The beginnings of assimilation

When Alexander the Great came to Yerushalayim in 332 BCE, miraculously, he entered the city in peace. The Greek monarch was fascinated with the Cohen Gadol, the Tora and the valus of the Jewish people. Alexander, who was very smart and had been educated by Aristotle, was so amazed at the religion of the Jews that he offered to please their desires. The Yehudim did not ask for anything material, nor revenge of their many enemies, etc. They said: *"We only ask that you allow us to live by our Tora in peace."*
Alexander agreed. A couple of examples: Alexander asked that an elite force be formed by Jewish soldiers, who would fight in his army. These soldiers would be allowed to fulfill their religion while serving in their ranks (Kashrut, Shabbat, etc.). There is documentation showing that Alexander the Great instructed his generals to excuse the Jewish soldiers from participating in the erection of a pagan temple in Babylon (E. Bickerman). A letter was also found where Alexander asks that a special oil be given to his Jewish soldiers in Antioquia, who refused to use the common oil (ta-me).

But over time, after a generation or two, the inevitable happened. The social and cultural contact between Jews and Greeks in Israel was friendly, daily and permanent. The Yehudim participated together with the Greek citizens in the arts, the market, and the army. There are documents from the year 259 BCE where we can see, for example, the abundant trade between the two peoples. The Greek language, which was the language of the market, came to replace the Hebrew language. The influence of the attractive Greek culture, modern technology and especially its sophisticated entertainment industry (sports, arts, theater) made a profound impact on the Yehudim of Erets Israel.

The book Yobelot (also known as □□□□ □□□□□□) relates that as a

result of the intense contact with the Greeks, many Yehudim *"had already forgotten the religious precepts, stopped observing the Shabbat, ate the same foods as the Greeks and some, even married with them, and served their gods."* Many Yehudim also stopped celebrating Rosh Hodesh, that is, the beginning of Jewish month. Why? Because the Jewish calendar is solar and lunar at the same time, while the Greek calendar was just solar, and it was the civil and commercial calendar. Ben Sira, an author of that time (wrote his books around the year 190 BCE) which is sometimes quoted by the Gemara, denounced that many Yehudim were ashamed of their religion. The Jews participated in the famous Greek sports, in which the athletes had to compete being totally naked. There is evidence, in an ancient Mishnah in Pirqe Abot, that some Jews underwent a certain type of surgery to reverse their Berit Milah (□□□□ □□□□□□), and thus be able to compete in athletic stadiums without the stigma of the circumcision (see Rambam MT, Teshubá 3: 6).

This tendency towards assimilation and abandonment of Judaism occurred, as is often the case today, not because the Jews were "forced" to abandon Judaism. Little by little many Yehudim left the Tora and were influenced by the Greek culture, their way of thinking and acting. Without the observance of the Mitzvot and without social barriers that protected them from integration into the Gentile society (Jews spoke Greek, dressed like Greeks and even had Greek names), little by little and perhaps without realizing it, they were losing their identity. ..

And all this occurred decades before Antiokhus Epiphanes (215 BC -164 BCE) established his decrees prohibiting Jewish practice.

Of course, not all Jews were assimilated. Many Yehudim, perhaps half or a little less, despite being integrated "commercially" with the Gentile society, still continued to fulfill the Tora and guarded the social barriers that

prevented assimilation.

Thus, in the times of the Hashmonaim, the heroes of Chanukah (175-165 BCE) there were already two very distinct camps within the Jewish people: those Yehudim who had voluntarily assimilated or Hellenized (mityavnim), and on the other side those who remained faithful to their religion, unconditionally.

To be continued…