

Nittel Nacht

Yeshiva students all celebrate December 25th – but in a unique way. How does Judaism approach other religions? Yosef in this week's parsha, and a story of the Baal Shem Tov, provide an interesting answer.

December 25th Celebration in Yeshiva

The non-Jewish holiday season is everywhere. Just go into any bank or shopping mall and you'll see the red and green theme in every window and on every front door.

Jewish people mark December 25 as well. It is a great vacation day, a day when, on a regular year, you can go out and have fun with the family. As a young yeshivah student, I remember that we actually “celebrated” the coming of December 25.

Allow me to explain:

As a general rule, a Jew is obligated to study Torah whenever there is a free moment. As we say in the Shema, “And you shall speak of them... when you lay down and when you rise, when you sit at home and when you travel.” Torah commands us to keep the Torah with us at all times. This means, in a practical sense, that every Jewish male after his Bar Mitzvah is duty-bound to use every free moment to study Torah. (Women and girls too, of course, may study Torah, but they are not as obligated as men are.)

Now, Torah allows a man to work because he is obligated to

support his family, as he is required by the kesubah, the marriage contract. He is also allowed to take time for meals and even to relax a bit. However, the basic rule is always in effect: whenever you have free time, you must study Torah.

As a Yeshiva student, you have no obligation to support a family and no other real responsibilities. Which means that you are basically obligated to study Torah at every given moment. This is not to say that yeshivah students have perfect records of Torah study—sure, there's plenty of time-wasting and goofing off. But when a yeshivah student doesn't study Torah, he doesn't really enjoy himself because of his guilt...

Except on December 25, when there is actually a Jewish tradition to *not* study Torah. Not for the entire day, though—the non-learning is only from sunset to midnight. In the late afternoon of December 24th, the yeshivah students close their holy books as the sun goes down and keep them closed until midnight that night.

Here's why: Since December 25 marks the birthday of "that man," as the Talmud refers to him, and especially since he was a Jew, we do not study Torah on the night of his birthday so that the Torah we study will not be credited to his merit—we do not want his soul to draw spiritual strength from the Torah that Jews study on that night.

So when December 25 rolls around, the joy on the faces of young yeshivah students, who normally must keep long daily schedules filled with Torah study, is hard to describe—now they are forbidden to study Torah, and without any guilt! For them,

the day is truly a cause for celebration.

The Pagan's Stipend

Now, what does all that tell us? It tells us that Judaism does indeed recognize this day. Though it recognizes it in a negative way, it still doesn't ignore it outright.

In this week's Torah portion, we actually find a positive recognition of religions other than ours.

In the parshah, the Torah tells us that a severe famine hit Egypt. There was no bread to be found throughout the entire country. The only available grain was stored in the government storehouses – the grain that Yosef had collected during the years of plenty.

At first, the Egyptians bought food with money, and Yosef collected all the money throughout Egypt and Canaan for the Pharaoh's government. When the people no longer had any money, they paid for food with their livestock—horses, donkeys, and so on. And when they no longer had any livestock, they sold their very selves as slaves to the Pharaoh. Yosef purchased them and their land, making everything belong to the Pharaoh—Communism at its best. (But here, it was not against their will).

However, there was one very limited group out of the entire population that did not need to sell itself to the royal government as slaves. Who were they? The priests.

The priests of Egypt's pagan religion received a special regular stipend from the government. Egypt's spiritual leaders had a

special relationship with Yosef.

But why? Why did Yosef treat them different than any other Egyptian citizen? What did they do to earn it—especially since they were idol-worshippers?

The Targum Yerushalmi, (sometimes referred to as Targum Yonason Ben Uziel), is a translation of the Torah in Aramaic which was written in the Holy Land about 2,000 years ago. This translation is unique in that it is not word for word—rather, in many places, it adds several words so that the whole story can be understood. It's a little like Rashi.

Now, with Yosef and the Egyptian priests, the Targum Yerushalmi says Yosef didn't acquire the priest's land as an act of repaying their kindness. They had done Yosef a very big favor, for which he was now repaying measure for measure.

The Fried Egg

What favor did they do for Yosef?

Everyone knows the story of young Yosef and Potiphar's wife, who had tried to seduce her husband's handsome young butler. As the Torah tells us, he abandoned his garment in her hands and fled.

But what did "Mrs. Potiphar" do? The Targum Yerushalmi tells us that she actually used the white of a raw egg to create false evidence on the bed sheets that Yosef had assaulted her. She then called the household staff and showed them the "evidence"—and indeed, when her husband came home and heard her story and saw the "proof," he wanted to literally kill

Yosef.

Back then, men would easily get executed for doing something like that— and certainly a foreigner and a non-Egyptian, a “Hebrew slave,” like Yosef.

So what indeed kept Potiphar, who, according to the interpretation of the Rashbam, was actually the Pharaoh’s royal executioner, from executing Yosef?

The Targum Yerushalmi says that Potiphar decided to consult with the priests, the religious leaders of Egypt, before he executed him.

“Yosef’s master took advice from the priests, and they investigated and found that it was egg white, and they did not execute him.” The priests had a method for dealing with such allegations of infidelity—they would take the physical evidence and literally hold it close to a flame, and if it turned into a fried egg it would prove that the allegations were completely false.

Yosef owed his life to those religious leaders, so when there was a famine in Egypt years later, he repaid this kindness by providing them with a stipend of grain, allowing them to retain their property, livestock, and their very selves.

The Shrine at the Rest Stop

A story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidim, that he once hired a wagon driver for one of his many trips in Poland. Today, the highways in America have rest areas every few miles—but in those days, every few kilometers along the highways you would come across a “shrine” marked by

cross, where travelers would stop to pray.

The Baal Shem Tov was traveling along with this non-Jewish wagon driver when they passed one of these stations. The Baal Shem Tov noticed that the man did not stop to pray. The journey continued, and at the next prayer stop, the wagon driver again did not stop. At that point, the Baal Shem Tov told him, “Take me back home.”

When they got home, the Baal Shem Tov informed the driver that he was now fired. “Why?” asked the driver. “Because you didn’t stop at any of the stops where every member of your religion stops,” replied the Baal Shem Tov.

“What do you care if I am religious or not?” asked the wagon driver. “It’s a personal issue!”

The Baal Shem Tov answered, “If you have no fear of your god, what guarantee do I have that you won’t get up and murder me?”

A Better World

Judaism is interested in even non-Jews being religious—because when a person is religious and believes in G-d, he knows that he will have to stand before his Creator and provide a reckoning for all his deeds.

A human being with respect for G-d creates at least the chance that he or she will behave better—but a man who shows no concern for G-d, even for the non-Jewish understanding of G-d, is capable of justifying and doing the greatest acts of evil without even feeling guilty.

That's why the Baal Shem Tov fired that driver. And that is why, my friends, we should encourage faith among our neighbors and fellow citizens, nurturing a better world, one individual at a time, until we finally arrive at that world for which we have been praying for thousands of years, the Era of Moshiach, may he come speedily in our days, amen.