The Septuagint and the Fast of the 10th of Tebet

This coming Tuesday January 3rd, we will observe the Tenth of Tebet, a fast-day that reminds us of three tragic events. The main tragedy we remember on this day is the siege of Yerushalayim, when Nebukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, surrounded Jerusalem with his army, which ended with the destruction of the Great Temple in 586 BCE . There are two other events, less known, that we also remember on this day: The translation of the Tora into Greek (Tebet 8th), and the passing of Ezra haSofer (Tebet 9th).

72 RABBIS WITH ONE VOICE

On the 8th of Tebet, approximately 260 BCE, in Alexandria, Egypt, King Ptolemy ordered 72 Jewish scholars, six representing the 12 tribes of Israel, to translate the Tora into the Greek language. King Ptolemy tried to demonstrate the nonexistence of a solid and homogeneous Jewish tradition and thus had an excuse to delegitimize Judaism and humiliate the people of Israel. For this purpose, the Jewish Sages were assigned to 72 separate work rooms. Thus, the Greek monarch thought it would be impossible for everyone to translate the Tora in the same way. However, all the Sages translated every word of the Tora identically, and the authenticity of the biblical and rabbinical tradition was again demonstrated.

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

But, if at the end of the day, all the Sages agreed on the exact rendition, why is then that the translation of the Tora into Greek is considered a tragedy? In previous years, I referred to the impact this translation had on the development of Christianity (see here). Once gentiles had access to the Jewish Bible, they tried to appropriate it. Let us remember that Christianity was founded with the idea of replacing Judaism, and with that intention in mind, demonized, persecuted, and for a long time did everything in its power to destroy the Jewish people to justify the claim that the Church is the “legitimate replacement” of old Israel (and its “Old” Testament). I recently realized that there were other important reasons, unrelated to Christianity, that justified

our Sages' view of this translation of the Tora as a tragedy: it contributed to the massive assimilation of the Jews to Hellenism, which resulted in a bloody civil war of Jews against Jews in the time of the Hashmonayim.

LOOKING AT YOURSELF IN A GREEK MIRROR

To understand the development of these events, it is necessary to remember certain characteristics of Hellenism. Aristotle (384-322 BCE), according to the words of one of his students, Clearco de Solos, once met a Jewish sage named Shimon (according to our tradition, this Sage was Shimon haTzadiq) and said about him that he was so brilliant "that he looked Greek." The Greeks saw their culture as the universal reference of knowledge and judged all other civilizations through the prism of Hellenic culture, looking down on any other type of knowledge or lifestyle. After Alexander, the Great conquered the Persian Empire, a process of adoption of Greek culture began, which knew no borders. Conquered peoples quickly adapted to Hellenic society, thus taking advantage of great social and economic advantages. Jews at the beginning, resist. And the Greeks were unable to persuade the Jews about the superiority of their culture since they didn't have access to our sources. This was until the appearance of the Septuagint…. Once the Tora was translated into the Greek language, the Greeks felt that now they had the tools and the right to evaluate Judaism and "cancel" it.

THE COLOR OF ABRAHAM'S HAIR

The Greeks, who excelled in sports, sculpture, aesthetics, and the art of warfare, questioned the Tora because it was up to the standards of their glorious culture. For example, "the Jewish book says nothing about the benefits of sports competitions! It does not include any theater play, comedy, or praise for sculpture. It does not describe in detail the looks of its heroes, as Hellenic writers do: it does not highlight the beauty of Abraham, Itschaq, or Ya'aqob, and it does not even mention the physical prowess of its main hero, Moses (which, by the way, would be easily defeated by the mighty Hector). The Greeks, accustomed to their myths and legendary heroes, could not conceive that the book of the Jews did not include something similar to the magic armor of Achilles, the superpowers of Hercules, or the spectacular killing of seven heads monster by Argus, the giant with a hundred eyes. The

Tora, the Greeks found out, was not a book of entertainment! It just tells the true stories of humans with no superpowers. And on top of that, the Jewish Book contained laws that ran utterly contrary to the well-established Greek ethical standards: The Tora protected the poor and the slaves –instead of advocating for the rightfully acquired privileges of the powerful and the nobles –. The Jewish book called for mercy toward the strangers instead of encouraging plundering and enslavement for the benefit of the victors. And that incomprehensible Book contained rules, like sexual fidelity or restraint, that were completely incompatible with the liberal woke lifestyle that Greek society so proudly practiced.

A JUDEO-GREEK TRAGEDY

To no one surprise, Greeks had no interest whatsoever in learning the Jewish Book! They perceived the Tora as boring, puritan, and contrary to Hellenic modernity. The real problem, however, was not the Greek's distaste for our morality but the new perception of our Tora by the less-educated Jews… Once the Greeks saw the Tora through their Hellenic prism, " many Jews began to see the Tora with those Greek lenses too". These Jews, who (perhaps unknowingly) were shaped by Hellenic mentality, now felt that their Tora was old-fashioned, and its laws had expired and needed to be abandoned, or at least reformed to fit the standards of "modernity". That is how a very deep and devastating assimilation process began that affected hundreds of thousands of Jews living in the Greek empire.

THE MIRACLE OF HANUKKA

This process continued for 2 or 3 generations until the Hasmonayim reacted on Hanukkah (175 BCE) and miraculously managed to end this phenomenon. Let us remember once again that Hanukkah represents the triumph of the Jewish people over assimilation, not over anti-Semitism. There was a civil war between Jews who were loyal to the Tora and those who sought the complete integration of the Jews into the Hellenic empire. And although in the end, the Hasmonayim triumphed and the Jewish people regained their values, many Jews disappeared in the assimilation process, as unfortunately also happens today. For this reason, our Sages mentioned the translation of the Tora into Greek as one of the three tragedies for which we fast on the 10th of Tebet.