

Rav Kook Torah



by Rabbi Chanan Morrison -
www.ravkooktorah.com

The Beauty of Greece

Summary: While the inner spiritual content of Torah must remain untainted by foreign philosophies, the Jewish people may adopt the external beauty and enhancements of other cultures.

After the Flood, No'ach blessed his son Yefet:

May God expand Yefet, and may he dwell in the tents of Sheim. (B'reishit 9:27)

What does this blessing mean? Why should Yefet live in Sheim's tents?

The Sages noted that Yefet was the ancestor of ancient Greece. As such, Yefet's blessing relates to the special accomplishments of the Greeks, especially in the realm of the arts and aesthetics (the name Yefet is related to the Hebrew word YOFI, meaning 'beauty'). As the Talmud states in Megila 9b: "May the beauty of Yefet reside in the tents of Sheim."

The blessing links Yefet and Sheim through the cultures of their descendants, Greece and Israel. Yet the relationship between these two nations was never simple. We know from the story of Chanuka that these

two civilizations clashed violently during the Second Temple period. How then can the beauty of Greek culture reside harmoniously in the tents of Israel?

Studying Greek Wisdom

On the one hand, the Sages placed no explicit prohibition against studying Greek philosophy. They were content to give general guidance, such as Rabbi Yishmael's instruction to his nephew: "Find an hour that is neither day nor night, and study Greek wisdom at that time" (Menachot 99b).

Regarding the education of youth, however, the Sages were more circumspect. They feared that the outward appeal and beauty of Greek wisdom would lure the next generation away from their fathers' faith. Thus they forcefully declared: "Cursed be the one who teaches his son Greek wisdom" (Bava Kama 82b).

The language of this decree specifically forbids teaching Greek wisdom. In other words, it is permitted to study it, but not to teach it. Young students must first acquire a solid basis in Torah, and only then will they be able to discern the difference between the Torah of Israel and the philosophy of Greece.

Style versus Content

We find that the Talmud makes a second distinction regarding Greek

culture. “Greek language is one thing, but Greek wisdom is another” (Bava Kama 83a). The intent of this statement is to differentiate between style and content.

Greek wisdom, as a philosophy and an outlook on life, profoundly detracts from the sacred and defiles the holy. The Greek language, on the other hand, poses no challenge of ideas and beliefs. Greek is a rich and sophisticated language, and is an appropriate vehicle through which to express our thoughts and ideas. The external language does not influence or harm the inner content.

We have no need to borrow from the content of foreign cultures when our own traditions are so rich and stimulating, ennobling both the individual and society as a whole. But we may adopt from other peoples that which adds external beauty and elegance. Even after the culture clash with Hellenism, the Sages still taught that it is fitting to adopt stylistic enhancements – “May the beauty of Yefet reside in the tents of Sheim.”

This approach is not limited to ancient Greece, but is true for all foreign cultures. It is not inappropriate for us to utilize the innovations and talents of other nations. After all, the focus of the Jewish people is primarily on inner matters, on ethical and spiritual advancement.

Even for the construction of the holy Temple, we find that Shlomo HaMelech turned to Hiram, the king of Tyre, for his workers’ expertise in cutting down and preparing the wood, “for we have none among us who knows how to hew timber like the Zidonians” (Melachim Alef 5:20). Shlomo used artisans from other nations to chop the wood and quarry the large stones for the Temple. But after these external preparations, it was the Jewish people who secured the Sanctuary’s inner holiness.

Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah, pp. 182-184