

## Question

The Greek empire extended its authority over the entire known world, and ruled peacefully over many cultures. **What was it about Judaism that compelled the Syrian-Greeks to prohibit basic Jewish practices? Furthermore, how does Chanukah celebrate their failure to eradicate Judaism?**

## Answer

While the Syrian-Greek empire ruled over multitudes of diverse people, all the varied cultures shared a common practice of polytheism. Each nation already had numerous deities, and it was not at all odd for them to add one or two more simply by changing the god's name. Their superficial belief in their gods served as a means for them to explain things that they did not understand. Furthermore, the extensive mythology of the Greeks was most useful, since it served to turn the gods into "enablers." By attributing to their gods human forms and human weaknesses (and often rather wicked behavior), the Greeks justified their own raucous behavior by imitating the behaviors of their deities.



The Jews, however, held fast to their belief in one unseen G-d, who knows and controls the entire world. This infuriated the Syrian-Greeks who wished to show that humankind was in control of nature. The Syrian-Greeks therefore prohibited the Jews, under penalty of death, from studying Torah, performing *brit milah* (circumcision), sanctifying the new moon (Rosh Chodesh), and keeping the Sabbath. Why?

Torah study was prohibited by the Syrian-Greeks because it promoted the divine commandments. The Torah teaches humankind to strive to be G-d-like. In contrast, the Greeks created gods who acted with less dignity than many humans. Thus, Torah in-and-of-itself was a fundamental threat to their culture and philosophy.

Foremost in the ancient Greek culture was the idealization of the beauty of the physical form, particularly the male body, therefore the Syrian-Greeks found circumcision to be most abhorrent. The idea that a man would willingly mar their bodies was outrageous to them. (Of course, in many ancient cultures, leaving a baby out in the cold to die of exposure wasn't a problem.) On a deeper level, however, circumcision represents the human being's ability to have control over one's physical self. The Syrian-Greeks believed in fulfilling all of their passions, and found Judaism's devotion to self-discipline unacceptable.

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