

Jewgreek: Eschatology and Ethics

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"Hebraism and Hellenism - between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them (Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*).” As we sit on the cusp of a holiday that has adopted this cultural dichotomy as its central theme, it seems appropriate to reflect on what it means to be situated at the nexus of these opposing forces. In certain ways, the dichotomy has become trite and a nuanced historical sensitivity makes the starkness of the opposition untenable. Hebraism isn't uniquely Hebrew nor Hellenism uniquely Greek. At times the Greeks are Hebrew, and at times the Jews are Greek. Nevertheless, talk about Hebraism and Hellenism as talk about sweeping metanarratives for thinking about history, ethics, community, identity, etc. has captivated thinkers as diverse as Leo Strauss and R. Yehuda Leib Alter, the *Sefat Emet*. It is in this vein - one that gives history a backseat to hermeneutics, that gives priority to understanding ourselves over understanding the past - that I want to consider these “two points of influence.”

To that end, I want to take up the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the familiar pairing of Greek-Jew gets canonized along with his novel pairings of same-other, politics-ethics, said-saying and totality-infinity. As the scholar Oona Eisenstadt helpfully summarizes, “In each of these formulations, the first term [in our case, Greek- AM] refers to a way of thinking that pulls things together into a larger order, and the second term to a rupture that operates as thought's origin and at the same thought's challenge.” To speak Greek is to categorize, to order, to define, and more romantically, to tell stories about the direction of history and its progress. To speak Hebrew is to question, to critique, to undo the ossification of orders and categories and definitions, and to make sure that stories about the march of history do not crush underfoot the complete ineffability and non-totalizability of particular persons. Thus it is that Jacques Derrida in a penetrating essay on Levinas's thought sets out the fundamental question of justice as whether to be Greek or Jewish: “whether to focus on the building of totalizing orders” - the creation of laws, order, ethical edifices, Halakha as manifested in the codes - “or to spend our lives calling orders into question” - The critique of laws and orders, the hard work of questioning and undermining and rupturing and undoing, Halakha as manifested in the Talmud. This question of justice finds its way into our thinking about history as well. For to be Greek in our historical thinking is to see history as fitting the mold of some totalizing order. It is to see history as having meaning, and to see the historical arc of justice in Messianic terms that portend a climax of history in a “Hegelian peace in which all differences are reconciled and everything is finally at rest.” By contrast, to be Jewish in our historical thinking is to resist seeing history through a teleological lens, to resist totalizing orders of meaning and historical progress, and to ensure that “ethical critique is the only constant and nothing is ever allowed to be at rest.”

With these thoughts in mind, we come to our *Parasha*. “And it happened at this time that Judah went down from his brothers and pitched his tent by an Adullamite named Hirah.” So begins the powerful tale of Judah and Tamar. And just here, R. Shmuel b. Nachman chooses to make the following comment: “For I am mindful of the plans [I have made concerning you - declares the LORD - plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a hopeful future”]: the tribes were consumed with the sale of Joseph, Jacob was consumed by his mourning and Judah was consumed by his search for a wife. All the while, God was fashioning the light of the King, the Messiah, [as it is written] “And it happened at this time, etc.” A Greek through and through. The axis of meaning for this tale is only to be found in the grand metanarrative, the cosmic teleology of Messianic redemption. For it is Peretz, the offspring of the illicit union of Judah and Tamar who will be the ultimate progenitor of the Messianic savior. This lonely chapter in Genesis takes up a position in the broader categories of religion thought, in a story all too Greek in its aspirations. Indeed, it is the *light* of the Messiah that concerned God. And it is *light* that forms the central metaphor of Greek thought as described in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. As Derrida writes:

A world of light and of unity, a “philosophy of a world of light, a world without time.” In this heliopolitics “the social ideal will be sought in an ideal of fusion...the subject...losing himself in a collective representation, in a common ideal...”

The heliopolitics of Greek thought is the selfsame heliopolitics of R. Shmuel b. Nachman’s Messianic radiance.

Is there a Jew to be found amidst these Greeks? Absolutely, for R. Shmuel b. Nachman’s story of eschatological futurity is not the only way to tell the story of Genesis 38. For R. Shmuel b. Nachman and his Greek compatriots, the climax of our story is to be found in Judah’s sexual encounter with Tamar, the moment when Messianic hope began to germinate. But for the more Jewish among us, the height of narrative tension is to be found later on. “And she said, ‘Recognize, pray, whose are this seal-and-cord and this staff?’ And Judah recognized them and he said, ‘She is more right than I.’” A question, a critique. An undoing of social orders and political hierarchy. The judge and the jury, the definer and the categorizer is called to task for his judgement, for his definitions and categorizations. There is no grand narrative, no web of Messianic hope to be woven into this moment of pure encounter, of facing up against the Other in her question. This is the Jewish moment in which “ethical critique is the only constant.” For the Jew, Peretz is not the portentous beginnings of the grand historical drama. Peretz is just that - a פּרֵץ, a breach, a rupture in all our totalizing and ordering.

So where does this leave us? “Are we Jews? Are we Greeks?” חנוכה is upon us, a holiday devoted to the triumph of Jew over Greek. Yet, we celebrate the triumph of Jew over Greek by singing

מעוז צור - a hymn that sets up the grand march of history as a meaningful teleological tale bending toward ultimate redemption. We celebrate the triumph of Jew over Greek by lighting a מנורה, and reinstating if only metaphorically and mystically our allegiances to a heliopolitics we thought we had quashed. So 'Are we Jews? Are we Greeks?' We are surely both. We are Jews with Messianic hope. We are Greeks who fight against the ossification of order. We are Halakhists who question Talmudically, and Talmudists who act Halakhically. We are dreamers who see dominion refracted through genuflecting sheaves, and we are critics who decry such dreams, saying "Who set you as a man prince and judge over us?" We proudly laud Moses as the redeemer, orderer, definer and lawgiver, and as the shatterer of those selfsame tablets, an act to which God nodded his head in approval saying "יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּהֵךְ שִׁשְׁבַרְתָּ." I wish us all to be in James Joyce's words Jewgreek and Greekjew, saying and unsaying, making and unmaking, learning and unlearning, as ones who let the only constant be inconstancy and the restless task of questioning.