Alexander the Great conquers the East. His head is crowned with a lion’s head, symbol of Hercules, whose lineage he claimed. (A Hellenistic sculpture from a sarcophagus)
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The Philosophers’ Hanukkah: Where Hellenism and Judaism Differ

This chapter is devoted to understanding Western civilization as the ongoing conversation and/or confrontation of Jew and Greek.

“No other two races [but the Jews and the Greeks] have set such a mark upon the world. Each of them from angles so different, have left us with the inheritance of its genius and wisdom. No two cities have counted more with humankind than Athens and Jerusalem. Their messages in religion, philosophy and art have been the main guiding light in modern faith and culture. Personally, I have always been on the side of both.”

— Winsto Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain

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INTRODUCTION
WHERE HELLENISM AND JUDAISM DIFFER

If Hanukkah is about the right to be different, then it is important that we understand what those deep differences are between Jewish and Greek culture. Many Jews today see no real difference between their worldview and that of their non-Jewish colleagues, or between modern Judaism and other ethical traditions. The more comfortable these Jews feel in a Judeo-Christian Western society, the less important it is to them to notice the distinctions between traditions. In fact, the culture we live in, both Jewish and non-Jewish, has already gone a long way toward synthesizing elements of the Jewish and the Hellenist cultures that first met in opposition in the era of the Maccabean revolt.

Let us add some historical perspective and philosophical depth to identify contrasting Greek and Jewish components of our cultures. Both are valuable to us, both have their strengths and weaknesses and hence the conversation between them and sometimes the ongoing disagreement between them is fruitful. As we search for renewed resources of spiritual growth we need to be attuned to the deeper elements beneath the homogenized synthesis of Jewish and Western tradition.

The scholars whose essays we have brought in this chapter have all studied Western tradition intensively and appreciatively yet have come to identify those features of Judaism which are still very different in emphasis.

Milton Steinberg, a learned, cultured Conservative rabbi, offers an appreciative survey of the greatness of Hellenist culture in the days of the Maccabees. Art, economics, philosophy, architecture and literature flourished in that era and justifiably attracted the provincial Jews of Judea. However, intuitively, many of those Jews also felt the deep lacunae in Greek thinking which still characterize Western society — the lack of a living spirituality and the overemphasis on competition to the exclusion of compassion for the stranger and the weak. Here Judaism has much to offer the Greeks and it is Steinberg’s dream that the strengths of both traditions ultimately be combined.

David Hartman, an Orthodox Jewish philosopher and rabbi, focuses on two parallel differences between Greek philosophy and Judaism. The Greeks put too high a premium on self-sufficiency, on being a “self-made man,” and at the same time they overemphasize the conquest of bodily desire by abstract intellect. Rabbinic Judaism, however, acknowledges our bodily needs and weaknesses and therefore is not ashamed to admit our dependence. Judaism promotes a healthy interdependence that counterbalances the exaggerated Greek desire for independence.

Mordechai Gafni, a young, contemporary Orthodox rabbi interested in spiritual renewal, uses the categories of Matthew Arnold, the 19th century English thinker, to contrast “Hebraism” and Hellenism. Gafni notes the strong attraction of young Jews to Eastern spirituality, which, like Western philosophy, puts a premium on detachment from everyday existence, on balance and emotional tranquility. Against that tendency Gafni counterposes the biblical God and the Jewish people who value a restless, passionate involvement with the world. That is the way of self-transformation and spiritual growth that Gafni recommends.

David Chidester, a cultural historian of religion is, unlike Steinberg, Hartman and Gafni, not a rabbi promoting an appreciation of where Judaism differed.
Yet he has much to teach us by contrasting the Jewish culture of the ear and the Greek culture of the eye. He points out that the differences between the two civilizations derive not only from their creeds and their philosophies, but from their preferred senses that “sensitize” them to divergent aspects of the world.

**Elias Bickerman**, the great Jewish historian of Hellenism, counterbalances all the other voices gathered in this chapter. For he shows that, beyond the polarity of Judaism and Hellenism, they share a passionate philosophic study of classical texts. In fact, our commemoration of the Maccabean rejection of Hellenism should not blind us to the greatest contribution of the Greeks to Rabbinic Judaism — the forms of study and centrality of text research for the achievement of truth and virtue. This is only one of the fruits of an open dialogue between cultures that Bickerman commends.

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*The Greek Culture of Competition.*

In the struggle between two pankratiasts (on the ground), the man on the left tries to gouge out his opponent’s eye, a foul for which the trainer is about to strike him with his cleft stick. Behind hang a bundle of boxing thongs and a discus in a bag, and on the left are two boxers.

*From a Greek drinking-cup, c. 500-475 BCE.*
Western civilization is shaped by the input of Judaism, often mediated through Christianity, and Greek culture. For a Jew it is important to see how Judaism continues to differ from the Greeks, as well as how Judaism itself has been influenced by Hellenism, and in turn, influences Western society today.

According to a Jewish tradition which is transmitted both by Josephus and by Talmudic literature, Alexander the Great, on his way to Egypt (332 BCE), came face to face with the High Priest of the Temple at Jerusalem. The meeting between Alexander and the priest is probably a legend with no basis in fact. And yet, like so many myths, this one, if it does not possess literal accuracy, is nevertheless spiritually true. It symbolizes one of the most dramatic confrontations in the history of humanity. For, from the moment when Alexander touched the Orient until the hour when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, the culture of the Jew and the culture of the Greek were in continuous contact with each other. In the folk-picture of the conqueror and priest facing each other there is to be discerned a parable of the collision of two great civilizations.

For, as it happens, the two groups that wrestled with each other in Palestine in the 2nd century BCE represented more than artificial and meaningless national affiliations. They were the bearers and protagonists of

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Alexander the Great was more than a conquerer. He was, after all, a pupil of Aristotle. He felt that it was his function to civilize the lands he subdued. Into the Orient, then, he brought deliberately the whole wealth of that civilization which had grown up in Hellas. With him went the epics of Homer and Hesiod, the poetry of Alcaeus and Sappho, the drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. The artistic standards which made the Acropolis, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the deepest roots from which later sprang Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism and neo-Platonism — all these were Alexander’s gift to the East.

Within a short time the entire Orient was Hellenized. From India to the Hellespont, from Egypt to the Black Sea, peoples of diverse stocks learned to speak Greek, came to dress like Greeks, to worship like Greeks and to think like Greeks. For six hundred and fifty years thereafter the whole of the civilized world remained Hellenistic. From this fusion of the Orient and the Occident, from this syncretism of Hellenism and older cultures sprang as brilliant and as graceful a civilization, as human beings have ever known.

It was, in the first place, a world, which was infinitely rich in material things. At the wharves of Alexandria merchants bartered in all the products of all the lands of the world. Silks, spices and gems from the East were traded for furs and amber from the Baltic. In the banking houses of Rhodes, elaborate financial enterprises were planned and launched. In Alexandria and Antioch highly organized governments ruled over vast empires.

The cultural life of the Hellenic Orient was fully as brilliant as its economic activity. There was no field of human endeavor in which this age did not excel. The same architectural genius, which had created the unparalleled majesty of the Acropolis, now built the Pharos of Alexandria and the Colossus of Rhodes. The tradition of Phidias and Praxiteles lived again in those sculptors who carved out the Laocoon and the Dying Gaul. In scientific research also this world distinguished itself. It produced the Euclid who systematized geometry, the Ptolemy who charted the heavens, and the Aristoxenus who wrote on harmonics. The museum of Alexandria with its zoological and botanical gardens was no accident. It was a logical expression of the scientific interests of a civilization that had been born when the West met the East. And the library of Alexandria with its vast collection of books — that, too, was a symbol of this Oriental-Greek world. The poetry of Apollonius of Rhodes, and of Callimachus, the Idylls of Theocritus, the satires of Lucian, the biographies of Plutarch, the essays of Theophrastus, the history of Polybius, and the geography of Strabo and Pausanias — all these were fitting successors to the literature of classic Greece. Certainly, until the dawn of the modern era no other society has created literary masterpieces in such variety and profusion.

Closely akin to this literary activity ran a great philosophical tradition. The Stoicism of Zeno and Chrysippus, Epicetetus and Marcus Aurelius, the Hedonism of Epicurus and Lucretius, the skepticism of Carneades and Sextus Empiricus, and the neo-Platonic school which attained its climax in Plotinus — all these give vivid indication of the fact that the intellects of this age wrestled with the problem of truth, the riddle of the universe and the human’s place in it.

Affluent in its possession of physical things, colorful in its art, glorious in its literature, and searching in its philosophy, this was indeed a magnificent world, a world startlingly like our own.
became the common possessions of mankind at large only through their heroic efforts.

The Jew’s Objection to the Greek Way of Life

The Jew, to be sure, could not but be affected by this dazzling Hellenist culture [with its poetry, drama, sculpture, philosophy, sports, literature and material wealth]. The upper strata of Jewish society in Palestine were Hellenized as completely as the aristocracies of other lands. In Egypt, where Jews were fully exposed to Hellenism, Greek culture profoundly permeated Hebraic life. Books like those of Philo, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Fourth Maccabees show how deeply the Jewish community of Alexandria was influenced by the dominating civilization of its day. But as a whole, Palestinian Jewry stood unyielding in the face of all the seductions of Hellenism. And when Antiochus IV attempted to force the Greek way of life upon the Hebrews, the Maccabees rose in rebellion.

Considering the overflowing richness of the Hellenistic world, its elegance, and its culture, one is tempted to brand the Maccabees and their followers as blind obscurantists, as benighted half barbarians who out of pure perversity resisted the transmission to themselves of elegance, beauty and truth.

And yet, the objection of the Jew to this Greek world, to its science, its art, its philosophy, and its amenities was not the blind, unreasoning hatred for intelligence of an uncultured group. It sprang from an intuitive but none the less profound and accurate judgment on the part of the Jews concerning Hellenism. There were in Greek life certain deep and fundamental voids, certain basic lacks, which the ancient Jew perceived. And there was in the Jewish tradition a body of religious and moral values for which the Maccabees fought justifiably. Almost by instinct, the Jew recognized that his culture possessed attitudes and ideals of which the Greeks were unaware but which were eternally necessary for human blessedness and salvation.

(1) In the first place, the Greek world had no living religion. The old pagan idolatry was dead. With the passing of the Olympian gods, philosophers took refuge in metaphysical abstractions. The masses, left without a satisfying faith, turned to a cynical skepticism, shot through with the blindest superstition. Humans believed in nothing and yet exhibited astonishing credulity in accepting any belief no matter how incredible. Organized religions have been accused of fostering superstition, and in instances, unfortunately numerous, the charge is justified. But it is equally true that when disciplined faiths disintegrate, men, far from being freed from faith and superstition alike, tend to take recourse to religious vagaries. The Hellenistic world is a classic case in point. The pagan, as Pliny testified, worshipped blind chance as the dominant power behind the world. But in a universe in which caprice rules, any ritual act, any charm or formula may possibly have efficacy. Whence it came to pass that magicians, astrologers and writers of amulets grew in
number, as organized religion decayed.

The ancient Greek, in addition, wanted, as humans always have, some faith to give meaning to their life. Unable to find it in their own world, they turned religious fadist, moving restlessly with tides of religious fashion from one cult to another. Now it was the Magna Mater, now it was Mithra, now Isis, now Serapis, now some fantastic meteoric stone worshiped as a god in some isolated Oriental hamlet. How desperately this world needed a religion can be seen from the eagerness with which it ultimately embraced Christianity.

“The three distinctive characteristics are to be found among Jews: they are merciful, they are chaste, and they are charitable.” In this epigram are to be detected moral distinctions between Greek and Jewish society which the ancient Jew perceived.

The Jews considered this pagan world which had no faith and no assurance as to the universe, which maintained a system of state-endowed temples housing gods in whom no one really believed, which taught religions from which all vitality had fled. They viewed this society with its cults and fads, its blind superstitions and its religious stupidities. They concluded naturally that they possessed one thing which the pagans did not have — a reasonable and intelligible faith concerning the universe, a faith which told them that the universe was not a matter of blind chance, but the manifestation of a cosmic mind, that their life was not a meaningless accident, but an integral and infinitely significant part of a universal drama. They rejected the Greek world because it offered no adequate religion such as they found in their own tradition.

(2) Of equal weight in impelling the Jew’s rejection of Hellenism was his awareness of a profound difference in morals between the two worlds. One of the ancient rabbis, contrasting Judaism and Hellenism, remarked, “Three distinctive characteristics are to be found among Jews. They are merciful, they are chaste, and they are charitable.” In this epigram are to be detected moral distinctions between Greek and Jewish society which the ancient Jew perceived.

The Jews, almost alone in the ancient world, had a sense of the dignity of the life of every human being. Their tradition taught them that humans were created through the infusion of the dust by the spirit of God, that each human being therefore was a divinity in miniature, and consequently of infinite moral significance. For that reason they were taught to detest all form of human exploitation, of the violent imposition by one human’s will upon others. In their schools of law, these ideals were given practical application through a reluctance to inflict capital punishment, and through the attempt to mitigate human slavery by so protecting the rights of the bondsman as to make the possession of a slave economically unprofitable.

In contrast, the Greek world was entirely without a sense of reverence for the sanctity of life. The Hellenistic social structure was built upon a brutal slavery. From Plato and Aristotle to the last days of Roman paganism, only rarely were even the best spirits among the Greeks moved to protest against this extreme exploitation of men and women. To be sure, Hellenistic literature does contain discussion on the morality of human bondage. But these discussions, while they reveal an inner moral disquietude, tend to end either with a rationalization of the status quo or with the advice to the slaves to find their freedom in inner self-emancipation. In any event, the slave economy of the Graeco-Roman world was very little disturbed by moral protest. Observing the amphitheater where human beings were done to death for the amusement of blood-thirsty mobs, the Jew concluded, as Walter Pater did centuries later, that “what was needed was the heart that would make it impossible to witness all this; and the future would be with the forces that could beget a
heart like that.” One knew that the Greeks abused their slaves. One perceived that Greek society was founded upon violence, that in it the world belonged to the strong. One who had learned to reverence humans as an incarnation of God rejected the Greek world because, in addition to having no adequate faith, it had also no respect for life, no recognition of the inviolability of the human soul. It was not **merciful**.

Almost alone, too, the Jew had standards of **chastity**. Jewish society had developed a tradition of sexual continence that avoided sensual bestiality without being ascetic. The Greek world, on the other hand, by and large, vacillated between complete and abandoned self-indulgence and extreme, insane flight from the flesh. It exhibited, on the one side, the sensual excesses of the Gardens of Daphne, and, on the other, the rigid asceticism of the later neo-Platonists. This distinction in moral standards was reflected in a difference in the tone of family life and in the position of women. The normal Jewish world reverenced the marital state, and insisted on its spiritual significance and indispensability — in marked contrast to the Hellenistic family in which the wife served to breed children and from which the cultured Greek fled to find his social outlets in the companionship of cultivated courtesans, known as Hetaerae. In all that brilliant world with its science and its arts, the Jew then possessed an attitude toward sexual relationships which in its wholesomeness was distinctly superior to that of the society which surrounded him.

And, last of all, the Jew was unique in his recognition of the virtue of **charity**. From Plato through the Stoics, there is rarely to be discerned in Greek thought any vestige of compassion for the human underdog, for those who fail in life. Plato has no scruples of kindness in consigning the masses of men to bondage in his ideal state. Aristotle insists that some human beings are naturally slaves. The Stoics generally despise the great masses of humans as *typhloi* or blind fools. Only the Jew had a doctrine of charity and of sympathy for the oppressed. Only he had the feeling that the human being attains truest humanity in the giving of oneself to those who falter in the struggle for existence. In all
the Greek world there was rarely heard a sentiment akin to that of the sages of Israel, “If you see a righteous person persecuting a righteous person, know that God is with the persecuted; a wicked person persecuting a wicked person, know that God is with the persecuted; a wicked person persecuting a righteous person, know that God is with the persecuted; and even when the righteous persecutes the wicked, by the very fact of persecution, God is with the persecuted.”

This is not to say that the Jewish world was inevitable that this world would fall into decay; that it would collapse into barbarism, that it would be conquered eventually by a religion born of Judaism, which supplied a rationale that made life significant and which conveyed standards of mercy, chastity, and compassion. In the very moment of its flowering, Hellenism was doomed, because the intellect and the sense of the aesthetic are not sufficient for man.

A Great Opportunity:
When Judaism and Hellenism Met

The two worlds, as a matter of fact, did not exclude each other completely. On Palestinian Jewry, because of its rejection of the Greek-Oriental way, Hellenism had but little influence. On Jewry outside of Palestine, especially on that Egyptian Jewry which centered around Alexandria, the imprint of Hellenism was real and pronounced. A great opportunity presented itself to mankind when Judaism and Hellenism met — an opportunity which unfortunately was not seized in its entirety. Had these two worlds interpenetrated each other peacefully, an ideal pattern for man’s living might have been created. This would have preserved the intellectual alertness and aesthetic sensitivity of Hellenism in synthesis with the Hebraic religious outlook and ethical values. Such a fusion would have abstracted the virtues of both cultures and enabled them to supplement each other. Humankind still entertains the hope that the time may yet come when Hebraic faith and ethics will be harmoniously fused with Hellenistic science, philosophy, and art, into a pattern of living richer than either alone.

The Greek world had wealth, science, art, and literature. They were not enough. It had no adequate faith and it had too little heart.

one of pure ethical light and the Hellenistic completely a realm of shadow. Not all Jews were saints and not all teachers of Judaism expounded an undiluted and ideal saintliness. Nor was Hellenism without mitigating religious and moral virtues. Indeed, among the Stoic legalists there appeared the axiom that all men are by nature equal — a proposition which, almost in the exact terminology in which these Stoics phrased it, appears in the American Declaration of Independence; it reflected an attitude which unfortunately was never competently applied by those who maintained it to the society of their day. There were currents of humaneness, movements of compassion, tides of a fuller religious life in the Hellenistic sea. But by and large and in essence the religious and moral distinctions which we have indicated above are unshakably valid. As a whole, each of these two traditions held virtual monopolies on attitudes and values of which the other possessed only fragmentary specimens.

It was because of this inherent difference in tone that the Jew rejected Hellenism. The Greek world had wealth, science, art, and literature. They were not enough. It had no adequate faith and it had too little heart. It
GREEK INTELLECT AND JEWISH BODY

A CONTRAST BETWEEN SELF-SUFFICIENCY
AND BLESSED DEPENDENCE

by David Hartman

A Tradition of Self-Sufficiency

For the sake of analysis and at the risk of oversimplification, one can divide what is generally referred to as Western thought into two distinct traditions. One tradition is characterized by the desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency. The highest perfection is intellectual excellence, which, ultimately, is an individual achievement. Though one may be seriously concerned with justice and with the needs of others, individuals aspire to overcome their need for others and to reach a perfection where they no longer feel dependent on anyone or anything. Perhaps it is more correct to describe this approach as choosing certain needs above other types of needs, i.e., intellectual above physical or social needs.

In Plato’s *Phaedo*, for example, the metaphor used to describe the relationship of the body and the soul is that of a person locked in a prison. Platonic philosophy aims at liberating the human from the prison of the body. To anyone schooled in Western thought, the prisoner metaphor is most appropriate to the description of the relationship of the soul or mind and the body, and to the process of self-perfection. For Aristotle, although ethics and politics are the objects of serious attention and analysis, the essence of humanity, i.e. that activity which is distinctly human, is intellectual contemplation of eternal truths. Unlike practical deliberation, contemplation has no practical value. The highest human achievement lies in the privacy of one’s thoughts; its content has no human utility; its subject, the philosopher, must be free of the claims of the body, which interfere with this activity.

A Tradition of Relationship

In contradistinction to this tradition is a tradition where relationship is an integral part of human perfection. The perfection aspired to is realized in relationship with others, and is associated with a pattern of life where the main focus is upon fulfilling normative demands within community and history.

The biblical tradition, which expresses the relationship of God and the people of Israel, is a paradigm case of this outlook. The God of the Bible, unlike the God of Aristotle, is described almost exclusively in terms of the Divine relationship with human beings. Indeed, many religious Jews consider that negating God’s providential relationship to history and to humankind is tantamount to espousing atheism.

People are drawn to the Aristotelian God by virtue of the perfection they wish to contemplate. In this tradition, the “relationship” to God is like the “relationship” between a person and an object of one’s curiosity or of one’s aesthetic appreciation. It is no wonder that in the Middle Ages, a very serious distinction was drawn between belief in the eternity of the universe and belief in creation.

In the Greek tradition, with its ideal of intellectual perfection, it makes sense for humans to seek to be liberated from human relationships which demand intense emotional involvement.

The God of Aristotle was an object of intellectual contemplation. Only a God who could be conceived of as the Creator, as acting at a particular time, could give Law to humanity and could be conceived of in terms of a relationship.

On the inter-human level, the sentence epitomizing the biblical outlook is, “It is not good for a human to be alone.” As Soloveitchik explains in “The Lonely Man of Faith,” the phrase lo tov, “[it is] not good,” is not to be understood in the light of utilitarian or pragmatic considerations. The unqualified judgment that it is not good for the human to be alone has an existential basis. The biblical statement declares that humans are incomplete by themselves; biological, social, economic interests aside, it is not good that a person be alone. Humans must relate.

In the Greek tradition, with its ideal of intellectual perfection, it makes sense for humans to seek to be liberated from human relationships which demand intense emotional involvement. The contemplative love of the philosopher places the lover in a situation of control. Interpersonal love, however, places the lover in a context where one is vulnerable and dependent. The freedom of the beloved (an essential condition of mature love) precludes the possibility of absolute control and self-sufficiency. In contrast, the relational perfection sought in the biblical tradition leads humans to accept dependency as a permanent, positive feature of the human condition.

Two Approaches to the Body: Our Prison or Our Spiritual Teacher?

The distinctive approaches of these two traditions extend to many more specific issues. Let us consider their differing attitudes to the body.

Common to the various expressions of the Greek tradition is the metaphor of “the prison of the body.” The desire to escape the body and the glorification of the life of the “disembodied intellect” are psychologically tied to feelings of embarrassment at having a body with weaknesses and needs. In biblical thought, however, the body is not perceived as being in conflict with the soul. The distinction between body and soul is similar to a difference in organic functions; it does not reflect that radical dualism that is implicit in Plato’s prison metaphor.

This difference may not be accidental. As suggested above, the God of the Torah-covenant differs from the god of Greek metaphysics in that He has a personal relationship with people. However scandalous it may sound to the ears of the metaphysical theologian, God, in the Bible, chooses inter-dependency with mankind. The God of history, who sends prophets, gives law, acts and reacts to what people do, is a God who, in some sense, “needs” humanity. The contemporary Jewish thinker A.J. Heschel’s striking title *God in Search of Man* and his use of such notions as “divine pathos” penetrate to the heart of the biblical outlook. In choosing a covenantal relationship, God, in effect, chose inter-dependency.

In this framework, inter-dependency is an ultimate datum of reality. If to be fully human is to give up the quest for self-sufficiency, and if to be whole one must learn to love, to accept
dependence, and to be able to say, honestly, “I need you,” then spiritual liberation must consider the significance of the human body. The Greek tradition must be turned on its head. The human body can humanize us and dispel our delusions of self-sufficiency.

The source of human hubris can often be traced to the exaggerated emphasis on the intellect at the expense of recognizing the limitations of the body. The body gives persons a sense of humanity and dependency and, hence, teaches humility. And, in the Bible, humility is perhaps the most notable characteristic one can attribute to people of distinction. “The man, Moses, was very humble, more than all the humans on the face of the earth.”

To the degree that people are alienated from the rhythms of their body, to that degree are they out of touch with the spiritual outlook of the biblical tradition.

The body, and its functions, is dealt with in Halakah. Halakhic man makes a blessing even after excretion:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has formed the human in wisdom, and created within a system of veins and arteries. It is well known before Your glorious throne that if but one of these be opened, or if one of those be closed, it would be impossible to exist in your presence. Blessed are You, O Lord, who heals all creatures and does wonders.

It is significant that, in the normative sequence of prayers, this blessing is considered the antecedent of:

My God, the soul which You placed within me is pure. You have created it; You have formed it. You have breathed it into me, and restore it to me in the afterlife. So long as the soul is within me, I offer thanks before You, Lord my God and God of my ancestors, Master of all creatures, Lord of all souls. Blessed are You, O Lord, who restores the souls to the dead.

Rather than ignore the body, Halakah draws a person’s attention to its complex functioning. The “body” heals human delusions of grandiosity. The body places one firmly in a world in which man cannot survive alone. In hunger and in need, in the interlinking of sexual desire, love and self-transcendence, in disease and in decay, the body is an important spiritual teacher. **To gain spiritual wholeness, the human soul must make contact with the body.**

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4. Numbers 12:1
One of the most politically and intellectually influential thinkers in the late 19th century in England was Matthew Arnold. He faced the crisis of industrialization and democratization in his land as a cultural crisis that might undermine educational standards. As he reflected on the culture he sought to preserve, Arnold conceived of Western civilization as a balance between the polarities of Hebraism, meaning Judaism and its offspring Christianity, and Hellenism and its offspring the Renaissance and modern science.

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.

The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines, is no doubt the same: human perfection or salvation. Still, they pursue this aim by very different courses. The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience. Nothing can do away with this ineffaceable difference; the Greek quarrel with the body and its desires is that they hinder right acting and thinking. The Greek notion of felicity, on the other hand, is when they think aright.

The Hebrew notion of felicity is “He that keeps the law, happy is he;” “There is nothing sweeter than to heed the commandments of the Lord.” Pursued with passion and tenacity, this notion would not let the Hebrew rest till he had got out of the law a network of prescriptions to enwrap his whole life, to govern every moment of it, every impulse, every action.

The governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness, that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience. The difference, whether it is by doing or by knowing that we set most store, and the practical consequences which follow from this difference, leave their mark on all the history of our race and of its development.

To get rid of one’s ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them, as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal, which Hellenism holds out before human nature. From the simplicity and charm of this ideal, human life in the hands of Hellenism is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy. They are full of what we call “sweetness and light.” Difficulties are kept out of view, and the beauty and rationalness of the ideal have all our thoughts. “The best man is he who most tries to perfect himself, and the happiest man is he who most feels that he is perfecting himself.”

Hebraism differs from Hellenism. [While the Greek thinkers sought restful contemplation of eternal truths], Hebraism has always been severely preoccupied with an awful sense of the impossibility of being at ease in Zion; of the difficulties which oppose themselves to the human pursuit or attainment of that perfection of which Socrates talks so hopefully, and so glibly. It is all very well to talk of getting rid of one’s ignorance, of seeing things in their reality, seeing them in their beauty; but how is this to be done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts? This something is sin; and the space which sin fills in Hebraism [meaning Judaism and Christianity], as compared with Hellenism, is indeed prodigious. This obstacle to perfection fills the whole scene, and perfection appears remote and rising away from earth, in the background. Under the name of sin, the difficulties of knowing oneself and conquering oneself which impede man’s passage to perfection, become, for Hebraism, a positive, active entity.

By alternations of Hellenism and Hebraism, of man’s intellectual and moral impulses, of the effort to see things as they really are and the effort to win peace by self-conquest, the human spirit proceeds. Each of these two forces has its appointed hours of culmination and seasons of rule. As the great movement of Christianity was a triumph of Hebraism and man’s moral impulses, so the great movement which goes by the name of the Renaissance was an uprising and re-instatement of human intellectual impulses and of Hellenism.

5. From Culture and Anarchy, c. 1870, England
Often, as Hanukkah approaches I wonder if I am becoming more of a Hellenist. Am I unconsciously sliding towards becoming a sort of “inverted Marrano,” Jewish on the outside, Hellenistic on the inside. And so, as part of my own Hanukkah ritual, I try and look at some new dimension of that ancient conflict of ideas.

This year I’m thinking a lot about balance and stability. How many of us at some point in our lives thought of pursuing a new direction but held back for fear of being branded unstable? Balance and stability are certainly important values. However, it may not be irrelevant that their source in Western intellectual history is rooted in ancient Athens and not Jerusalem.

For the Hellenist, the harmonious and balanced personality is the ideal. However, Hellenistic harmony comes from a place of detachment. Plato’s ideal is to “become a spectator to all time and existence.” This is no Judaism. The basic Hebraic posture in the world is passionate involvement in the realness of life.

The Hellenist seeks eternity. He cannot find it in the world of particulars, which are here today and gone tomorrow. So he searches in the realm of essences, universals, and principles of logic. In their unchanging shadow, he feels the breath of eternity. For the Hellenist, theory is always more important than application, thinking is higher and more pure than doing.

For the Jew there is no greater sin than the sin of detachment. The ideal is the full embrace of the concreteness of being. God is in the details. God is in the ferment of our lives.

Jewish wisdom-masters rarely make sweeping universal statements about the nature of reality. They are relatively unconcerned with grand systems and elegant structures of logic. Their vision is almost always of the particular individual and his or
her choices. For the Jew, eternity resides in
the human encounter with the moment.
God, the source of the eternal, is revealed in
the infinite depths of the human personality
no less than in the mathematical theorems of
Pythagoras. The Hebraic worldview shapes
the way we understand and live our lives in at
least four important ways.

First, our vision of God differs from that of
the Hellenist. The Jewish God is personal
and cares deeply about all of His creatures.
The Talmud describes God who is attendant
and empathetic to the joy and pain of his
creatures. The Jew believes in a God who
cares. Our God knows our name. The
mandate of Hebraic man is imitatio dei, to be
like God. To be like God is about moral
commitment to the betterment of our world
and deep existential empathy with all who
suffer. To be like God is to have a passionate
social vision, which addresses all facets of
humanity. It is to be concerned, engaged and
attached.

Secondly, for the Hellenist, God is a
force in the universe, an unmoved mover.
The notion of a God who cries is
blasphemous to the Hellenist. The notion of a
god who doesn’t cry is blasphemous to the Jew.

Thirdly, the Hellenist seeks to prove via
rational demonstration that his God exists,
while the Jew longs for intimacy with God.

Fourthly, as a function of this intimacy, the
Jew on occasion even challenges God.
Abraham becomes the first Jew by challeng-
ing the justice of God’s intended destruction
of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Jew, writes
Elie Wiesel, can be angry and even shout at
God, but can never ignore God. Such is the
nature of intimacy. The Hellenist however,
must shape his God to be beyond taking any
responsibility for the world. For the
Hellenist to contemplate is to embrace.
For the Jew to struggle is to embrace.

These ideas play themselves out in all sorts
of very practical ways. One example: For the
Jews there is always a legal obligation to
rescue. That can apply to lost property or a
friend drowning. Not to get involved is a
violation of God. For the Hellenist and any
of his Western descendants, “don’t get
involved for it may ruin your personal
harmony” is the order of the day.

Now I am not arguing against balance and
stability. However, for the Jew, balance and
stability are values which are subservient to
moral passion, reality, and empathy. They
cannot become code words, which allow us to
live blissfully in inherited truths unwilling to
genuinely struggle with ourselves and the
world.

For the Jew to realize the Divine within is
to be always rising and becoming. And to
become you have to risk falling, failing, and
losing your place. Change by definition
involves instability. Balance needs to be
disrupted when it fronts as an excuse for
fear of growth and change.

Let’s give ourselves a Hanukkah present
this year. Let’s risk the new. We need to try
and break the hold of the Hellenistic shadow
on our psyche. There is something
comfortable about the Hellenistic vision —
all is harmony, life never really touches me
and I don’t have to pay the price of becoming.
Perhaps it’s time for commitment in places
where we’ve been bravely maintaining our
detachment because we were scared to death.
Maybe we need to become unstuck from the
tired idea that our life is what it is. Our life is
what it could be.

Athens was a great city, but we are children
of Jerusalem. Jewish eternity resides in the
infinite value and holiness of our personal
story and our potential for change. In the
tradition of Hasidism, let us bless each other
that this Hanukkah should be the year for us;
a year in which the flame of the Hanukkah
candle in our soul dispels the darkness of our
fears — giving us courage to dare, to be, to
care and love. Let the Maccabees be
victorious.

The basic Hebraic posture in the world is
passionate involvement in the realness of life.
David Chidester has explored the way in which perceptual metaphors of seeing and hearing shape different cultural and religious understandings. He believes every culture uses both kinds of metaphors and often identifies its greatest insights with experiences that can only be described paradoxically using both of these two exclusive analogies simultaneously. For example, at Mount Sinai, “all the people saw the voices.”

However he summarizes an important strand of thought that holds that Greeks and thereafter Philo and many Christian theologians give priority to visual symbols: “God is light,” ideas are visual forms, and gods can be represented pictorially.

In contrast, Biblical culture forbids making an image of God and emphasizes hearing God’s voice. “The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of the words but perceived no shape — nothing but a voice.” Nevertheless we must note that Jewish mystics and prophets in the Bible and beyond do use visual images, and over-generalization about whole cultures is always a danger.

_Pagan and Jew_

“The age-old battle between the eye and the ear is far from being decided one way or the other.” Ambitious conclusions have been drawn about the perceptual orientations of entire cultures. The visual orientation of ancient Greek culture and the auditory orientation of ancient Hebraic culture became a kind of cliche of cultural history. This assumption that Hellenic culture was somehow fundamentally visual in its orientation, while Hebraic culture was fundamentally auditory, was clearly formulated in the nineteenth century by the historian Heinrich Graetz:

To the pagan, the divine appears within nature as something observable to the eye. He becomes conscious of it as something seen. In contrast to the Jew who knows that the divine exists beyond, outside of, and prior to nature. God reveals Himself through a demonstration of His will, through the medium of the ear. The human subject becomes conscious of the

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**CONTRASTING JEW AND GREEK**

by David Chidester


7. Exodus 20:18

8. Deuteronomy 4:12
A phenomenology of perception must be sensitive to the ways in which the senses were understood to operate within specific historical and cultural contexts. The scientific explanation of vision was a major concern of those Greek philosophers known as the Atomists. Within that school of thought, visual perception was imagined to result from a direct contact between an object and the organ of vision. That contact was produced by images (eidola) or films (simulacra) that the Atomists thought were continuously being emitted from visible objects. In the act of seeing, those images or films entered through the pupil of the eye. In this “intromission theory” of vision, images from the object of vision were imagined to enter the eye to be simulated there as in a mirror. The visible object was duplicated in the eye.

A second theory of vision, the so-called “extramission theory” popularized by Plato and adopted by Augustine, explained seeing as the result of visual rays emitted by the eye. Beginning the analysis of vision with the organ rather than the object, the eye was not a mirror but a lamp. The eye was imagined to radiate visual rays that reached out and touched its objects of perception. This fire glows in the eyes. In the form of a visual ray, the fire extended from the eye to the object. Contacting the object, the visual ray then doubled back again to the eye.

What can be concluded from this all too brief sketch of ancient Greek optical theory? Certainly, the dominant assumption about vision, from all perspectives, was that seeing resulted from a relationship between organ and object based on immediacy or continuity — the immediate presence of images in the mirror of the eye or the continuous bond between organ and object formed by the emanation of rays from the lamp of the eye. From ancient Greek speculations on vision, subsequent thinkers could derive certain basic associations that attended the process of seeing: continuity, connection, presence, similarity, immediacy, and even the union between seer and seen.

Hearing, however, was an entirely different matter. Unlike vision, hearing was not a process initiated by the organ of perception. Rather, auditory perception was always thought to be initiated by an external object. There was almost unanimous agreement that hearing resulted from a blow that struck the air, traveled over some distance, and impacted upon the ear. The discontinuity between perceiver and object was most clearly revealed in the temporal aspect of the process of hearing. Hearing required time.

In hearing, the object of perception was not immediately present to the perceiver as it was in vision. There was no presence, no connection, and no continuous bond between the subject and the object of perception. Because sound referred back to the agent that produced it, the auditory mode was referential rather than presentational.
The Phenomenology of Seeing and Hearing

There are definite contrasts between the ways in which the different sensory modes organize reality. Seeing defines a different orientation to the world than hearing. The most obvious difference has to do with the association of seeing with space and hearing with time. Vision is diffused in space, words move in time. Sight presents simultaneity and hearing presents sequence. The coherence of the visual mode is in simultaneous spatial presence. The sense of reality in hearing is a dynamic quality, a movement, a trajectory through time. Words move in time as “an indefinite series of discontinuous acts.” Visual experience gives immediate disclosure of information, while the sequential nature of

Hearing is dependent on actions, events, and occurrences in the outer world, a world of becoming, while seeing has a constant and continuous access to the world’s state of being.

the Hebrews were organized in a predominantly auditory way, each people’s conception of truth was formed in increasingly different ways.” Because hearing was most important to the Jews, Borman concluded that the decisive reality in their world was the word. For the Greeks, however, it was the thing. In both cases, an entire culture organized its conceptual life in terms of a predominant perceptual orientation toward either hearing or seeing.
auditory experience involves a mediated understanding. For example, the mind puts the individual words heard separately into a sequence that makes sense.

In vision the initiative for perception tends to begin with the subject [who decides to take a look, while the object creating the sound initiates the hearing in the recipient of sound]. Objects in the environment are by nature visible. They reflect light and are, therefore, immediately accessible to visual perception. They do not emit sounds simply by virtue of there being objects in the same way that they reflect light. Therefore, the perceiver cannot choose to hear something but must wait until something happens in the environment to cause sound. Hearing is dependent on actions, events, and occurrences in the outer world, a world of becoming, while seeing has a constant and continuous access to the world’s state of being.

From these two perceptual orientations we might derive active and contemplative dispositions toward the world. Hearing evokes action, while seeing allows for a more neutral contemplation of the environment. Vision involves the discernment of patterns, configurations and spatial relationships — in other words, the recognition of order. Seeing permits a relatively neutral disengagement that contrasts with the dynamic interaction inherent in auditory experience. Sound informs the perceiver of an event, not merely the existence of things in a certain configuration. The hearer is compelled to respond to this independent change in the environment.

**Afterword by the Editor**

In the light of David Chidester’s contrasts it is easy to see how Biblical Judaism can be seen as more oral and aural. God initiates contact with the Jews by calling them by name, then they must respond in action. As A. J. Heschel, the contemporary Jewish thinker, suggests, “God is in Search of Man” demanding action/mitzvah, unlike the Christian mystic who initiates the search for a vision of God. Not dogmas or revealed knowledge about God or the world, but moral action is central to Judaism. Not science i.e. a picture of a lawful pattern of nature, but history i.e. dynamic change over time is central to the Bible. God prefers “palaces in time” i.e. holy moments commemorated in holy days more than palaces in space, sacred sites. Of course Judaism has holy places, but their holiness is derivative from the holy events that occurred there. Telling and remembering orally are more important to Jewish self-understanding than seeing or imagining or making artistic representations. God acts through the word, through becoming, through history, more than through being and nature. As Mircea Eliade the historian of religion noted, the Bible added linear time to the pagan sense of cyclic time. As the literary scholar Robert Alter points out, the Bible offers the first example in human culture of prose narrative and of history writing, in contradistinction to the epic poetry that painted word pictures of pagan nature deities. Generally, though not without exception, Hebrew ears hear God’s word, while Greek eyes see his light.

When the Maccabees confronted the Hellenists, two radically different perceptions of the world met and conflicted. Since then, these two cultures have learned a great deal from one another and have become more balanced in their emphasis on the visual and on the aural perspectives.
The Philosopher and the Rabbi

The Greek Contribution to the Rabbinic Ideal of Torah Study

summarized from Elias Bickerman

All the previous selections on Hellenism and Judaism have been polemical, seeking an essential difference and sometimes a value polarity of these two competing cultures and identities. However, Elias Bickerman argues that Judaism — the Torah culture of the Second Temple Rabbis — is fundamentally altered and improved by the influence of Greek philosophic thought on traditional Biblical Torah study. He celebrates the way the Maccabees helped Judaism emerge as a self-confident, critical borrowing and adaptation of Greek ideals. Hellenism is the midwife by which Judaism evolves out of Biblical Hebraic religion.

“Hellenism is the epoch characterized by the union of Greece and the Orient. East and West were ripe for fusion, and cross-fertilization and metamorphosis quickly took place on both sides; newly-awakened popular life led to constantly new and further developments in Greece, invading the life of the world of the East and fertilizing it. Something fundamentally new arose in Hellenism — through the encounter of Greece with the Orient — which differed from the time of classical Greece, just as Judaism — underwent a gradual but deep-rooted change in the Hellenistic period through its encounter and conflict with the social, political and spiritual forces of this epoch. On this basis it differs in essential points from its earlier forms in the Old Testament.

“By and large, Judaism had its greatest influence on world history in the Hellenistic-Roman epoch. This included the reception and reworking of Greek thought side by side with self-assertion against alienation; the foundation of a national state after four hundred years of foreign rule, and the inner strength to withstand the new catastrophes which brought that state to an end and led to the final “dispersion.” We may regard this as an expression of the incomparable vitality and dynamism of the Jewish people. Both its freedom fight against the Seleucids and its bitter struggle with Rome are probably unique in the ancient world. This dynamism developed most strongly in the religious sphere.”

— Martin Hengel

The creation of the Rabbinic Torah culture that allowed Judaism to outlive the loss of its land, its Temple, its state and of the Graeco-Roman environment itself owes much to the Hellenism it fought so avidly under the Maccabees. Elias Bickerman identifies the Jerusalem scholar Ben Sira (190-180 BCE), just a generation before the Maccabean Revolt, as the key figure who adapts Greek philosophic ideals to Torah study.

Ben Sira’s Revolution

Since the days of the Rabbis it has become axiomatic to identify universal male text study as a Jewish activity par excellence. However Elias Bickerman claims that this is a Greek innovation that can be dated to Ben Sira, the Jewish philosopher who lived in Jerusalem in the generation before the Maccabees. Previously, the Bible recommended that fathers teach their sons the basic laws by rote and retell the primary stories. Biblical law was part of public education only peripherally — once every seven years when portions were read aloud to the whole people. Only the priests like Ezra were intensively involved in Torah study.

9. This summary is based on but does not quote directly from Elias Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (p. 166-174), published by Harvard University Press.
10. *Judaism and Hellenism*, p. 2-3, 309
Greek culture made it an ideal for the citizen’s class to study a classical text as part of becoming a human being.

vehicle of Hellenization for upper class subjects of the Greek empires whatever their ethnic origin.

This Greek cultural practice was, says Bickerman, the direct model for Ben Sira. Ben Sira argued for the first time that Torah — both its ritual and ethical parts — should be the basic subject matter of Jewish education even if it was not tied to preparation for a profession as a priest or jurist. For Torah is understood as a wisdom literature that adds not only skills but virtues and philosophic insight to human life and to the life of the individual scholar who devotes himself to study as a means to self-perfection. The Jewish term chochma (wisdom) became synonymous with paidea (education) and sophia (knowledge). The true disciple is out to learn the secret of a happy and successful life, not practical skills. But as Ben Sira emphasized, “fear of the Lord” is the beginning of this search for wisdom.

The study of the law by lay persons was, in short, a Hellenistic innovation imported into Jerusalem even before the Maccabean Revolt and continued unabated throughout and after the Maccabean struggle. While other great traditional religious cultures like the Egyptian and the Babylonian declined under Greek rule, Jewish culture flourished under the Rabbis even without political independence. The miracle of survival was simply that other traditional societies continued the monopoly of knowledge in the hands of the priesthood and continued to separate themselves off. However the Maccabees and their descendants, as ironic as it seems, imitated the Greek model of text study but gave it Jewish content. In fact Judaism went one step beyond Hellenism in opening up text study to the lower classes rather than restricting it to the leisure classes.