



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

HANUKKAH 2024

Faith in the Festival of Lights

“Look On Our Works, Ye Mighty”

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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Two centuries ago, Percy Bysshe Shelley challenged his friend Horace Smith to a 19th-century version of a poetry slam. He had read of the acquisition by the British Museum of the torso of Pharaoh Rameses the Second, known in Greek as Ozymandias, and suggested that both he and Smith write poems about this new exhibit. What Shelley composed became one of the most famous poems in the English language, a reflection on finitude and the limits of power. It describes the bust of a tyrant on a pedestal bearing a proud proclamation:

*“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

What is less well known is that after composing this poem, Shelley would come upon another Ozymandian image, one that would inspire him to consider in two brief works of prose the mysterious endurance of the Jewish people. In 1819, Shelley traveled to Italy and was suddenly inspired by his visit to the Arch of Titus in Rome, with its depiction of Jerusalem’s despoiling by the emperor Titus, embodied by the image of the menorah held aloft in a triumphant Roman parade. Soon after, and not long before he drowned on the Italian coast, he wrote down his thoughts, in two “orations,” about the Jewish people. The Shelley scholar Nora Crook notes that there is “nothing

quite like them in Shelley’s oeuvre,” as both are compositions “in which Shelley speaks in the person of an imagined contemporary Jew to fellow Jews.”

The first fragment imagines a 19th-century Jew standing at the Arch of Titus, staring at “the desolation of a city.” The Jew describes himself studying the Roman “procession of the victors, bearing in their profane hands the holy candlesticks and the tables of shewbread, and the sacred instruments of the eternal worship of the Jews.” On the opposite panel, he sees the emperor, “crowned with laurel, and surrounded by the tumultuous numbers of his triumphant army.” Titus, in other words, demands that all in his empire look upon his works and despair. Yet studying the destroyed colosseum nearby, the Jew is struck by a realization:

The arch is now mouldering into ruins, and the imagery almost erased by the lapse of fifty generations. Beyond this obscure monument of Hebrew desolation, is seen the tomb of the Destroyer’s family, now a mountain of ruins. The Flavian amphitheater has become a habitation for owls and dragons. The power, of whose possession it was once the type, and of whose departure it is now the emblem, is become a dream and a memory...

Or to put it differently, when it came to the Roman Empire, “nothing beside remains.”

The same, of course, could not be said for Jewish civilization. The menorah borne aloft to Rome ultimately disappeared when the city was sacked by the Vandals, but it was remembered in lamps relit in Jewish homes throughout the centuries, as it will be this and every year at Hanukkah. And if Jews chose to remember the story of one small flask of oil that somehow endured, it was because they view that tiny miracle as a metaphor for their own national life. Shelley's *Ozymandias* is a story not only of Egypt, but of nation after nation throughout history—except one.

And Shelley, who, as Crook notes, was often Voltairian in his attacks on traditional faith, nevertheless seemed to understand this, as he pondered not only the Jewish past but also its future. The second Shelley fragment, also written in Rome, sits today in the University of Tokyo archive; according to the university website, it is “the only known manuscript in the hand of Percy Bysshe Shelley outside the UK, Europe, and the U.S., apart from a few letters. It came to Japan in the latter part of the Meiji era, when Japanese literary scholars were discovering the Romantic Poets and ‘Japonism’ in the West was at its zenith.”

In this second fragment, Shelley, again writing in the voice of a Jew, describes what he calls an “infallible plan,” and an unusual one for 1820: the re-attaining of what he calls the “land of promise” through “re-establishing the ancient [sic] free republic of the Jews according to the Mosaic law, and rebuilding the City and the Temple.” Shelley, the website further notes, “does not portray Jews as helplessly mourning their lost land, unlike Byron in ‘Hebrew Melodies’ (1815), nor does he present the restoration of the Jewish nation as something for Western nations or Christian sects to take the initiative in promoting. Rather, it is something for Jews to achieve by their own efforts.” The author of “*Ozymandias*,” in other words, was led by his encounter at the arch, and the logic of his poem, to ponder the possibility of the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel 70 years before Herzl.

In December 2018, a gaffe was committed by the Catholic News Service when it attempted to tweet out an encouraging Hanukkah message. Seeking an online image of a menorah, it tweeted an image of the arch, joining this famous visual of the destruction of Jerusalem with the cheerful message “Happy Hanukkah to those who celebrate!” The News Service immediately apologized, and the tweet was an error, but it nevertheless unintentionally reflected a profound truth: The arch does indeed remind us of what we celebrate on Hanukkah, and how the celebration of Hanukkah throughout the centuries predicted the miracles of our own age.

“*Ozymandias*” is, therefore, an oddly perfect Hanukkah poem, in that the holiday celebrates the ultimate victory of the Jews over ancient foes when it comes to time itself—and it can be paired with another. Horace Smith, in his competition with Shelley, wrote a poem about Rameses that, in the face of his friend’s masterpiece, has been forgotten. But it, too, is worth remembering and reciting. Looking at a remnant of an ancient empire and acknowledging how all that was the Egyptian Empire is now gone, Smith put his pen to pondering what that meant for the future of the British Empire, which was, when he lived, the Egypt of its age. Smith reflected:

*We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro’ the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.*

Nothing beside remains. But one nation endures.

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“The Presidential Traditions of Hanukkah”

Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman and George W. Bush are among the leaders who helped make a Jewish holiday part of the American story.

BY DR. TEVI TROY AND RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

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On the evening of Wednesday, Dec. 25, Jews across the globe will mark Hanukkah by lighting candles. The tradition originates in the 2nd-century B.C. triumph of a ragtag group of Judean rebels known as the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek army of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. To mark the restoration of their nation’s independence, the Maccabees rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem, using a small jug of sacred oil to light the seven-branched candelabrum known as the menorah. Miraculously, the oil kept burning for eight days.

For American Jews, the holiday and the candle-lighting ritual also serve to illuminate their role in the nation’s history. Louisa Hart, a 19th-century woman from Easton, Penn., recorded in her diary that George Washington once spent a winter evening in the home of her father Michael Hart, whom she described as “a Jew reverencing and strictly observant of the Sabbath and Festivals.” Writer Stephen Krensky used this meeting as the basis for his 2006 children’s book “*Hanukkah at Valley Forge*,” which imagines Washington drawing inspiration, during the harsh winter of 1777 – 78, from a Jewish soldier lighting his menorah.

There's no evidence that Washington ever really saw Hanukkah being celebrated, but he certainly knew his Scripture and often evoked the Israelite prophets' image of a tree as a symbol of liberty. In a 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, R.I., Washington wrote, "May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."

In 1862, however, the first night of Hanukkah brought the worst act of anti-Jewish discrimination by the government in American history. Aiming to suppress cotton speculation during the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant ordered "Jews as a class" to leave the area under his jurisdiction, including parts of Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee, within 24 hours. A holiday meant to commemorate a fight for religious freedom now saw Jews experiencing expulsion and discrimination.

As the historian Jonathan Sarna has written, a man named Cesar Kaskel swiftly traveled from Paducah, Ky., to Washington, D.C., and met with President Abraham Lincoln to protest the decree. According to Kaskel's later account, Lincoln referred to the biblical Israelites, asking: "And so the children of Israel were driven from the happy land of Canaan?" "Yes, and that is why we have come unto Father Abraham's bosom, asking protection," Kaskel replied. Lincoln swiftly revoked the order, and Grant himself later regretted his hasty action.



President Teddy Roosevelt alluded to his familiarity with the story of Hanukkah in a 1903 speech, noting that "When I was police commissioner of New York I had experience after experience of the excellent work done—excellent work needing nerve and hardihood, excellent work of what I might call the Maccabee type...by police officers of Jewish extraction." In 1895, Roosevelt cheekily used 40 Jewish officers as bodyguards for an antisemitic German preacher making a controversial visit to New York, calling this "the very most effective answer that could possibly be made to him, and probably the best object lesson we could give of the spirit in which we Americans manage such matters."

In advance of Hanukkah in 1906, Roosevelt wrote to the prominent Jewish leader Rabbi Stephen S. Wise wishing "heartily good will" to the Jewish immigrant children of the Riis Settlement. The president urged that "Jewish boys and girls should



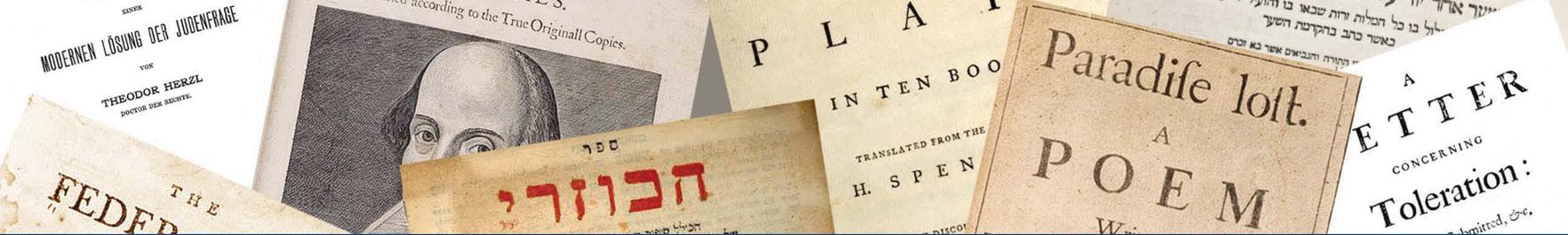
keep their pride in and admiration for their own heroes of early days," which "instead of hindering them, will help them to the friendliest and most brotherly relations with all their fellow-Americans."

When modern Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, visited the White House in 1951, he gave President Harry Truman a menorah that had been brought to the U.S. by German Jewish refugees from Nazism. The gift, delivered on Truman's birthday, May 8, served to express Israel's gratitude for American support. Decades later, in his 1987 Hanukkah message to the nation, President Ronald Reagan cited the Maccabean revolt as inspiring not only Israel's rebirth but the struggle to free Soviet Jewry. Hanukkah's message is "timeless," Reagan said, and "its lessons inspire the struggles of today and the victories of tomorrow."

In 2001, President George W. Bush instituted what has now become an annual tradition, the White House Hanukkah Party. Speaking just months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, Mr. Bush noted that "America and Israel have been through much together...We can see the heroic spirit of the Maccabees lives on in Israel today, and we trust that a better day is coming, when this Festival of Freedom will be celebrated in a world free from terror."

In 2021, President Biden's Hanukkah statement also noted the relationship between the Maccabees' victory and the national character of the U.S., remarking that "At its core, Hanukkah recounts a story at the heart of the human spirit—one that is inherently Jewish and undeniably American." The continuing commemoration of Hanukkah by American presidents reflects the enduring inspiration of the Maccabean story for all those who seek the light of liberty.

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