

"WHAT'S THE USE?"

A Hanukkah Thought

For eight days, beginning later this week, we shall be lighting the Hanukkah candles and, after reciting the blessings, shall read the Ha-nerot halalu, a brief excerpt from the Talmud, Masekhet Soferim.

In the course of this passage, which explains the reason for the observance of Hanukkah, we shall add the following well-known words:

ha-nerot halalu kodesh hem, v'ein lanu reshut le'hishtamesh bahem,

ela lirotam bilvad, these candles are holy, and we are not permitted to make use of them, only to gaze at them. This refers to the law that Hanukkah candles, unlike Shabbat candles, may not be used for profane purposes; for instance, we may not use them to illuminate the house.

(That is why we always provide an extra candle, the shammash, so that if all other lights are extinguished it will not be these Hanukkah candles alone that will provide the illumination for members of the household.)

For the candles are holy, and what is holy may not be used, only gazed at and contemplated.

There is something quite remarkable about this idea that what is holy may not be "used" for any other purpose, no matter how worthy, that there are certain things that are valuable in and of themselves even if they serve no other function. It is, let us readily confess, a fairly un-modern and un-American idea. The ideal American is tough-minded and eminently practical, and his guiding philosophy is pragmatism or instrumentalism: ideas are meaningful only if they work. Things have to work, wheels have to turn, projects must be completed, one must lead to another, things must get done. The most modern of modern questions is, "of what use is it?" And when the true modern wants to express despair and hopelessness, he says, "What's the use!" -- as if that which has no use is as good as dead, utterly worthless.

Our Hanukkah lights, then, take exception to that rule. They have no use -- we may not use them -- for they are holy. The inventiveness of the practical man and the ambition of the pragmatist all must stop at the Menorah: here he may only gaze at the lights, contemplate what they represent, and consider them an end in themselves. He may not exploit them for his own use.

What a sorely needed corrective they offer for our over-managed, over-efficient, over-driven, over-anxious lives! They remind us that what we are, and not only what we do, is important; that not how much we make, ^{but what we make} of ourselves is what really counts. They challenge us to measure a work of art not by how much of a return a wise investment in it will bring in ten years, but by its inner esthetic worth; to judge a course of study not by how it will advance your child's career, but rather how it will mold his very being, refine his character, enforce his sense of purpose, and expand his intellectual horizons. As one who teaches in a college I am sometimes appalled by the cold, calculating, business-like attitude that young men -- who should be flushed with idealism -- bring to their studies. Talmud? -- how will it help me become a doctor? Philosophy? -- what will it do for my career as a lawyer? Poetry? --- all poets starve so it's not for me! Hanukkah reminds us that there are certain areas of life that ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem, that may not be exploited, ~~where the pragmatic test may not be exploited~~, where the pragmatic test may not be applied. Hanerot halalu kodesh hem --- that which is holy, like that which is beautiful and that which is true, is an end in itself; it serves no other purpose. In fact, all other things are for the purpose of discovering it.

This is what our Tradition means by Torah lishmah -- the study of Torah only for the sake of Torah, not for the purpose of becoming a Rabbi or teacher, or achieving a reputation, or any other practical reason. Just Torah for Torah's sake -- like the Hanukkah lights.

That is why the authentic Jewish tradition does not agree with Philo's analysis of Shabbat. For Philo, the Sabbath rest is an opportunity to refresh one's self in preparation for another week's activity; the Shabbat was made for the rest of the work-week. Our Siddur, however, disagrees. The more genuine Jewish view is that the rest of the week was made for Shabbat: ata kidashta et yom ha-shevi' lishmekha, takhlit maaseh shamayim va-aretz, God sanctified the seventh day as the purpose for which heaven and earth were created! Shabbat is the purpose (takhlit) of the other days, and not the other way around.

The same holds true for Prayer. It is true that we begin the enterprise of prayer because we feel certain needs which no one but God can satisfy, and so we pray in order that these needs be met. But that is only the beginning. The object of prayer is to forget myself and my needs, to gain a new perspective on life, to appreciate how trivial most of my concerns really are, to see myself from God's perspective. In real tefillah man is so overcome by the presence of God that he forgets himself and what he wants. That is why truly pious Jews are never really concerned about the "efficacy of prayer"; prayer is not something they want to use, it is an end in its own right. They are not so much concerned that God should be an oneh tefillah, One who answers prayers, as a shomeia tefillah, that He should hear them.

But the most important lesson of ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem concerns: people, human beings. Human life, like Hanukkah lights, may be enjoyed, but not used; explored, but not exploited. Man was created in God's image; he is at least as holy, as much an end in himself, as Hanukkah candles. E'in lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem -- we must never manipulate another person for ulterior motives. A human being too must be approached lishmah.

When the brothers, in this week's Sidra, cast Joseph into the pit and contemplate destroying him, it is Judah who saves him. Yet the Talmud (Sanh. 6b) is severe with anyone who praises Judah. Why? Because Judah's reason for selling rather than killing Joseph was, mah betza ki naharog et ahinu, of what profit, what use will it be to us to kill him? If we sell him, we will at least receive something in return for him. It is true that this strategy saved the life of Joseph. But it revealed a decadent attitude: brothers may be used, exploited, reduced to mere means by which to aggrandize myself. The words Mah betza, "of what use is it," reveal a criteriom which is destructive of all human values. Mah betza ignores value in favor of price; it is what leads people to sell their own brothers down the river.

Consider how this pernicious mah betza doctrine, "what's the use" policy, destroys family integrity. If people may be used, then parents too are but means to be exploited by ambitious children. Then parents become not the corner-stones of our lives, to be honored and cherished, but stepping-stones to our own happiness, to be stepped on and taken advantage of in order to get what we can out of them. Parents who are over-permissive with children, who ply them with too much cash and with cars when they are still very young, destroy themselves as parents. They teach their children that parents were created for the pleasure and use of children, and have no meaning and significance as individuals without always giving and providing. Do you remember when grandfather or grandmother was a permanent feature in every Jewish home? No one ever wondered -- least of all the old folks themselves -- of what use are they now that they do not work and earn a living and cannot get about. No one ever asked mah betza -- of what use are they. Instead: ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem, ala lirotam bilvad, we dare not consider the question of "what's the use", for merely to see them, to have their company, to enjoy their presence -- that is enough.

That holds true as much and more so for husband-wife relations. A mah betza standard makes a true, happy relationship impossible. For then a wife considers a husband as nothing more than a way to earn a living and achieve status, and a man takes his wife as but an opportunity to satisfy his lust or advance his career. Then a spouse is not a helpmeet, but a "help me." Ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem.

Children can also be used by parents, even without parents realizing it.

If mah betza, then a father will see in his son nothing more than an extension of himself, and attempt to carry out through his son's life whatever ambitions he originally had for himself but were frustrated. He doesn't care whether the child is capable of it or likes it or is happy with it; a son or a daughter is, consciously or not, used and exploited. A mother may follow the same policy and often use a child as the object of unexpressed emotions properly directed elsewhere. In such cases, a child is not cherished and loved for what he or she is, but for what they can do for the parents happiness.

In Psalm 127 there is a remarkable statement concerning children:

ke'hitzim be'yad gibbor ken bnei ha-ne'urim, "as arrows in the hands of a mighty man, so are the children of one's youth." What a strange smile! How, indeed, are children like arrows?

A weapon has one of two purposes. When it is borne by a weak, diffident man, then the weapon has a vital function. He aims it at others to scare them off or to eliminate them, or he bears it in order to reassure himself that he is not totally helpless. He needs the arrows or the sword or the rifle, and uses it both militarily and psychologically. However, if a man is strong, powerful, unafraid, and respected, then he does not need the weapon in order to defend himself or to frighten others. He is confident of his own strength and position. He bears the weapon only as an ornament, as a badge. He shines it and polishes it and sharpens it, not as a weapon of death and hostility but as a symbol of position and serenity. The

arrows of a weak man are used and exploited; they reveal his inner shortcomings. The same arrows in the hands of a gibbor, a mighty man, are cherished as ornaments; they reflect ~~this~~ inner tranquility and confidence.

So it is with children. A weak, insecure, immature man will use his children like arrows: attack others through them, employ them as pawns in his never-ending battles with society or wife or family, use them as pointed expressions of his own dreams that failed. A powerful man does not need to use his children. Like a gibbor carrying his arrows with dignity and honor, he treats his children not like tools but like objects of love and adoration. He regards them not as extensions of himself, but as nahalat ha-Shem, as a gift from God which he loves and tries to develop with wisdom. He respects them, and wants them to fulfill their, and not his, dreams and ambitions. "As arrows in the hands of a mighty man, so are the children of one's youth!" Hanerot halalu kodesh hem, V'ein lanu reshit lehishtamesh bahem. These young lights are holy; they must not be exploited for our own use.

Never before was this sublime message of Hanukkah as necessary as it is today. Our mad~~f~~, rushing, mechanized, automated world is one in which man has become depersonalized and dehumanized; he is manipulated by ad-men, exploited by politicians, used by employers ^{and employees} and colleagues. Our world is one in which man has more and more become a "thing," a means to other ends. Not character but productivity has become the standard by which men are judged.

Let us, therefore, to protect our humanity, to keep intact our dignity as children of God, learn that lesson: hanerot halalu kodesh hem, that which is truly enlightening in the world is holy; and the human personality or soul is the most divine light of all -- ner ha-Shem nishmat ha-adam -- and is therefore sacred. V'ein lanu reshut lehishtamesh bahem, ela lirotam

bilvad, and that which is holy may not be used profanely, only seen and appreciated and revered.

Let us learn this and we will have reversed the tendency towards de-humanization, and contributed mightily towards reaffirming man's worth, his value, his dignity.

"For not my might nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."