



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Hanukkah Unbound

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THE OLYMPIC TORCH relay is one of the most celebrated of international spectacles. Kindled in Greece, the torch is borne by runners around the world, ultimately ending up at the host city for the games, where it is used to bring the Olympic flame into being. The torch is seen as a link between ages ancient and modern, between Olympia and the Olympic stadium, a drama spectacularly staged and internationally embraced.

And it was entirely the invention of the Nazis, created as a means of linking ancient Greece to Germany's Aryan identity, and to celebrate the dawn of the Third Reich.

The evil origin of the Olympic torch is often elided, but it is important to review the facts. Though many modern Olympics had already been held, it was at the Berlin 1936 games that the torch relay first took place, concocted by chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels's group of propagandists. Thus *USA Today* reports:

"There was no torch relay like this in ancient times," [said] David Clay Large, a history professor, historian of modern Germany and author of *Nazi Games: The 1936 Berlin Olympics*....The relay came into being as part of the political propaganda used by the Nazis to

promote their cause in conjunction with the Olympics. And it has stuck around ever since."

While Adolf Hitler was initially uninterested in the Games, which had been awarded to Berlin before he rose to power, Goebbels persuaded him that the event could provide a powerful publicity tool. Hitler ordered Nazi party researchers to find links between the ancient Greeks and the Aryan race.

During the relay, onlookers in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, and Czechoslovakia were encouraged to yell "Heil Hitler" as the flame went by. "That route was significant too," Large added. "Within a couple of years the Wehrmacht would essentially take the same route in reverse as they marched through Europe."

With the advent of Hanukkah, when Jews recall the cultural clash between Hellenism and Judaism in the second century B.C.E., we would do well to ponder the contrast between the fire of the Olympics and the flames that illumine the menorah.

While the Olympic torch was a piece of Nazi propaganda, the Olympic flame that it lit was ancient in origin and did feature in the original Olympics millennia ago. A basin filled with fire was, for the Hellenists, a tribute to Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods. According to Greek myth, Prometheus and Epimetheus were charged by the gods with creating man. Zeus gave man fire, but then Prometheus taught humankind to sacrifice animal bones to the gods and keep the best

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meat for themselves. Furious at the deception, Zeus took fire away, but Prometheus hid it in a reed and bore it away from Olympus. In response, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock and sentenced him to having his liver pecked out by an eagle over and over.

In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus inveighs against the injustice of the gods, as typified by Zeus's conduct. And the injustice is precisely the point, which is why Aeschylus's work is so different from anything in the Hebraic canon. As the great Talmudist and literary scholar Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein once noted, the closest biblical book to Aeschylus's *Prometheus* is the tale of Job, in which the main character ponders suffering in the face of God's providence.

Rabbi Lichtenstein writes that though he does eloquently protest, "Job knows his place in relation to the Holy One." Job speaks of a good God whose ways we cannot often understand. By contrast, Aeschylus emphasizes a conflict "between power and justice." Rabbi Lichtenstein adds, "The tragedy is that although these two values should work together in harmony, they are in fact in conflict here and ultimately it is power which prevails."

This is the metaphysical view expressed by the Promethean myth. And indeed, it is the centrality of power over justice that was being celebrated as the Nazis held aloft the Olympic flame as the purported *Übermenschen* of their age.

It is therefore fascinating that in Talmudic tales, we find a rabbinic story about the origins of fire that is a mirror image of the Prometheus story. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and enter a dark and unredeemed world. But in a great act of love, the Talmud tells us, God took two stones and instructed Adam in the art of creating fire. Whereas the Greeks see in fire the story of a rebellion against the gods, and a world where power prevails, fire for Jews epitomizes God's mercy, as well the existence of the divine-human partnership.

It is with this in mind that the central ritual of Hanukkah today—the kindling of several small flames in commemoration of a Menorah that burned in the Temple for eight miraculous nights—must be understood. The story of the flask of oil has been mocked by bigoted anti-Jewish writers who celebrate the intellectual achievements of Hellenism. Thus did Christopher Hitchens sneer that "Epicurus and Democritus had brilliantly discovered the world was made up of atoms, but who cares about a mere fact like that when there is miraculous oil to be goggled at by credulous peasants." But such a critique, like most of Hitchens's commentary on biblical religion, entirely misses the point. The contrast between the fire of Greece and the flames of

the Talmud allows us to understand that for Jews, to light the menorah is to do more than mark a miracle; it is to look at those small flames and ponder what biblical monotheism bequeathed to a pagan world, and the miraculous endurance of the tiny people that brought this message to humanity.

We are indeed forever indebted to Athens for its intellectual achievements, but the menorah's flames remind us of the insights found not in Athens but Jerusalem—that human beings are created in the image of God, and therefore precious and inviolable; that history has purpose; and that countries stand under the judgement of a good and just God. The Nazi effort to seize the Olympian mantle ought to remind us of the dangers of rebelling against this biblical message, as Germany in the early 20th century was, in a sense, the Athens of its age. This point was made by the late Justice Antonin Scalia in a speech delivered at a congressional Holocaust memorial:

You will have missed the most frightening aspect of it all, if you do not appreciate that it happened in one of the most educated, most progressive, most cultured countries in the world. The Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s was a world leader in most fields of art, science, and intellect....Berlin was a center of theater....German poets and writers included Hermann Hesse, Stefan George, Leonhard Frank, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann....In architecture, Germany was the cutting edge.... And in science, of course, the Germans were preeminent.

The right response to what happened in Germany, Scalia reflected, "can be achieved only by acknowledging, and passing on to our children, the existence of absolute, uncompromising standards of human conduct. Mankind has traditionally derived such standards from religion; and the West has derived them from and through the Jews."

This, in the end, is what Hanukkah is all about, and the holiday therefore speaks particularly to us today. Throughout much of the West, biblical faith has waned profoundly. No one still sacrifices to Zeus, but given the approach of many to the sanctity of human life and the worshipful embrace of nature, the prospect of a repaganized Europe is all too real a possibility. In a season marked all too often by holiday kitsch, it is worth remembering the clash of cultures that brought Hanukkah into being—and the profound message that the menorah's flames have to teach us. 🕯️