Jews, Greeks and Christians

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Many Jews who were raised in Christian countries developed a strong distaste for the holiday of Christmas. We suffered through the month of December, which was drenched in holiday song and imagery, struggling to insulate ourselves against this cultural barrage. We vigilantly turned our televisions sets away from holiday programming, tuned out holiday-themed commercials, and avoided listening to Christmas carols. The holiday celebrations were a painful part of growing up Jewish in Christian lands, and the last weeks of December became a period we all grinned and beared.

Our visceral aversion to this day was based on many factors. Firstly, this day, more than any other Christian holiday, accentuated the most heretical aspect of Christianity, namely, the belief in a physical child of an infinite and non-physical God. For centuries we bravely defended pure monotheism, flatly denying any physical association with Hashem, often paying the ultimate price for our conviction. Associating anything human with Hashem is a terrible corruption of our belief.

Historically, this day was also associated with violent and cruel antisemitic attacks. On this day, an annual vitriolic sermon from the local pastor would, inevitably, incite vicious and brutal pogroms against the local Jewish community. The situation was so dreadful that Torah study and public prayer were banned on this day, so that Jews would not be murdered on their way home from the Beit Midrash or from shul. Infamously, this night was referred to as "nittel nacht" or the night devoid of Torah study.

All these factors left a very bitter taste in our mouths. To be courteous to our gentile neighbors, we wished them a generic "Happy Holidays" instead of uttering the actual word Christmas. We were even taught to refer to the day as X-mas, to avoid directly mentioning this unpleasant holiday.

Additionally, we were offended by the juxtaposition between this Christian holiday and our own celebration of Chanuka, which usually occur in the same month. We were always delighted to witness public Chanuka displays, but, just the same, we were dismayed to observe public chanukiyot sitting in display windows alongside holiday trees. We all grew up with a strong distaste for this Christian holiday, and we tried to buffer it from our Chanuka celebration.

Ironically, there is a hidden historical link between Chanuka and the rise of Christianity, a relationship which reframes our view of Christianity.

The Great Revolution

In 1263 when Judaism was put on trial in Barcelona, the Ramban valiantly defended it against its alleged crimes against Christianity. Though the Ramban eloquently represented Judaism, our religion was found guilty as accused. Of course, the verdict was "in" well before the trial began. Fearing for his life, the Ramban eventually fled for his life to a safe haven in Israel. It was a very dark moment in the history of Jewish Christian relations.

To raise the morale of his dispirited Jewish community, the Ramban penned a pamphlet entitled Torat Hashem Temima in which he observed an interesting religious impact of Christianity.

Historically, Christianity was a tragic calamity, as it committed so many bloody and heinous crimes against the Jewish people. However, ideologically and religiously, Christianity contributed to the great advance of monotheism.

Initially, the Jewish nation was tasked with spreading monotheism and morality across the planet. Had we remained in our homeland, we would have been the sole architects of this grand educational project. Our model for a religious life of prosperity and spirituality would have inspired an entire world to a godly lifestyle. It was not to be, as we failed, were evicted into exile, and watched, as history shifted gears. Cast aside by history, we were no longer capable of solely and independently spreading the knowledge of God. There would be other forces driving the conversion of our world into monotheism. By adopting monotheism, Christianity became part of this revolution of religious consciousness.

The Great Escape

Prior to this revolution, humanity was trapped in a murky underworld of paganism and black magic. People assumed the presence of multiple warring gods who battled over control of our planet. These human-like gods were, unsurprisingly, very similar to humans, flawed and sinful. They were also angry gods who toyed with their human playthings for recreation.

A world which was subject to the whims of capricious gods would always be random, and could never be organized through logic nor mapped through science. Additionally, laboring under the tyranny of decadent gods, humanity had absolutely no incentive for moral behavior. In this dark and violent world, the concept of a compassionate “one” God remained distant.

Christianity shifted much of this chaotic world away from its pagan clutter and closer to monotheism. Emerging from Judaism, adopting and adapting the Bible, Christianity embraced core Jewish values such as charity, forgiveness, sanctity of life, morality and the dignity of the human condition. Most of all, it asserted a one God who was responsible for all creation.

Unfortunately, while these ideas were lifted from Judaism, they were also corrupted, and no corruption was more offensive than the repelling notion that a non-physical Hashem could have a child. These corruptions were so severe that Christinaity lost most of its resemblance to Judaism. However, some of its core ideas remained monotheistic and this religion has participated in a religious revolution. Amidst the fury of medieval antisemitism, the Ramban's comments reminded us that Christinaity was partially responsible for delivering a more civil society, which believes in a one God who cares about His creatures and who gifted them with the tools of science to improve their condition.

What does this have to do with Chanuka?

The Chanuka story should not be shrunk into a series of isolated military battles between courageous Jewish heroes and militant Seleucid Greeks who banned religion and erected statues of Zeus in our Mikdash. The Chanuka battle was just a part of a larger cultural encounter between Athens and Yerushalayim spanning several generations. As the Greeks probed their world seeking universal truths, they had a gnawing sense that the road to religious truth ran through Yerushalayim. The Greek descendants of Yafet realized that they must return to the tents of Shem to uncover prophecy. Science and philosophy weren’t sufficient to uncover the deeper truths of this world.

Part of this cultural encounter erupted into violence through attempts to Hellenize Judaism and desecrate our mikdash. We resisted and fearlessly defended our land, our mikdash and our religion. However, the cultural tides of this encounter between Athens and Yerushalayim flowed both ways. Many Jewish values backwashed to Greece, effectively creating Hebraicized Greeks who adopted numerous Jewish values and practices and possessed monotheistic leanings and sympathies. The Septuagint or the Greek translation of the Bible, written during this era of cultural encounter, made Jewish ideas even more accessible to the Hebraicized Greeks who inhabited the Mediterranean basin.

Candidates for Conversion

Two centuries later these Jewishly influenced Greeks who had already been sensitized to Judaism, formed receptive audiences for Christian values. Fortunately, Jews themselves resolutely rejected Christian ideas, but these values shifted the ancient world of Greece closer to true monotheism. The Chanuka victory increased the appeal of Judaism, inspiring Jewish sentiments in Greeks who would one day turn away from their pagan mess and inch closer to a world of monotheism and enlightened science.

During the *al hanissim* prayer we announce that God's miracles made His presence more "kadosh" in our world. The term "kadosh" refers to God being different or transcendent. Chanuka reminded the world of a God who was different from this world and responsible for all of it. As the centuries passed more of humanity began to comprehend this – even in a corrupted form. Chanuka formed a major milestone in the advance of this brave new concept of God. Its ripples were felt across the religious world.