

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Chanukah 5769

“I recall the distress that befell me; with three blows He struck me in this month... He surrounded me on its eighth day with darkness left and right, for these three events I instituted a fast: the king of Greece forced me to translate the Torah into Greek, on my back the plowers plowed and lengthened their furrow.” (Selichos for the Tenth of Teves)

Why is the translation of the Torah into Greek considered a tragedy, one of the reasons for our fast on the Tenth of Teves? The answer is that the translation marked the beginning of the Hellenistic era in Jewish history, an era characterized by heresy and defection from the Torah on a scale the Jewish people had never seen before. Increasingly, Jews began speaking Greek and studying the Greek culture. They wanted to remain Jews as well, preserving the Torah, but they wanted to transform the Torah from a living book, a text which Jews spent their days and nights discussing and explaining on multiple levels, into a dry text with one simple meaning. The Greek translation, called the Septuagint, suited their purpose well.

This was the era when the Sadducee movement arose. The Sadducees and the Hellenizers were closely related, because the Sadducees also sought to deny the Oral Law and base their Judaism solely on the Written Torah. To them, the Torah was a fixed text with no room for questions or discussions. They did not spend time pouring over the Torah and its interpretation, as the Talmudic sages did; instead, they studied Greek philosophy and culture. Their view of Torah study was typified by the statement of Elazar ben Poirah, who advised King Yannai to kill all the sages. “What will become of the Torah?” asked Yannai. Elazar replied, “The Torah is sitting in a corner; whoever wants can study it” (Kiddushin 66a).

By contrast, the Gemara, the Oral Law, is full of questions and challenges: “How do we derive this? Is this not a contradiction? Why does the Torah repeat this or that word?”

Chanukah is the time when we commemorate the victory of the Hasmoneans over the Hellenizers, and thus the victory of the living Torah, the Oral Torah, over the fixed, dry, translated Torah. This victory is alluded to in the story of Yaakov Avinu defeating the angel. The angel gave Yaakov the name Yisroel, “for you have contended with angels and men and won.” When Yaakov asked what the angel’s name was, the angel said, “Why do you ask my name?” (Bereishis 32:29-30) Why was Yaakov so interested in the angel’s name? And why didn’t the angel answer the question?

Yaakov reasoned as follows: “My new name, Yisroel, must reflect my essence. If my essence is the fact that I triumphed over this angel, then I want to know the angel’s name. I want to know what was so important about this victory.” The angel replied, “My name is ‘why do you ask’.” You have been victorious over the philosophy that advocates blind faith and opposes asking questions. Similarly, the Jewish people eventually defeated the Sadducees, who left the Torah as a fixed text and denied the Oral Torah.

The Sadducees are long gone, but today we face a different, more sinister heretical movement: Zionism. Among those Orthodox Jews officially opposed to Zionism, there are two types. There are those pay lip service to anti-Zionism because they know that all the gedolim of the past were anti-Zionist. However, they do not spend any time studying the subject in order to understand exactly what is wrong with Zionism. Thus many of them are woefully ignorant, and they use the word Zionism for anything they happen to oppose: irreligious political parties, irreligious kibbutzim, desecration of Shabbos and so on. When asked to explain their opposition to the essence of Zionism, they avoid the question and say piously, “Why do you ask these questions? We have to accept the ‘shitah’ of our famous rabbis of the past even if we don’t understand it.”

Then there are those who are really interested in the truth. They approach Zionism as they approach any other Torah subject: with questions, deep thinking, and analysis of the sources. It was this approach that set the Satmar Rav apart from many other great rabbis of his time. All of them were against Zionism, but the Satmar Rav was the only one who wrote a full-length work analyzing all the sources, quoting the arguments of the Zionists and refuting them.

Studying Vayoel Moshe and all the relevant sources, asking questions and searching for answers is the only way to ensure that we stay on the proper path. Otherwise we could, G-d forbid, become like those who say they are against Zionism yet advocate Zionism of the most extreme kind.

Those who do not have e-mail can now receive this sheet free every week by regular mail. To order write to the address below.



True Torah Jews
183 Wilson St. PMB 162
Brooklyn, NY 11211

For additional copies of this publication,
or to sponsor an issue,
PLEASE CALL 718-841-7053.