Hebraism and Hellenism: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

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"May God enlarge Yefet, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" Bereishith 9:27.

In rabbinic tradition, Yefet and Shem—two sons of Noah—represent different civilizations. Yefet is identified with Greek culture, while Shem is identified with Jewish tradition. Yefet—whose name connects to the Hebrew word for beauty—symbolizes the Greek stress on aesthetics and philosophy. Shem symbolizes the life of religious belief and observance.

Over the course of the centuries, the civilizations of Yefet and Shem have had mixed relationships. The Hanukkah story reminds us of the antagonism between Hellenism and Judaism. Yet, the impact of Greek thought on Judaism has been profound, and especially so since the time of Moses Maimonides in the 12th century.

The great 19th century English literary figure, Matthew Arnold, wrote a chapter in his book Culture and Anarchy, which he entitled "Hebraism and Hellenism." In a stereotypical manner, he averred that Hebraism stands for "strictness of conscience," while Hellenism fosters "spontaneity of consciousness." "The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience." He goes on to assert that "as Hellenism speaks of thinking clearly, seeing things in their essence and beauty, as a grand and precious feat for man to achieve, so Hebraism speaks of becoming conscious of sin, of wakening to a sense of sin…." Arnold acknowledges that Hebraism i.e. obedience is 75% of life, and is responsible for maintaining a properly behaving society. And yet, he presents Hellenism as the 25% of life that actually involves clear thinking, appreciation of beauty, and freedom of imagination.

As religious Jews, we must ask ourselves: is our religious life mainly concerned with obedience? Does Arnold's notion of Hebraism ring true to how we actually live our lives? Don't we also have inquiring minds, aesthetic values, and spontaneity of consciousness? Is it fair—or even religiously healthy—for Hebraism to be isolated from the worldview of Hellenism?

To some, it does appear that Judaism can be reduced to obedience. The great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik, lamented the negative turn in the religious life of his day in Eastern Europe: "Halakha has an angry face…Strict, severe, hard as steel—strict justice…[it] sets forth its ruling and leaves no room for differentiation: Its yes is Yes, its no is No…fossilized piety, obligation, enslavement… (quoted by Zvi Zohar, "Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East, pp. 4-5). This critique is not entirely irrelevant even today in some circles.

On the other hand, there are those who are so enchanted with the worldview of Hellenism, that they downplay the role of obedience (i.e. mitzvoth) in Judaism. Yet, without the firm foundation of

religious observance, Judaism can evaporate into religious-sounding platitudes. Without the commitment to daily religious observance, Judaism gradually fades away with the passing of generations.

The Talmud (Megillah 9b) cites an interpretation of the verse: May God enlarge Yefet and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem. “Said Rav Hiyya bar Abba: Yefet’s beauty belongs in the tents of Shem.” I believe that Rav Hiyya’s statement provides a healthy view of Judaism. While firmly based in Torah and mitzvoth, it welcomes the beauty of Yefet into its tent.

Hebraism and Hellenism are not antithetical to each other. On the contrary, both worldviews need each other! Human beings need the spirituality and orderliness of Hebraism, as well as the intellectual freedom and love of beauty of Hellenism.

Our home base as Jews is Torah and mitzvoth. But for us to flourish fully in our humanity, we invite the beauty of Yefet into our home. We not only foster a “strictness of conscience,” but also a “spontaneity of consciousness.” Our goal is “to see things in their essence and beauty” while staying faithful to our spiritual natures.

It is a vast overstatement to restrict Hebraism to obedience, just as it is an extreme exaggeration to assert that Hellenism has a monopoly on seeing things as they really are. We gain as Jews—and as human beings—when we give due respect to a harmonious blend of the teachings of Yefet in the tents of Shem.

Angel for Shabbat