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## RABBI WEIN'S WEEKLY BLOG



### **Being Aware of Hellenism Today**

The holiday of Chanuka marks the struggle between the Hellenistic view of the world and of life and that of traditional Judaism and the values that it represented and continues to represent. The Hellenistic world was a superstitious world. It was a world where human beings were represented as gods, and a world of paganism, where idols, icons and statues were all glorified and worshiped, many times even at the expense of human life.

But it was a dominant culture, a culture that predated every aspect of human life. And, as all cultures, it had an attractive side. If it had been all bad no one would have followed it. But its positive elements, music, drama, art and architecture, its philosophy and new ideas, and the system of government that would eventually develop into what today we call democracy were all part of the Hellenistic world.

And since it touched on so many areas of human life, it brought with it the negative parts of the Hellenistic culture as well, its paganism and violence, its immorality and depravity, and its wars and constant struggles for power and dominion. This happened in the Jewish world as well.

Paganism was rampant during the time of the Second Temple and the Greek language and culture was dominant in many areas of Jewish life.

Even in religious Jewish life and in the language of the Mishna and Talmud itself, we find many Greek words and ideas as well. But the success of the rabbis in combating Hellenism lay in their ability to defeat the dark side of it... not to accept its ideas and values, even if they begrudgingly acknowledged its language.

In the emerging world of the fourth and fifth centuries, paganism began to wane, as did Hellenism as well. Christianity became the dominant force in the western world and soon conquered all of Europe. Christianity adopted much of Hellenism. It had statues and icons in its religious services and had a great deal of pagan superstition built into its structure.

The Jews, a persecuted minority, attempted to combat all of this by denial of the basic beliefs and value system of the time. Judaism always represented a lonely road, but it always was the road to survival and to eternity. That is the message of Chanuka and of the lights of Chanuka which should long ago have been extinguished, but which burned ever more brightly, even in our day.

Christianity also has begun to wane. It no longer is the force that it once was in the world, and a new brand of Hellenism has invaded human society. This new form of Hellenism is a combination of atheism, agnosticism,

immorality, and to a certain extent, the acceptance of violence as not only necessary but acceptable in human society. Because of this, again the Jewish world is challenged by the ideas of Hellenism. It faces the same challenges that it did many, many centuries, in fact, millennia ago.

It no longer can ignore the fact that Hellenism has invaded every corner of Jewish life and threatens us with moral, if not even physical destruction. Chanuka comes to remind us that the struggle is unceasing. The rejection of Hellenism, of its ideas, of the fact that it leads to not only a dead end but a hellish end, should be remembered and should serve as a warning to all of us. This is the entire message of Chanuka as reflected in the flickering lights that always seemed to warm and inspire us and give us a vision of a better and stronger future. 🕯️