

The Public Menorah Battle

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

What effect has the public menorah had on Jewish self esteem?

University Acceptance

Last Shabbos, an elderly fellow told me excitedly that his grandson had been accepted into Tulane College in New Orleans, which is considered quite an impressive feat. The grandson had written a paper about his great-grandmother, the mother of this grandfather, and about her Holocaust experiences.

As we were talking, he noticed the large menorah standing in the courtyard. He suddenly pivoted and said, "It's all because of the menorah, it's all because of the Rebbe."

I was a bit surprised. I've known this fellow for 25 years, and they never assumed him to be a major fan of Chabad.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"When I applied for university," said the grandfather, "I did everything to hide my Judaism. I feared that my Jewish identity would hamper my efforts to be accepted. My grandson, on the other hand, was excited to emphasize his Judaism, and he was sure that it would help him be accepted. That attitude is, no doubt, due to the Rebbe's campaign for public menorahs and Jewish pride in the streets."

It's true. In his day, Jews felt that Judaism was to be expressed only behind closed doors, while hidden in public. The Rebbe, with the public menorahs, brought Judaism into the public square.

The Public Menorah Fight

In 1972, when my father-in-law, Rabbi Leibel Alevsky, arrived in Cleveland, he decided to erect a public menorah in Public Square, a central area in downtown Cleveland owned by the municipality. The Jewish federation immediately declared that they were opposed to it, and my father-in-law soon received a telephone call

from his biggest philanthropist, Mr. Irving Stone, telling him that the Jewish leaders of Cleveland were furious.

Many Jews felt that it was important not to violate the separation of church and state to be able to demand that non-Jews do the same in public venues such as schools. Therefore, the Federation wanted him to move the menorah to private property.

Rabbi Alevsky replied that he could not make any decision without the Rebbe's approval. He phoned the Rebbe's secretariat and told Rabbi Hodakov about the situation — that the federation was very opposed and that they were putting immense pressure on Mr. Stone, Chabad's main supporter in town.

Rabbi Hodakov soon came back to the phone with the answer: *beshum oifem nit*, absolutely not. He told Rabbi Alevsky to explain to Mr. Stone that this was actually the right thing to do.

Everybody went crazy, but that year, the menorah was lit in Public Square.

In those years, public menorahs were very controversial. The Jewish federations often fought against it — in several places that are quite close to Cleveland. This took place both in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in Cincinnati, Ohio, and from there it reached the Supreme Court.

Chabad argued that there was nothing wrong with a public menorah. Even President Jimmy Carter participated in the public menorah lighting across the White House in Lafayette park, on public property. Could there have been a better “kosher certification”?

The main arguments were whether the menorah was a religious symbol. Chabad argued that it is a symbol of freedom, commemorating the Jewish victory over Greek culture that was imposed upon them. The fact that it was used in religious ceremonies did not turn it into a religious symbol. The court accepted that argument, and permitted menorahs on public properties while indicating that it should be done in a way that expresses this message of freedom.

In Cincinnati, they didn't give up. They decided to argue in a new case that despite the ruling of the Supreme Court, the municipality opposes the menorah, and that it has the right to do so. Chabad in Cincinnati argued that it contravenes

the right to free speech; a menorah in public is a public expression, and every citizen has the right to do so. It rolled around the court system for 20 years, and at the end, the Supreme Court once again ruled that the municipality does not have the right to prohibit a menorah on public property.

The Hellenists

We are now celebrating Chanukah. Everyone knows the story of the Greeks who tried to impose Greek culture and prohibit Judaism, banning circumcision, Shabbat, etcetera, and how the Maccabees rebelled against them and won.

It's a bit more complicated than that. Greek culture was the civilization of the day. The greatest scientific achievements came from Greece, and they were considered the most progressive people of the world. In fact, the entire modern industry of sports — like the World Cup that just concluded — is based in ancient Greece; even the name Olympics, for example, comes from the city of Olympia in Greece.

As in many progressive countries, the local Jews wanted to become part of the local society. In the days of the Maccabees, there were many Jews who held Greek culture in high esteem, and deeply wanted to be a part of it.

Many of these Jews felt that the more we acculturate ourselves into Greek culture, the nicer they will be to the Jewish people. It soon became a trend — of many Jews adopting Hellenist culture, language, and customs. This was especially prevalent among the families of the priests, and even of the high priesthood. Many Jews, especially the elites, became dedicated hellenists, and went to great lengths to prove their fealty.

This was not always so easy. Greek culture idolized the human body, so sports tournaments would take place completely naked. The Jews who wanted to participate were afraid that everyone would see their circumcision, so many of them undertook painful techniques to hide the fact that they were circumcised. That's how far they went to be accepted into Hellenist society. It is for this reason that Maimonides rules that one who hides his circumcision has no place in the world to come (See *Toras Menachem* vol. 62 p. 351, vol. 66 pg. 370).

This is what gave rise to the Maccabean revolt. Committed Jews felt so

demoralized that the Maccabees were finally inspired to rise up and bring back Jewish dignity and Jewish pride to the Jewish people. Just like the public menorahs.

Joseph's Jewish Pride

This week's Torah portion, Mikeitz, also tells us about Jewish pride.

Let me preface with a question:

Where is Moses buried? Obviously, nobody knows exactly where, but in which region, exactly, was he laid to rest?

The answer is that Moses was buried on the east side of the Jordan river, where the Jewish people were encamped before they entered the land of Israel.

Here's another question:

Where is Joseph buried?

The answer is: in Shechem, in the land of Israel.

This is somewhat bizarre: Joseph died in Egypt and was buried there hundreds of years before the Jews left Egypt. Nonetheless, before leaving Egypt, Moses made sure to find his casket, bring it along for all those 40 years, and then have it buried in the land of Israel. Moses, on the other hand, died at the gates of the promised land, and yet he was left out. Why? Why was Joseph brought into the land of Israel, while Moses, the Redeemer of Israel himself, was left in the Diaspora?

The answer is found in this week's Torah portion. At the beginning of the reading, we read about Pharaoh's dreams about seven fat cows and seven skinny cows etc. Pharaoh understood that he was being given a message, and he couldn't figure it out, until someone remembered that there was a "Hebrew lad" languishing in prison who knew how to interpret dreams.

The Midrash says something fascinating. "He who identified himself by his land, was buried in his land. He who did not identify by his land, was not buried in his land. Joseph identified himself with his land, as the verse states, 'I was stolen

from the land of the Hebrews.' Therefore, he was buried in his land."

Moses on the other hand, did not identify himself as a Hebrew. When he arrived in Midian to escape Pharaoh's wrath and met Jethro's daughters, they came home and told their father that they had met a Egyptian man. In other words, Moses had introduced himself as an Egyptian. Therefore, the Midrash says, "Moses, who didn't identify with his land, was not buried in his land" (Devarim Rabbah 2:8).

The message of Chanukah is that the most important thing we need is Jewish pride. Just as we always make sure to give our children self-esteem, we need to give them Jewish self-esteem. They should never be embarrassed of it; they should embrace it, identify themselves with it, and be proud of it.