Tree, Yes but Menorah, No?!?!

What really lay behind the war of the Greeks against the Jewish people?

The Menorah Excitement

A few weeks before Chanukah 2005, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hanoka of Pasadena, California received a telephone call from the shopping mall where he normally held his public menorah lighting. “This year, we received instructions from our parent company that we are not to approve religious symbols within the mall.”

When he asked why an exemption was made for the holiday tree, they responded that unlike the menorah, the tree was a holiday decoration and not a religious one — and another few excuses.

He reached out to the non-Jewish mayor who was a friend of his; the mayor was disappointed, but there was nothing he could do. It was the decision of the company, not the city. Rabbi Hanoka tried to arrange for a new location for the public menorah lighting, but everyone responded that it was too late.

For lack of a better option, he decided to hold the menorah lighting in the parking lot of his Chabad center.

He shared the story at his JLI class, and one of the members of the class reached out to the local newspaper. On Yud Tes Kislev, just several days before Chanukah, a reporter from the newspaper called

and said that they wanted to interview him about the story. Later that day, the news crew came to the Chabad center, interviewed the rabbi, and took a picture with him next to the menorah with one light bulb burnt out.

The next morning, on 20 Kislev, his picture was plastered across the front page with the headline, “Menorah Lights Out.” They wrote about the fact that the tree was permitted while the menorah was not, and noted that the mayor didn’t support the mall’s decision.

The story immediately took off, and he received a call from KNX, a prominent radio station in California, asking him to do a short, thirty second segment about the story. As soon as the story aired, he received a call from ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox News. He invited them all to the Chabad center, where he went from crew to crew and repeated his story (it was ultimately aired on five networks and two radio stations).

One of the networks went so far as to interview passerby in the mall (during the busiest shopping season of the year) to ask them about the “antisemitic incident” that had occured. All the responders were against the decision, branding it as an unacceptable antisemitic decision, and some even threatened to take their business elsewhere.

This turned into a different crisis; storekeepers in the mall protested — should they lose their business just because the mall-owners made a wrong decision? The same network sent a team to interview a well-known pastor about the antisemitic incident, and he was also upset for a different reason: “How could they say that the tree isn’t a religious symbol!?”

In short, the ball rolled on and the story got a wider and wider audience.

As he was dealing with the news stations, he received a phone call

from the deputy CEO of the company. Clearly, the publicity had made an impact. The fellow began to apologize; “We have no such policy, it was simply a miscommunication,” and so on and so forth. “What do we need to do to bring you back?” he asked.

“It’s very close to Chanukah,” the rabbi responded, “and we’ve already publicized that the menorah lighting will be in our parking lot. To change the location, transport the Menorah etc will cost five thousand dollars.”

Moments later, the funding was approved; the company would sponsor the move and host the menorah lighting after all.

Rabbi Hanoka immediately came out to the TV crews and shared with them the latest development – that the company had changed their decision and the menorah lighting would be held at the mall after all. The next morning, he added, they would be holding an event — the return of the menorah to the mall. As you can imagine, a television crew was waiting at the mall the next morning to cover the excitement. He made a public announcement on television that everyone was invited to the grand menorah lighting on the first night of chanukah.

A massive crowd showed up on the first night, including the local conservative rabbi and members of his congregation who came to show support for the rabbi. The mayor was there, television crews captured the event, and it was an unbelievable Pirsumei Nisa.

After the menorah was lit, the bochurim began to dance. Someone pulled the mayor into the circle, and before he knew it he was hoisted onto someone’s shoulders with a fedora on his head. His wife got so scared that they worried that she would collapse and she needed to be calmed down, but meanwhile, it caught the eye of the photographers and it was the main picture of the event in the news the next day.

(*The Longest Farbrengen in history, page 77)*

Why The Fight?

What exactly is it about the menorah that draws such opposition? Why does the menorah call forth such emotional reactions?

We all know the story of Chanukah, the celebration of the miracle of the oil and the victory of the Jews over the Greeks. But the Rebbe posed the following question (Toras Menachem vol. 63 pg. 11):

The Greeks were famous for their pursuit of wisdom; they were philosophers and scientists. The Jewish people, too, cherish wisdom. Why didn't we find common ground? Why didn't we join forces and use our joint interests for the benefit of the public? In fact, the Talmud records debates between the sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah and the wise men of Athens. So why did they fight us?

The answer, the Rebbe explains, can be found in the following statement of the Midrash: "If someone tells you that there is wisdom among the nations, believe him. But if he says that there is Torah among the nations, do not believe him" (Eichah Rabba 2:13).

The distinction between Torah and regular wisdom lies at the crux of the issue that separates us from the Greeks.

Wisdom is something that is independent of other faculties in the person. With the power of intellect, a person can gain profound wisdom and discover deep philosophies — but it will not necessarily obligate him to change his behavior.

He could very well not practice what he preaches; he could come to the conclusion that charity is virtue, but it won't necessarily compel him to act on it.

Aristotle, one of the greatest Greek philosophers, was once caught

acting immorally. When asked how such a great philosopher can stoop to such actions, he responded, “Now, I am not Aristotle.” In other words, when he was actively involved in the pursuit of wisdom, he was the great Aristotle, but when it came to his behavior, he was a regular person. His profound wisdom didn’t have any impact on his character. A similar idea is told about Socrates, thought by many to be the father of western philosophy. He lived a very immoral life, and he didn’t see any reason to apologize for it at all.

This is all in direct contrast to the Jewish approach to intellect. We don’t pursue wisdom for its own sake; rather, we use our intellect to determine right from wrong. The wisdom is a means to an end — the betterment of the human being.

This is a very important concept.

The mind is not a moral compass. It is a tool — it can be used to determine how to be better people, but it could also be used for evil. The most evil people in history weren’t fools; to the contrary, many of them were brilliant minds.

This is what lay behind the intense hatred of the Greeks against the Jewish people. The Jews were the conscience of mankind. The Jews declared with their behavior that there was a concept called true morality. There is right and there is wrong, there is good and there is evil, and a person has a Divine obligation to follow the correct path.

The Greeks couldn’t handle that. They wanted a world in which they could live without a guilty conscience. They wanted a world in which they could be great philosophers, while still enslaving human beings and killing the innocent. That’s what they hated about the Jewish people, and that is what lay behind the war of Chanukah.

This is exactly what bothered Hitler as well; he famously wrote that “I am freeing my nation from the empty vision called a

conscience…which is merely a Jewish invention."

The victory over the Greeks is the victory for justice and morality, a victory of the spirit, and a victory of Torah over wisdom.

In our daily lives, we are often faced by a dilemma. We know that the Torah dictates one form of behavior, but we don't necessarily feel compelled to follow its guidance. The holiday of Chanukah reminds us that the Torah is not merely a form of wisdom; it is a guide — one that is meant to be practically applied in our lives.