

Ulysses

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Judaism has engaged and locked horns with Greek culture for thousands of years. Alexander the Great was welcomed in 332 BCE. He permitted the Judeans to worship their way freely. But then the rival successor dynasties of the Ptolemies in Egypt and Seleucids in Damascus began to interfere in Judean affairs. This culminated in the Maccabee revolt against Antiochus in 169 BCE. The wealthy and aristocratic Judean classes readily accepted Greek culture. Indeed it was the priesthood that introduced the games, theater and circus into Judean life. But even the rabbinic leadership which resisted Greek culture, philosophy and paganism, still borrowed the idea of the academy from Greece. Competition between Greeks and Judeans primarily over commercial and public status led to a series of assaults on Jewish communities around the Mediterranean and sometimes fierce retaliation.

Greece was absorbed by Rome. The struggle between the two worldviews continued. The Talmud relates that during the civil war between the Hasmonean princes Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, someone who spoke Greek sent a pig to be sacrificed in the Temple. That was the moment that the sages decided to ban *Chochmat Yavanit*. Literally Greek Wisdom. Was *Chochmat Yavanit* referring to Greek philosophy or science or the language? There are plenty of Greek words and terminology in the Talmud. And if it meant studying sciences or what we call secular education, the Talmud too is full of references to scientific analysis and experimentation. And there continued to be a great deal of interaction. The Talmud (Bava Kama 83a and Sotah 49b) says that Rabbi Gamliel allowed his sons to speak Greek and dress like Greeks because they had to represent the Jewish people to the Romans.

Against all the odds, under pressure from the great Western cultures, our small, fractious people survived and preserved their religious culture even though the fact is that the overwhelming majority of its members either abandoned the struggle intentionally or were forced by circumstance to give up the struggle.

But was our survival conditional on excluding everything else? The issue of secular education remains a serious bone of contention between Haredi Jews and the rest. If Greek culture and philosophy underpin Western cultures, it stands, in the Haredi mind for everything antithetical to Jewish values (not to mention the constant attempt to threaten Jewish existence). Yet in Medieval times both Maimonides and Rashi supported studying what we would call secular studies (Both commenting on the Mishna in Sotah 9.14). Once, a knowledge of Greek Philosophy was crucial to any Jew who wanted to engage intellectually. Saadya Gaon, Maimonides, Yehudah Halevy all immersed themselves in Greek philosophy.

My late father often spoke about combining Jerusalem with Athens. Even if Jerusalem, for him and me, has always taken pride of place, there was and is much in Western thought and literature that is valuable and can add to our

understanding of the world and ourselves. The two need not necessarily or completely exclude each other. When I was a schoolboy Latin and Greek were essential parts of the school curriculum in Britain. Slowly Greek disappeared and then Latin went. Nowadays barely 300 British students graduate school each year with any classical Greek and they are almost all in private schools. The purely intellectual disciplines are disappearing in favor of marketable, practical ones. Utilitarianism has led to the dumbing down of our education. It is a shame for the non-Jewish world too, for what it misses out on, as much as for religious Jews.

Greek philosophy nowadays, does nothing for me, other than as a historical feature of different times. Greek culture, however, is still deeply embedded, even in Hollywood, where the wars of the Greeks and the rivalry of Greek gods and goddesses regularly feature in blockbusters. The great Greek and Roman writers produced epic stories of love, deceit, war, and ambition, not entirely different from the earlier biblical stories we are familiar with. Except of course they lacked all the spiritual dimensions so crucial to ours. Yet Homer and Virgil are simply not part of our Jewish world today. And if one were to mention the name Odysseus in a yeshiva, no one would know who he was. But then how many kids in the USA in general would?

I am re-reading one of the great books of western culture, "Ulysses" by James Joyce. The legendary Greek hero, Odysseus was the king of Ithaca, a small island in the Ionian sea, where he lived with his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. The Romans called him Ulysses. After fighting the war against the city of Troy with the other Greeks, he started his journey home to his wife and son. He was delayed for ten years during which he endured one adventure and drama after another. Each inflicted on him by the random jealousies and rivalries of the Greek gods. In one way it reminds me of the Ten Trials of Abraham. Suffering can strengthen you. The story is told by Homer in the Iliad and by Virgil in Aeneid. And it is a perfect example of the difference between a pagan view of how life works, in contrast to Monotheism, where the good deeds of humans, rather than random gods, decide what happens in life.

In "Ulysses" the novel, James Joyce retells or rather adapts the saga of Ulysses, through the mundane experiences of Irish characters, including an assimilated Jew by the name of Leopold Bloom who lives in Dublin. The theme, in so far as there is one, is of a painful journey through life in the city. Ireland, as with most of the British Isles, has a very long record of both anti-Semitism and yet harboring small Jewish communities of refugees. My paternal grandparents lived and were buried in Dublin. And the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, Isaac Herzog, came from a position in Dublin. And my youngest brother was Chief Rabbi there once upon a time. Nowadays Eire is one of the most anti-Israel states in the world.

The book is a challenge. Almost Talmudical. So complicated that it can't be understood without the use of reference books and copious notes. Even then, it is very hard work. It is not for the faint of heart or determination. I am struggling through it for several reasons. One is the challenge of the text itself. The more personal is the unusual number of references to Jews, Judaism and Jewish History. It is fascinating how much Joyce refers to Jews and Jewish themes and how much he gets wrong. From Jewish funeral customs to

translations and transliterations of Hebrew terms. Despite his Jewish name Leopold Bloom has absolutely no connection with Jewish life. And yet he suffers from constant prejudice, snide remarks and anti-Semitism. Joyce had some close friends who were secular Jews in Italy and Ireland and had a remarkable amount of sympathy for their sense of alienation. Many misread his Jewish references as anti-semitic but they are the very opposite. They show how so much anti-semitism is ignorance and petty prejudice. And our sympathies are with Bloom rather than his bigoted environment. Ulysses is worth reading both as great literature and because it gives me an insight into another world, as well as how others view Jews. It is a very different and specific way of looking at life. And even if it is remote from mine, it is instructive if only by way of contrast.

Knowledge can come from any source. And it seems a shame to me, that the Haredi world, in general, focusses so exclusively on Torah. They see Chanuka as emblematic of the existential threat of Greek culture. Ironically almost all of the priesthood at that time was pro-Greek. We were divided then as we are now. Of course, I am glad we were victorious. But there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I do believe that Torah should be a priority in how one lives one's life. And I admire those who devote themselves to it. But to miss out on so much else is really a shame and a loss.

And I can still wish you all a Happy Chanukah