

From Athens to Jerusalem

By Mordechai Gafni

From Balanced Personality to Passionate Risk-Taker

Matthew Arnold, writing in his celebrated work *Culture and Anarchy*, suggests that Hebraism and Hellenism are the two essential philosophies of life between which civilized man must choose. For Arnold, Hebraism is primarily a system of obedience to an external source (the Mosaic Law) while Hellenism advocates perfecting the self (as the Greeks did) by expanding our consciousness through culture. Chanukah is the tale of the clash between these two world visions, the clash between the Hebrew Maccabees and the Hellenist Romans. Thus, in the Jewish calendar, Chanukah becomes the time of year when we try to relocate our spiritual direction on the road between Athens and Jerusalem.

Often, as Chanukah approaches, I wonder if I am becoming more of a Hellenist. Am I unconsciously sliding towards becoming a sort of "inverted Marrano," biblical on the outside, Hellenist on the inside? In seeking an answer, as part of my own Chanukah ritual, I try and look at some new dimension of that ancient conflict of ideas.

This year I'm thinking a lot about balance and stability. How many of us at some point in our lives thought of pursuing a new direction but held back for fear of being branded unstable? Balance and stability are certainly important values. However, it may not be irrelevant that their source in Western intellectual history is rooted in ancient Athens and not Jerusalem.

For the Hellenist, the harmonious and balanced personality is the ideal. However, Hellenistic harmony comes from a place of detachment. In the platonic myth the ideal is to "become a spectator to all time and existence." This is certainly not biblical myth. The basic Hebraic posture in the world is passionate involvement in the realness of life (doing, not thinking, as Arnold would say).

The Hellenist seeks eternity. He cannot find it in the world of particulars, which are here today and gone tomorrow. So he searches in the realm of essences, universals, and principles of logic. In their unchanging shadow, he feels the breath of eternity. For the Hellenist, theory is always more important than application, thinking is higher and more pure than doing.

For the Hebrew there is no greater sin than the sin of detachment. The Hebrew requires the full embrace of the concreteness of being. God is in the details. God is in the ferment of our lives.

Biblical wisdom-masters rarely make sweeping universal statements about the nature of reality. They are relatively unconcerned with grand systems and elegant structures of logic. Their vision is almost always of the particular individual and his or her choices. For the Jew, eternity resides in the human encounter with the moment.

The Hebraic worldview--or what I have termed in other I writings biblical myth--shapes the way we understand and live our lives in at least three important ways. Deep meditation on these particular dimensions of biblical myth is the spiritual technology of Chanukah.

First, the biblical myth vision of God differs from that of the Hellenist. The biblical God is personal and cares deeply about all of His creatures. Biblical myth prophet Isaiah as well as the talmudic wisdom masters describe a God who is fully engaged and radically empathetic to the joy and pain of his creatures. The Hebrew believes in and experiences a God who cares.

Our God knows our name. Indeed the very designation of God in biblical myth is Hashem-- accurately translated as: the name.

When a person dies we recite the Kaddish prayer. The prayer begins with the Aramaic words--"Magnified and exalted be God's name." Biblical myth commentary is aghast. Is theological pronouncement about the magnification of God's name appropriate to the existential pain and confusion of the open grave!? Do we not need to roundly condemn Job's comforters for offering theology instead of solace at their friend's time of sorrow?

Deep reading of Zoharic texts suggests a radical re-reading of the Kaddish. Death--teach the Zoharic masters--is a diminishment of divinity. Every human being expresses an infinitely unique face of God. Indeed, God's name is no more and no less than the name of every being who lives, lived, and will live on the planet. The name of man and the name of God are one. Thus, when a person dies we offer eulogy. Its essential goal is to receive the soul print of the departed--a soul print that perhaps we were unable to fully receive in his or her lifetime. In biblical myth the primary symbol for soul print is name. Thus names are so crucial in understanding biblical text--particularly the mythic sections of the Bible like the books of Genesis or Samuel.

When someone dies and divinity is diminished for the loss of a wholly unique expression of the name--we say Kaddish--"Magnified and exalted be the great name." And we mean not the abstract designation of divinity but the name of the departed--which in the deepest of places is the name of God.

The mandate of Hebraic man is *imitatio dei*, to be like God. To be like God is to never receive service from a person without knowing their name. To be like God is about moral commitment to the betterment of our world and deep existential empathy with every individual who suffers. To be like God is to express and implement a passionate social vision, which addresses all facets of humanity. It is to be concerned, engaged, and attached.

Secondly, for the Hellenist and the Hebrew, love takes on very different meanings. For the Hellenist, love is the desire to know the essence of the matter. God is the ultimate object of love. God however is not a personal force or even a force for healing and transformation in the world. God is, rather, an unmoved mover. The love that moves the universe is the contemplative love of the philosopher seeking to decipher the nature of divinity. Love is an intellectual category realized in the privacy of one's heart and mind. It involves no other personal being-- it is neat and orderly, focused in the realm of eternal truths. Thus for the Greek, freedom--in the sense of personal autonomy--is a fundamental goal. The great desire is to be free of all enslaving powers, be they the human body, an oppressive state, or desires that might imbalance one's moral and intellectual virtue.

For the Hebrew the essential category of being is Encounter. Biblical myth imagines relationship as the crucible in which human perfection is forged. Love is the love of the personal Other--which wells out of a deep relationship and embracing of one's own name--the love of self. Indeed in biblical myth it is the drive to move from loneliness to loving which is the fundamental ground of both being and becoming.

Thus the biblical lover gives up on the ordered ideal of independence and autonomy. Protestant theologian Schleiermacher was not completely wrong when he described the essence of the religious experience as being one of radical dependency. And yet he was not entirely right either. Interdependence would be a better description of the biblical myth ideal. Human beings depend on each other and God depends on human beings. The Kabbalists understood--suggests sixteenth-century master Ibn Gabbai--that the need and ability to receive is a virtue of perfection. God then--the ultimate perfection--must be, in some sense, needy and capable of receiving.

For the Hellenist, the person loves the unmoved mover. For the Hebrew, the person loves a perfect yet paradoxically personal and needy God. More-over--and this is what shocks the Hellenist to the core--the person is passionately loved by God in return.

Recently I gave a talk at Cambridge University titled "Towards the Redemption of a Crying God." The chairman of the philosophy department, a fine Aristotle scholar, in genuine puzzlement asked me after the lecture--How can you believe in a God who cries?

I responded--not logically, but with the primal intuition of a biblical myth teacher--"How--in the twentieth century--can I believe in a God who does not cry?"

The notion of a God who cries is blasphemous to the Hellenist. For the Hebrew the notion of a God who doesn't cry is blasphemous.

This difference expresses itself as well in the different sensory orientations of the Greek and the Hebrew. The primary sensory perception for the Greek was through the eye--visual--while for the Hebrew it was auditory--the ear. The visual modality invites contemplation but not necessarily relationship. "Look but don't touch" is not just a contemporary idiom; it is the very nature and experience of reality for both the Platonist and the Stoic.

Objects in the environment are by nature visible. They reflect light and are therefore immediately apparent to visual perception. Objects, however, do not emit sound merely by virtue of their being objects. Therefore the perceiver cannot choose to hear something. He must rather wait to be called. Hearing implies becoming and relationship. Thus the biblical myth clarion call is "Pay Attention" or in more biblical parlance--"Hear O Israel."

The Hellenist seeks to prove via rational demonstration--symbolized by vision and contemplation--that an unmoved mover, God, exists. The Hebrew desperately, ecstatically, seeking union, longs for intimacy and full sensual absorption by God.

Thirdly, as a function of this intimacy, the Hebraist, unlike the Hellenist, may occasionally even challenge God. Abraham becomes the first Jew by challenging the justice of God's intended destruction of Sodom and Gomorah. The Jew, cries Hasidic master Levi of Berdichev (a cry echoed by Elie Weisel)--the Jew can be angry and even shout at God, but can never ignore God. Such is the nature of intimacy. The Hellenist, however, must shape his God to be beyond taking any responsibility for the world. For the Hellenist, to contemplate is to embrace. For the Jew, to struggle is to embrace.

This entire set of ideas plays itself out in all sorts of very practical ways. One small example: For the Hebrews there is always a legal obligation to rescue. That can apply to lost property or a friend who is drowning. Not to get involved is a violation of God. For the Hellenist and

many of his spiritual descendants, "Don't get involved for it may ruin your personal harmony" is the unspoken mantra of the day.

For the Hebrew, tikkun olam is the categorical imperative of becoming. For the Hellenist, a Western liberal education which helps one better understand reality is the mark of a truly cultured human being.

Now I am not arguing against balance and stability. However, for the Jew, balance and stability are values which are subservient to moral passion, reality, and empathy. They cannot become code words, allowing us to live blissfully in inherited truths unwilling to genuinely struggle with ourselves and the world.

For the Jew to realize the Divine within is to be always rising and becoming. And to become you have to risk falling, failing, and losing your place. Change by definition involves instability. Balance needs to be disrupted when it fronts as an excuse for fear of growth and change.

Let's give ourselves a Chanukah present this year. Let's risk the new. We need to try and break the hold of the Hellenistic shadow on our psyche. There is something comfortable about the Hellenistic vision--all is harmony, life never really touches me, and I don't have to pay the price of becoming. Perhaps it's time for commitment in places where we've been bravely maintaining our detachment because we were scared to death. Maybe we need to become unstuck from the tired idea that our life is what it is. Our life is what it could be. Chanukah invites us to become passionate lovers, daring the uncertainties as our reaches exceed our grasps, yearning for heaven.

Athens was a great city, but we are children of Jerusalem. Jewish eternity resides in the infinite value and holiness of our personal story and our potential for change. In the tradition of Hasidism, let us bless each other that this Chanukah should be the year for us; a year in which the flame of the Chanukah candle in our soul dispels the darkness of our fears--giving us courage to dare, to be, to care and love. Let the Maccabees be victorious.

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