CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Dark Days in Alexandria

For two decades after his death, Alexander's generals fought each other for control of Alexander's vast empire in a series of four wars, known as the Wars of the Successors. In 302 b.c.e., the final division of the Alexandrine Empire emerged.

Lysimachus became king of the lands in Europe and Asia Minor. Seleucus became the king of the Near East and Mesopotamia. Ptolemy became king of Egypt. These states were politically independent and militarily aggressive. Each of them was driven by the ambition to become dominant over the others and reconstitute Alexander's world empire under their leadership. And so they fought each other endlessly with none of them ever emerging fully victorious.

Judea sat at the crossroads of the Greek world. After the division of the empire, Judea came under the control of the Egyptian Greeks. But the Syrians Greeks also coveted this small but important prize. The two kingdoms would fight over Judea for over a hundred years.

Much as the Greek successors to Alexander were political and military enemies, much as their territorial ambitions clashed, they were nonetheless joined together by a common language, history, culture, religion and ethnicity. They read the same books, attended the same

plays, celebrated the same festivals and shared the same cultural aspirations. They wanted to hellenize the entire world.

Ptolemy I Soter was the first Greek king of Egypt. For its entire centuries-long existence, the kings of this dynasty would almost always be called Ptolemy but with an added epithet. The capital city of his kingdom was the cosmopolitan port of Alexandria, which was founded by Alexander. The city had become populous even during Alexander's lifetime as people poured in from all parts of the empire, including many thousands of Jewish immigrants. In the decades after his death, it became a great commercial and industrial center. The Gemara relates that craftsmen in Alexandria were commissioned to manufacture the ornate doors of the Heichal and that Alexandrian expert bakers and perfumers were consulted in the Beis Hamikdash.[1]

Ptolemy Soter aspired to make Alexandria the cultural and intellectual center of the Hellenistic world. One of his ideas was to build a library that would be a repository of all the knowledge of the civilized world. It was an enormously ambitious plan. Ptolemy Soter did not live long enough to execute it, but Ptolemy II Philadelphus, his son and successor, made the dream come true.

The library of Alexandria was a stunning achievement. At that time, books came in the form of handwritten papyrus scrolls, with some spanning several scrolls. All scrolls were copied by professional scribes. Agents of the library scoured the world for books worthy of a place in the library. They also boarded all ships docking at the port of Alexandria and took possession of any books they found. Their scribes would copy the books, keep the originals and return the copies to the owners. In this way, the library amassed hundreds of thousands of different books, a phenomenon unheard of in the ancient world.

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[1] Yoma 38a.

The necessity of managing all these books led to the invention of library science. The librarians developed a system of categorizing and cataloguing the books. They were grouped in different genres, such as poetry, history, philosophy, religion, science and mathematics, and the books in each genre were grouped in subgenres and arranged alphabetically by the names of their authors.

In the addition to the author's name, the catalog featured a short biographical note, including birthplace and teachers; a list of the author's other works; information about the scroll itself, such as the number of lines it contained and even the first words of the text. This monumental first library catalog in the Western world spanned over one hundred and twenty papyrus scrolls.

The library also served as a university, where brilliant scholars studied and worked. Euclid invented geometry there. Archimedes and many other scientists, engineers, mathematicians, philosophers and writers also worked there. Punctuation and initial capitals were invented there. The library of Alexandria became the crown jewel of the Ptolemaic kingdom and the pride of the entire Greek world.

In the year 250 b.c.e. or thereabouts, Ptolemy II Philadelphus ordered a copy of the Torah in the Greek language for his magnificent library. The story behind this command is told by Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived three hundred years later.[2] The works of Josephus are among the richest sources for the history of the ancient Western world. He will be discussed at length in the chapters on the first century of the common era when he lived and wrote.

According to Josephus, one of Ptolemy's ministers urged him to acquire for his library a copy of the Jewish Bible. The absence of this important book was a glaring omission. Although the book is written in a

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[2] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XII, 2.

different language and different writing, it would be worthwhile to have it translated into Greek so that it would be available to the rest of the world. In order to ensure that the translation was accurate, Ptolemy brought seventy elders from Judea and installed them in separate rooms on the island of Pharos, each to make his own translation. In the end, all the translations were essentially identical, and the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Torah, was born.[3]

The Greek translation was welcomed with rejoicing in the great Jewish community of Alexandria. It was read at a vast public gathering in the presence of the translators, after which the people gave the translators a standing ovation. The Jews of Alexandria were partially hellenized. They spoke only Greek and barely any Hebrew. Fiercely passionate about their Jewish identity and traditions, they were faithful to their ancient religion to the best of their ability, but they could not read the Torah. And now, they finally had access to their precious ancient text. They celebrated the event with great fanfare and designated its anniversary as an annual celebration of the Jews of Alexandria.[4]

The Sages, however, had a different reaction to the translation. The day of the completion of the translation is remembered as one of three days of darkness in the month of Teves. On 8 Teves, the Torah was translated to Greek. On 9 Teves, Ezra died, and prophecy came to an end. On 10 Teves, the Babylonians breached the walls of Yerushalayim.[5]

We can easily understand why 9 Teves and 10 Teves are considered days of darkness, but what was so monumentally tragic about the translation of the Torah into Greek? Furthermore, God commanded the Jewish people to inscribe the words of the Torah on great stone

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[3] Megillah 9a.
[4] Philo of Alexandria.
[5] Sofrim 1:7; Megillas Taanis.

monoliths when they cross over the Jordan River into Israel.[6] According to the Talmud, they were to appear in seventy languages so that all the nations could read them.[7] The translation of the Torah at that time was not only permitted but actually mandated. Why then was the Greek translation a day of darkness?

At that time, the combined Greek kingdoms ruled the Imperial Quadrant, which was effectively the entire world. In the aftermath of conquest, the wise conqueror will consider the security of his achievement. How secure is his empire from within and what threats does it face from without? Threats from within were minimal, since the Greeks were providing culture, science, technology, literature, sports and entertainment to their conquered people.

The Greek ministers undoubtedly gathered intelligence and paid great attention to possible external threats. In the east, the Parthians in northern Persia were a rising power, but they did not pose an imminent threat. In the western Mediterranean, two powers were vying for dominance. The Carthaginians, a Phoenician trading people, had a maritime empire based in present-day Tunisia. The Romans had just completed the conquest of all of Italy, including the Greek cities in the south. They were now fighting a war with Carthage over the island of Sicily at the tip of the Italian peninsula. The Romans were aggressive and rising, but they were not quite a threat to the Greek colossus. At least not yet. So where was the threat?

When they translated the Torah, they discovered that the greatest threat was not an army or a navy. It was a book belonging to a small people that presented an idea that clashed directly with the Greek idea. As explained in earlier chapters, the Greeks had risen above paganism.

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[6] Devarim 27:2-4.
[7] Sotah 35b.

They relegated the gods to festivals, and even if they ascribed some powers to the gods, they had established that humans were superior to them. The Greeks had embraced secular humanism and placed humankind at the pinnacle of creation. Man was the idol that deserved to be worshipped. The Jewish people contended that only God deserved to be worshipped. These two ideologies could not coexist.

God had commanded the Jewish people to translate the Torah into seventy languages in deep antiquity when the world was polytheistic and tolerant of all other gods and religions. There was always room for another god. But the Greeks had no room for the God of the Jews.

The Greeks discovered that the Jews were their mortal enemy, the greatest threat to the Greek world, and they were correct. Eventually, Judaism, by itself and through Christianity and Islam, its daughter religions, buried the Graeco-Roman edifice for a thousand year before it was reborn during the Renaissance. In the modern world, we again find the conflict between the Jewish and the Greek ideas at the centers of history in the Imperial Quadrant.

As long as the Greeks were not aware of the Torah, they paid little attention to the Jewish people, but now, things had changed. For the first time in history, a nation waged war on a religion and tried to destroy it. A day of darkness descended on the world.