

Joseph and Hanukkah: On the Question of Assimilated Jews Hanukkah

By Rabbi Jason A. Miller

“Are you a Jewish-American or an American-Jew?” I hate that confusing question. I was in middle school the first time I was presented with it. I also remember feeling guilty the first time I posed that same quandary to a class of teenagers in religious school. Is it just semantics? Or is it a most perplexing identity question for us? Is there even a correct answer?

As Americans, we observe Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. We celebrate Halloween, Thanksgiving, and New Years. As Jews, we observe Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha’atzmaut. We celebrate Purim, Sukkot, and Rosh Hashanah. We want kosher hot dogs and knish at Major League baseball games – the “American pastime.” We expect our public schools to close on Yom Kippur. So the question arises: Now that we are so assimilated, can we have our matzah and eat it too?

As Hanukkah now comes to a close, there’s a certain amount of relief that we all feel. With the advent of the winter holiday season comes much discussion and debate about how Jews should handle this time of year. We hear various opinions about the rate of assimilation in our country. Statistics showing our dwindling demographics. Books proclaiming the “Vanishing American Jew.” Jewish families with Christmas trees. Issues about our children’s participation in Christmas programs at school. Programs that fall under the guise of “winter festival programs” and try to be all-inclusive to all religions and beliefs. We see our townships place the token menorah in the town square to placate us. And then we wonder if we really wanted it there in the first place.

This past week, I read an op-ed in our Jewish newspaper questioning whether it is permissible (or seemly) to hang lights from a Jewish home. What if they are blue and white lights resembling dreidels? And who hasn’t seen the Hallmark cards intended for our friends celebrating both Hanukkah and Christmas? Come December, rabbis are inundated with questions like, “Rabbi, what would you say if we let our two-year-old sit on Santa’s lap at the mall?” Jews want to share in the festivities of society-at-large. I think we’ll all be a little relieved when New Years rolls around and we can put another “winter holiday season” to bed. But before we do, I’d like to put a different spin on the assimilation issue.

On this Shabbat, the final day of the Festival of Lights, it is appropriate that we read the story of Joseph’s assimilation into Egyptian society. It offers much insight as we question the extent to which we Jews have become just another number in Christian society. Have we become too “American” at the expense of our Jewishness?

It all began in the mid-eighteenth century, when our ancestors in Germany fought for emancipation. They worked toward the abolition of disabilities and inequities applied to them simply because they were Jewish. How did they do this? Through assimilation into German society. With this emancipation, the Jews were no longer segregated from the surrounding world. They began to eat with gentiles, to study with gentiles, to work with gentiles, to socialize with gentiles, and to act like gentiles. First and foremost, they were German. This contact with the larger environment brought about new forms of Jewish practice. This was the dawn of the Reform, and later the Conservative, Movement. This assimilation also presented a Jewish identity problem.

Today, we speak of the same identity problem. The alarmists among us paint the picture of two polar opposites. “Assimilation” at one end of the spectrum and “Jewish Continuity” at the other. But “Assimilation” and “Jewish Continuity” are not polar opposites. There is middle ground

here on which we can find balance. In Conservative Judaism's approach, for instance, we find the equilibrium between Tradition and Change. We find our comfort level in the general society without compromising our faith or our heritage.

Hanging dreidel lights on your home is not necessarily an issue of assimilation – an issue of trying to blend in with Christian society or of adopting Christian practice. The mitzvah of Hanukkah, as dictated in the Talmud, is *pirsume nisa*. We are obliged to publicize the miracle of Hanukkah. We do this by lighting the chanukiah and placing it in the window facing the street for all to see. When we do this, we are making a statement. The statement of Jewish pride. The statement that we are the minority and we have been in the past. But we continue to persevere. We continue to cleave to our tradition.

We should be grateful that we can publicize the miracle of Hanukkah. If putting up flashing dreidel lights on your house helps to publicize our joy, and the message of the holiday, then great! Unfortunately, because of anti-Semitism in many places around the globe, other Jews cannot even consider such a display of Jewish faith and pride.

So, is assimilation good or bad for the Jews? Looking at the Joseph narrative, we can ask, "If Joseph doesn't assimilate into Egyptian society, where would we be today?" Remember, there is a horrible famine when Joseph is in political power in Egypt. Our ancestors, Jacob's sons, go to the only place in the region where there is food. There's food in Egypt because their brother Joseph has the forethought to stockpile before the famine. No assimilated Joseph... no Jewish people today.

So too with the Purim story. As Rabbi Daniel Brenner states, "Purim is a wild story of assimilation." The Jews of Persia are a minority community under threat, but they assimilate and attain political influence. In the end, they are saved from annihilation due to Esther's bravery. Again, we can ask, "If Esther doesn't assimilate into Persian society, where would we be today?"

Joseph assimilates, but deep down he remains an Israelite. He remains a member of the family. It is evident that he has not forgotten his mother tongue. When his brothers come down to Egypt to pay him a visit, he understands the Hebrew they speak in his presence. Hearing the familiar language forces Joseph to turn his head and weep. The rabbis sense that Joseph isn't a lost cause. He hasn't completely assimilated away from his birthright. And they do not write him off for his actions. In fact, they refer to him as *Yosef Hatzadik*, "Joseph the Righteous."

Turning our attention to the Hanukkah story, we find that some of our assumptions of forced assimilation may not be historically accurate. Historians have shown that the Hasmoneans, or Maccabees, were open to various forms of Hellenistic influence. Professor David Levine, of Machon Schechter in Jerusalem, offers a fresh perspective on the Hanukkah story. Ancient coinage offers us the insight into the self-image and public relations of the Hasmoneans. "Several of the coins minted by Hasmonean rulers illustrate the complex relationship that existed between the Maccabees and their Hellenistic surroundings."

Professor Levine explains, "On one side of such a coin would be the Hebrew name of the ruler with his title as high priest, and the other side would have his Greek name with the Hellenistic title of king. There was no human representation on any of these coins. The combination of languages, titles, and names, together with the abstention from figurative art, illuminates a multi-tiered cultural stance."

Professor Levine uses the coins as an example to show that participation in surrounding culture should not be taken to mean an abandonment of Jewish law and tradition. The minting of these coins with the titles and bilingual names show the extent of Hellenistic influence on our

ancestors. Yet, there were clear limits. What is absent from these coins is a picture of the ruler's face, which was prevalent in the Hellenistic world. This was in keeping with the Torah's prohibition of figurative art.

Whether we live in the Second Century BCE or in the Third Millennia CE. Whether we consider ourselves Jewish-Americans or American-Jews, we all straddle two worlds. The story of the coins in the Hasmonean Period is but one model of integration. I go by the name Jason – the same Greek name of the High Priest when the Hellenistic influence began in Judea. But I am also known as Yehuda – my Hebrew name and the name of the Maccabee who led the revolt against the Greeks. We need to find the balance that works for us. It may be hanging blue and white dreidel lights on your house in December. It may be discovering how to allow your daughter to play soccer in the community league while remaining observant of Shabbat. It may mean sending your son to public school, but explaining to his teacher that he will not be able to take the exam on Sukkot. We have all assimilated into society, but we have our limits too.

I am confident that we will find the appropriate models of integration for our day and age. We have a very rich culture in Judaism. We will continue to feel at home in America. We will continue to participate within Western Civilization, making vast contributions to its advancement. It's not a choice between "Assimilation" and "Jewish Continuity." Rather, our challenge is one of living and actively participating in the civilizations around us, while maintaining allegiance to our Jewish laws, rituals, and tradition.

In his article "The Courage to Put our Jewish Lights in the Front Window," Rabbi David Hartman writes, "the major question, which we must ponder on Hanukkah, is whether the Jewish people can develop an identity that will enable it to meet the outside world without feeling threatened or intimidated. The choice, hopefully, need not be ghettoization or assimilation. We can absorb from others without being smothered. We can appreciate and assimilate that which derives from 'foreign' sources and at the same time feel firmly anchored to our particular frame of reference."

We are fortunate that it does not have to be an "either-or" decision. It's the challenge of finding the middle ground. *Bayamim hahem u'vazman hazeh* – It was the challenge in ancient days and so it is in our time.

Shabbat Shalom.