

DEAR COMMUNITY,

AMID THE SUGAR AND OIL DAZE CREATED BY THE SEEMINGLY NEVER-ENDING PROCESSION OF CHANUKAH PARTIES, RANDOMLY AVAILABLE DOUGHNUTS, AND OUR HOLY CONSUMPTION OF LATKES IT IS EASY TO FORGET THE ACTUAL MEANING OF THE FESTIVAL. HOWEVER, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF PESACH, IT IS THIS HOLIDAY WHICH WE NEED TO SPEND TALKING ABOUT THE MOST. WE SHOULD TAKE THE TIME TO TRULY FOCUS ON WHAT THIS HOLIDAY IS ABOUT, AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT OUR VALUES AND PRIORITIES.

THE MEDRASH RABBAH GIVES A HOMILETICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE STATE OF DESOLATION AT THE BEGINNING OF CREATION. THE VERSES DESCRIBE A DESOLATE, DARK WORLD AND THE MEDRASH ASSOCIATES EACH OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS WITH ONE OF THE EXILES THAT THE JEWS WILL FACE. THE FIRST EXILE BY THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE IS ASSOCIATED WITH DESOLATION WHILE THIS EXILE, THE EXILE OF THE SELEUCID OCCUPATION OF JUDEA IS CORRELATED WITH DARKNESS. THE MEDRAH PROCEEDS TO WRITE A SEEMINGLY CRYPTIC STATEMENT “THE EXILE OF THE GREEKS IS SIMILAR TO DARKNESS SINCE THEY DARKENED THE EYES OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE BY MAKING THEM WRITE ON THE HORN OF AN OX ‘WE HAVE NO CONNECTION WITH G-D’”.

WHY DOES THIS FORM OF OPPRESSION CORRELATE WITH DARKNESS MORE THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF PERSECUTION THAT THE JEWS SUFFERED? INDEED, WHY WAS THIS CALLED AN EXILE MORE THAN ANY OF THE OTHER PERIODS OF PERSECUTION THAT THE JEWS SUFFERED IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL DURING THE TEMPLE ERAS? WHY IS THE MEDRASH CHOOSING THIS ACT OF RELIGIOUS REPRESSION AS THE ACT EPITOMIZING THE OPPRESSION OF THE GREEKS?

LATER IN GENESIS THE VERSES WRITE THAT G-D SEPARATED THE LIGHT AND THE DARK INTO SEPARATE DOMAINS. RASHI BRINGS A MIDRASH THAT UNTIL THAT POINT THEY WERE SOME HOW COMBINED AND NOT USEFUL AND THEY NEEDED TO BE SEPARATED FOR THEM TO BE OF USE. SO AS THE MEDRASH DESCRIBES THE PERIOD OF CHANUKAH AS THE TIME OF DARKNESS, IT MEANS THAT THERE WAS THIS MIXTURE OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS.

THE HELLENIC JEWISH APOLOGISTS, SUCH AS PHILO, TRIED TO HELLENIZE JUDAISM AS TO FIT IN THE INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE TIME. THERE WAS A GENERAL PUSH TO INCORPORATE JUDAISM INTO THE GENERAL HELLENIC SYSTEM OF THOUGHT AND VALUES. THERE WAS A REJECTION OF THE ‘PRIMITIVE AND ARCHAIC’ JEWISH RITES THAT STEMMED FROM SOME BARBARIC, NOMADIC TRIBE AND AN UNQUESTIONING EMBRACE OF THE NEW, EXCITING, ‘INTELLECTUAL’ WORLD-VIEW AND LIFE-STYLE OF THE CULTURAL ELITE.

IT WAS THIS CULTURAL INSECURITY THAT EPITOMIZED THE STRUGGLE OF CHANUKAH. WE FOUGHT FOR THE PRIDE AND CENTRALITY OF OUR TORAH VALUES AND BELIEFS. WE REFUSED TO SEEK AFFIRMATION IN THE EYES OF THOSE EMBARRASSED BY OUR STEADFAST FAITH IN A RELIGION THAT DID NOT MIX WELL IN ‘POLITE SOCIETY’. WE FOUGHT FOR THE PRIMACY OF THE JUDAISM, OF OUR TORAH AND OUR SAGES AND WE REJECTED THE DESPERATION TO PERVERT OUR FAITH IN THE PURSUIT OF CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION.

GREEK SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY HAD ITS PLACE IN JEWISH LIFE AND LEARNING. RABBIS FOR CENTURIES HAVE STUDIED ARISTOTLE, PLATO, EUCLID AND GALEN. HOWEVER, THERE WAS ALWAYS A CLEAR DEMARCATION OF WHAT BELONGS WHERE. THE DANGER IS WHEN WE SEEK TO MIX THE TWO DOMAINS,

WHEN WE ALLOW MODERN TRENDS AND IDEAS TO INTERFERE WITH WHAT WE HOLD MOST DEAR. IT THIS MIXTURE OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT THAT IS THE GREATEST DANGER.

THE HELLENIC RULE IS CALLED AND EXILE BECAUSE IT WAS A TIME OF UNPRECEDENTED ALIENATION FROM JUDAISM. WE WERE PRESSURED TO GIVE UP OUR FAITH AND BELIEF IN G-D TO SATISFY THE CULTURAL AMBITIONS OF THE LOCAL HELLENIC JEWS. THIS IS WHY IT IS CALLED A TIME OF DARKNESS, IT WAS A TIME WHEN THE LIGHT OF OUR WORLD, OUR TORAH, WAS BEING EXTINGUISHED AND WE WERE TO BE LED BY PHILOSOPHICAL MOVEMENTS ANTI-THEICAL TO OUR NATIONAL CHARACTER.

THIS IS WHAT NEEDS TO BE FOCUSED ON THESE DAYS AS WELL. WHAT ARE WE TRADING OUR TORAH AND JUDAISM FOR? ARE WE SEEKING TO FIND WAYS TO KEEP OUR TORAH AND FAITH IN A NEW WORLD OR ARE WE DRAWING LINES IN SHIFTING SANDS TO ACCOMMODATE OUR NEED FOR AFFIRMATION FROM A WORLD NOW HOSTILE TO ORGANIZED RELIGION? ARE WE GIVING OUR CHILDREN A STRONG PRIDE AND DEPTH OF MEANING IN JUDAISM OR DO WE HOPE THAT THEY WILL PICK THIS UP THEMSELVES AS WE DRIVE THEM TO THE BRINK OF MADNESS IN THE PURSUIT OF THE PERFECT COLLEGE APPLICATION?

I WOULD LIKE TO WISH EVERYONE A GOOD SHABBOS AND A HAPPY CHANUKAH,
RABBI SHLOMO AGISHTEN