war on Jewish observance that was waged on the family front.

The foremost goal of the Greeks was to unravel the Jewish family, the bedrock of Jewish continuity. By enacting decrees aimed at the eradication of *bris milah*, Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh, the natural flow of the Jewish home would become permanently disrupted.

שגזרו יוונים על כל בתולות הנשואות להיבעל  
לטפסר תחלה.

*The Greeks decreed that all Jewish brides must first be defiled by a Greek officer.*

#### **Rashi, Shabbos 23a**

Through the Greeks' abhorrent practice of violating all Jewish brides, the sanctity of the Jewish marriage would become forever tainted. No longer could husband and wife turn to one another in holiness, but rather they would turn away from one another with trauma and shame.

Thus it is the salvation of the Jewish home and marriage that represents the underlying victory of Chanukah. The light of Chanukah, uncompromising and unusable, stands as a strict symbol and beacon of the miracles of the past.

By contrast, the light of Shabbos lives

in the present. It serves a practical purpose in supporting couples as they navigate the obstacles of marriage. It is by this light that families strengthen their bonds and grow closer to each other and their *mesorah*.

Can this be achieved in darkness?

In research studies on human interaction, behavioral scientists have found that anywhere from 66% to 93% of communication is non-verbal. In other words, achieving *shalom bayis* may be more closely related to how something is conveyed, rather than the actual words themselves.

Noted marriage researcher Dr. John Gottman spent over four decades observing couples talking and fighting. By watching their body language, facial expressions, eye contact, active listening, and ability to turn toward one another, he was able to see their levels of engagement, mutual concern, and friendship. After refining his research and honing his craft, Dr. Gottman, who has visually studied and coded the behaviors of more than 3,000 couples, can observe a couple talking for 15 minutes and amazingly, within the first three minutes of the conversation, predict with over 90% accuracy whether that couple will ultimately divorce.

In today's modern marriage, where stresses and distractions are at an all-time high, *shalom bayis* may be threatened even under the best conditions. How much more so is the risk elevated in homes where the proverbial darkness is growing. In my doctoral research studying several hundred divorced individuals in the Orthodox community, the findings uncovered the harsh realities of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse in one-third to half of those in the sample. These findings highlight a

need to raise awareness about healthy communication, and to educate our children and communities about safe relationships and *shalom bayis*. Thus the way we successfully relate to one another requires the foremost ability to truly see the other person — both literally and figuratively.

Chazal understood that marriage is not easy, and couples cannot skate by in the darkness. To have a successful home, husband and wife must be

**It is these countless  
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unspoken, that not only  
define the marriage, but  
ultimately mold and  
shape the children.**

intentional about their relationship and their communication skills. It is not enough to converse in the darkness; couples must consciously invest in the larger, non-verbal forms of communication as well.

Thus, the role of light in the home is critical for the success of marriage and family. It is these countless interactions between husband and wife, albeit subtle and sometimes unspoken, that not only define the marriage, but ultimately mold and shape the children. When the home is filled with the physical and spiritual lights of Shabbos, children are taught about the power of human relationships, *bein adam lechaveiro*. At the same time, the lights of Chanukah reinforce our

Divine relationship, *bein adam LaMakom*. Children raised in such an environment, exposed daily to this dynamic duality where both illuminations are upheld and treasured, are bound to become *talmidei chachamim*.

Perhaps we can suggest that because the Greek warfare against the Jews was an assault on the Jewish home and family, Chazal emphasized the fulfillment of the mitzvah, not only in personal terms but in familial terms. Unlike other mitzvos, which are generally individualistic, the concept of *ner ish uveiso* reminds us of the centrality of the home, where the *bayis* is inseparable from the mitzvah.

Much like the views of Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel, who debate between adding or subtracting candles each night, the imagery of this ebb and flow captures an authentic snapshot of every home. The home is a living, breathing, and dynamic organism that requires a great deal of thought, love, patience, and investment.

Because Chanukah represents not only a rededication of G-d's home but of our own home and family, Chazal specifically chose Chanukah to emphasize the concept of *mehadrin*. For although a person can fulfill the mitzvah of *ner Chanukah* with a single candle, the concept of *mehadrin* becomes a non-verbal expression of our desire to strive for more and go above and beyond. The lesson of Chanukah for the Jewish marriage is to strengthen the home by finding our own *mehadrin*. When husband and wife take the time to really see one another and interact in a healthy and loving manner, the silent but profound power of *mehadrin* has the ability to elevate a relationship to new heights.



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