

In the special AL HA'NISSIM prayer which we recite on this Chanukah holiday, thanking G-d for all His favors to us, we recite a short account of the Chanukah story. In the course of so doing, we mention the evil Greek rule over Palestine, and the fact that the conquering Greeks sought LE'HASHKICHAM TORASSECHA, to make them (the Jews) forget Thy Torah.

Now, while it might be true that many an enemy of Israel has attempted to "make them forget Thy Torah", we do not find that the Greeks expressly prohibited the study of Torah. We know that a couple of centuries later the Romans specifically forbade it. But the Greeks, according to the Book of Maccabees, forbade only three religious institutions: SHABBOS, CHODESH and MILAH. We have no record of them forbidding TORAH. Why, then, this statement in the AL HA'NISSIM that the Greeks tried LE'HASHKICHAM TORASSECHA?

Let me ask that question in another way: Rabbis are always upbraiding their people, demanding of them loyal adherence to the Torah. We cry and protest and lecture because the Jews are being alienated from their Bible. We want Jews to be GOOD JEWS, not Jews by birth or friendships alone. And yet there is always the wayward layman who asks: But am I not a good Jew? So what if I don't observe SHABBOS, CHODESH, MILAH, so what if I smoke on the Sabbath, or never come to a synagogue to know when Rosh Chodesh prayers are to be recited, so what if I allow a doctor - a non-Jewish one yet - to circumsize my child? Does that mean that the Bible is not mine as well as the next fellow's? Does that mean that I am not a GOOD JEW? My diet may be non-Jewish, my work-schedule may be non-Jewish, my lack of support of a synagogue may be not in keeping with Jewish demands, but I'm good-natured, generous, I support certain social agencies which are Jewish-sponsored and I occasionally lend some money to my brother-in-law. Isn't that what G-d wants? Isn't that in the Bible? How can you say that I have forgotten the Torah, that I'M not a Good Jew?

The answer to those questions, which are actually one and the same, can be found in the phrase that follows in the AL HA'NISSIM. LE'HASHKICHAM TORASSECHA, ...U'LE'HA VIRAM ME'CHUKEI RETZONECHA, to make them forget Thy Torah, and to transgress Thy Mitzvos, the laws of Thy will. There is the answer, friends. If a Jew fails to observe CHUKEI RETZONECHA, if he transgresses the commandments of G-d, any of them, then he is automatically in the class of LEHASHKICHAM TORASSECHA, of being one who has rejected the Torah. You cannot be a GOOD JEW, you cannot be a Bible-loving Jew, if you reject the Mitzvos, the practical observances it contains. Love of the Torah is ludicrous without performance of the Mitzvos. To say that one is a Good Jew because he likes G-d and adores goodness, although he observes none of the commandments of the Torah, is equivalent to saying that one is a good American citizen because he salutes the flag, although he never votes, commits murder and mayhem, and some espionage and treason for diversion. LEHASHKICHAM TORASSECHA is the logical consequence of LEHA VIRAM ME'CHUKEI RETZONECHA. That is how the Greek anti-semites sought to destroy Torah - through destroying the Mitzvos. That is how we Jews, with good intentions and weak backbones, show that we really are NOT good Jews, by declaring verbal allegiance to Judaism and doing nothing of what a Jew is required to do.

It hurts sometimes to have to tell a well-intentioned Jew that he is NOT a good Jew just because he is good-natured and has not sold out his country. But it has to be told: Torah is composed of two kinds of commandments, the MITZVOS SHE'BEIN ADAM LAMAKOM and those SHE'BEIN ADAM LACHAVEIRO, the purely religious or ritualistic commandments, and the ethical or moral, the primarily social, ones. Reject either body and you are a BAD Jew. There is no half-measure. Give a check to the UJA and violate the dietary code or the Sabbath; or, put on Tallis and Tefillin every day, but speak evil of your neighbor or insult him in public; either way, it is the mark of a BAD Jew. A GOOD JEW, said the Hassidic teacher, R. Bunam, is one who thinks, eats, sleeps and intends goodness, one who is altogether good. Otherwise he is a good worshipper or donor or student, not a good Jew.

Allow me to mention one important attitude towards Torah and Mitzvos, as we have been discussing them, which is both historically important, and of contemporary significance. I refer to the attitudes of Respect and Disrespect to Religion.

The one major event which really precipitated the Macabbean Revolt by evoking the righteous indignation of old Mattathias was something done not by a Greek gentile, but by a Jewish Hellenist, by one of the MISYAVNIM. They were Jews who wanted to be "up to date", they wanted to assimilate in their Greek environment, bow down to the Greek idols, and, of course, be accepted in high Greek society. The Jewish Hellenists stopped at nothing in these attempts to imitate and amalgamate with the Greeks. They trained their children to believe that the Olympics were more important than Jewish Festivals, and that the Gymnasium was more important than the Beis Hamidrash. They urged their children to participate cheerfully in the Greek equivalent of Christmas. They probably scheduled their athletic events to commemorate the Greek New Year on Friday nights. In all their dealings they were completely oblivious of the feelings and sensitivities of the Pietists, what we would call the Orthodox Jews of that day, led by the Macabee family. In short, they were most disrespectful, in ways vulgar, cheap and offensive. They showed no reverence or respect for Tradition. It was when one such Hellenist slaughtered a non-kosher animal ~~in-fro-~~ as a sacrifice to a Greek idol, in full view of his fellow Jews, that Mattathias could no longer contain himself and began what developed into a physical war against Greece and a spiritual war against the Jewish Hellenists. It was DISRESPECT by Jews to Judaism that touched off the whole incident which we commemorate this week.

No doubt, we too must beware of disrespect, of flaunting our unJewishness in the faces of those who regard it as sacred. A synagogue must be respected. A Prayerbook and Bible must be treated with the proper respect. An observing Jew must be treated properly, and we must use common sense and good taste in not demonstrating and flaunting our neglect of Judaism in his face or in the face of his synagogue. We must respect Judaism.

But there is an opposite danger as well. DISRESPECT is like putting a dagger into the heart of Judaism. But too much RESPECT is sometimes like smothering Judaism in a barrel of molasses. I think Prof. Heschel in his latest book has chosen the proper term for it: A THEOLOGY OF RESPECT. I come to the synagogue because my father did, not because that is where I meet up with G-d and bare my soul to him. I pray because it is "Jewish expression", not because prayer is the supreme adventure of the human heart. In the synagogue I do not whisper and talk, not because I am absorbed in the holiness of the Torah being read, but because of courtesy. We want to avoid the LEHASKICHAM TORASSECH, not by means of observing CHUKKI RETZONECHA, but by that dignified, gentlemanly, cold, stuffy, empty gesture called RESPECT.

This too, we must stress, is a wrong approach. Refuse to observe SHABBOS, CHODESH, MILAH, KASHRUTH, TEFILLAH, TAHARATH HAMISHPACHAH, and all other Mitzvos, and all the respect in the world won't make you a Good Jew. A respectful Jew, perhaps. But not a good Jew.

When the two brothers, R. Elimelech Lizensker and R. Sussya, later to become outstanding Hassidic teachers, were still poor, beragged wanderers, they once halted, at nightfall, in the town of Ludmir. No one welcomed them except the poorest man in town, one Reb Aaron. A few years later, when they became world-famous, they again chanced to stop at Ludmir. This time they came well equipped, with horse and carriage and attendants and Chassidim. The richest man in town, seeking the honor of their presence, begged them to remain at his home. But instead they went to the home of poor Reb Aaron. When asked why they turned him down, they told the rich man, "We are the same persons to whom you paid no attention a few years ago. The difference is that then we came without horses, and now we came with them. Obviously, it is not we who are being respected but our horses. We are entirely willing to accept your hospitality and respect for our horses."

I think the same holds true for those who indulge in the Theology of Respect. We respect the synagogue. Well, what is the synagogue? Walls? A dome? Seats? Books? Glass Stained windows? Is that what I "respect"? If so, I find myself ~~like~~ in the position of the rich man who respected the horses of the Rabbis.

~~Ah, but~~ But ah, you will say, it is G-d Whom we respect. If so, then ~~forget the~~ ~~need~~ for G-d's sake, do what He asks of you. He is liable to feel offended by your strange diet and strange actions and strange words and strange thoughts. G-d is respected only by being obeyed. To rise for the Torah and violate its precepts is the sheerest hypocrisy. Respect can, by the dialectic of hypocrisy, become disrespect. One can violate the Mitzvot with the utmost tenderness, gentleness and "respect" for Tradition; but it remains a violent rejection of the Torah.

Let us remember that "respect" or "KAVOD" in Judaism was always connected to a behavior pattern. KAVOD for a scholar meant tending to his personal needs and studying his scholastic achievements. KAVOD for father and mother means supporting them, and obeying them. And KAVOD for Torah means, as well, supporting it and obeying its Mitzvos.

On this Chanukah, recalling the heroic epic of the Macabean revolt, let us remember too that the enemy aimed at the Torah when he attacked the Mitzvot. Let us remember that it was Disrespect for Judaism, by Jews, which precipitated the battle. And let us remember that Respect, by itself, is like a tablet of concentrated Saccharine: it is bitter. Only by adding it to the Faith, the Tradition and the Practice of Mitzvot, can it sweeten all of Life, and make of each of us the true, complete and total kind of person we should and want to be: the GGOD JEW.