



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

From the Sources is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. Please consider discussing these texts and questions around your chanukiah on one night of Chanukah.

Chanukah

Development, Globalization and the Miracle of the Maccabees

Introduction

Chanukah commemorates the victory of Jewish sovereignty against the Greek/Hellenistic empire. The Greeks, and later the Romans, brought great advances in science, technology and philosophy that have profoundly shaped Western culture – and influenced Jewish practice and tradition – for millennia. They also brought religious persecution, strict political hierarchy and a foreign elite. Under the Greek king Antiochus IV, many Jewish practices were outlawed and Greek religious symbols were forcibly installed in the Second Temple. Eventually, the Maccabees rose up against the Greeks and reasserted Jewish rule in Judea. In the 21st century, we are also witness to great advances – medical, technological and economic – that reach to the corners of the world. With these advances, however, come the cultural norms and ideologies of the West. Chanukah offers an opportunity to explore the conflicts and tensions that accompany globalization and development.



Al Hanisim (Liturgical formula incorporated into the Amidah and Birkat Hamazon during Chanukah)

In the time of Mattityahu, the son of Yochanan, the Hasmonean High Priest, and his children, the evil Greek empire confronted Your righteous people to make them forget Your Torah and to divert them from the laws of Your choosing...

- How does Al Hanisim characterize the encounter between the Greek Empire and the Jewish people?

“Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition,” Erich S. Gruen, p.xiv

The degree to which acculturation took place in Judea itself and the time when it began in earnest elude any certainty... “Judaism” and “Hellenism” were neither competing systems nor incompatible concepts. It would be erroneous to assume that Hellenization entailed encroachment upon Jewish traditions and erosion of Jewish beliefs. Jews did not face a choice of either assimilation or resistance to Greek culture... The prevailing [Hellenistic] culture of the Mediterranean could hardly be ignored or dismissed. But adaptation to it need not require compromise of Jewish precepts or practices. The inquiry can be formulated thus: how did Jews accommodate themselves to the larger cultural world of the Mediterranean while at the same time reasserting the character of their own heritage within it?

- How does Gruen characterize this same encounter between Greek culture and the Jewish people?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף לג עמוד ב

דיתבי רבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון, ויתבי יהודה בן גרים גבייהו. פתח רבי יהודה ואמר: כמה נאים מעשיהן של אומה זו: תקנו שווקים, תקנו גשרים, תקנו מרחצאות. רבי יוסי שתק. נענה רבי שמעון בן יוחאי ואמר: כל מה שתקנו - לא תקנו אלא לצורך עצמן, תקנו שווקין - להושיב בהן זונות, מרחצאות - לעדן בהן עצמן, גשרים - ליטול מהן מכס.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33b¹

For R. Judah, R. Jose, and R. Simeon were sitting, and Judah, a son of proselytes, was sitting near them. R. Judah commenced [the discussion] by observing, “How fine are the works of [the Roman] people! They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths.” R. Jose was silent. R. Simeon b. Yohai answered and said, “All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places to set harlots in them; baths to rejuvenate themselves; bridges to levy tolls for them.”

- Mapping this passage onto the current globalization debate, which “works” do you think R. Judah would praise today? How would R. Simeon b. Yohai critique his praise?
- How do these three texts together help us to understand our own experience as American Jews?

¹ For a humorous alternate take on this passage, see “The Aqueduct” clip from Monty Python’s “The Life of Brian” at <http://tinyurl.com/2k9wz4>.

“Culture: Cultural Diversity, Cultural Production and Identity,” Fatma Alloo et al., *Another World is Possible*, p.213

The increasing demand by peoples and communities to have their cultural identity preserved comes in a world context we now call globalization, which many perceive as taking us towards a progressive homogenization at a global level...The process of globalization manifests itself as a two-headed creature. One has an unprecedented capacity for communication and exchange on a global scale...The other manifestation, in contrast, is the imposition of a Western socio-economic-cultural model throughout the world.

- In what ways do you see globalization as bringing opportunity? In what ways does it impose homogeneity?
- How does Alloo's assessment of globalization as “two-headed” offer commentary on the views expressed by R. Judah and R. Simeon b. Yohai?

“Global Covenant: A Jewish Perspective on Globalization,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Making Globalization Good*, p.224

Globalization, writes Zygmunt Bauman, “divides as much as it unites... What appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signaling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate” (Bauman 1998: 2). There can be no doubt that some of the economic surplus of the advanced economies of the world should be invested in developing countries to help eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, ensure universal education, combat treatable disease, reduce infant mortality, improve work conditions, and reconstruct failing economies. As with *tzedakah*, the aim should be to restore dignity and independence to nations as well as individuals. Whether this is done in the name of compassion, social justice, or human solidarity it has now become a compelling imperative. The globalization of communications, trade, and culture globalizes human responsibility likewise. The freedom of the few must not be purchased at the price of the enslavement of the many to poverty, ignorance, and disease.

- What argument does Rabbi Sacks make in favor of globalization? What is the “compelling imperative” that he identifies?
- How does Rabbi Sacks' view relate back to the traditional telling of the Chanukah story?
- Contemporary development includes elements of “communications, trade, and culture.” Imagine the beneficiaries of that development writing their own version of *Al Hanisim*. What might they say?
- What do these texts teach us about how to “do development”? How should we support those in the developing world, given our people's historical experience of oppression at the hands of the Greek and Roman globalizers?



Conclusion

For the Jews during the time of the Maccabees, the Hellenistic imposition of development, assimilation and cultural imperialism were sufficiently disruptive that they chose to resist with violence. Now that we, American Jews, are in some ways on the other side of the equation – supporting development in the Global South and benefiting from the economic forces of globalization – we should be particularly sensitive to the ways in which we approach those whom we seek to help. This Chanukah, let us struggle with the question: How can we balance our aspirations to improve people's lives while avoiding the tendency to impose our own agendas and values?

For more information on this and other publications from the AJWS Education Department, please contact Sarah Margles at smargles@ajws.org. To subscribe to this publication, visit www.ajws.org/holidays. AJWS is preparing a catalogue of holiday teaching guides for the Jewish calendar.

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