

THE PROGRESSIVE CANDLES: A COMMENTARY ON JEWISH LIFE

A-45

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the most important feature of Chanukah, the Chanukah candles, is the increase in the number of candles from day to day. The lighting of the candles is progressive; that is, we proceed from least to most. The first night we light one candle, the second night two candles, the third night three candles, and so until the eighth night when the candelabrum is ablaze with all eight candles. What we have is growth and increase and progress. It was the House of Hillel which gave this order its legal form when it said that MOSSIF VE'HOLECH, the number of candles is to be increased each night, because MA'ALIN BE'KODESH, because one must rise, increase or progress, in holiness.

In a sense, this idea of increase, of addition, of the Progressive Candles, is a very deep and incisive commentary on Jewish Life and what it should be. The Chanukah candles represent more than merely the military victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the Greek Antiochus. They symbolize as well the clash of cultures, the war of world-views. There was the Greek world, steeped in its oriental idolatry, pitted against a Jewish minority, stubbornly proud of its pure belief in one G-D. One should not dismiss the Greek world lightly. The world's greatest philosophers were nursed in the cradle of Greek culture. But the great difference between Hellenism, as the Greek culture is known, and Judaism, lies in this: The Greek world glorified contemplation, the Jewish - behavior, Mitzvos. The Greeks stressed creed, while we insisted upon deed. The Greeks were inclined to inactivity, while the Jew insisted upon activity. The Greeks had many philosophers, but few saints; many thinkers, but few doers. With the Jews this was reversed. Our world was not one of cold thought, but one of warm action. And this Jewish attitude is best represented by the Progressive Candles-increase, growth, action, progress. I have no doubt that if the Greeks had won

the war, and decided to celebrate it by the lighting of Candles, they would have constructed one gigantic, beautiful candle in front of the statue of Zeus, or a thousand smaller ones all around him - but it would have remained that way. With us Jews, however, a Chanukah is celebrated by Progressive Candles - MA' ALIN BE' KODESH.

In human terms, we could call the Greeks sitters or standers; that is, in their cold inactivity they confined themselves to one place and there stagnated. They were sitters or standers; who never chose to advance to help a fellow man. And if the Greeks were sitters and

standers, we Jews were walkers and goers. And when one of us decided to "Sit it out", and not participate actively in the good life, then our Rabbis were merciless in their criticism. Today's Sidra begins with some very significant words:

which is usually translated as, "and Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's residence", but which literally means, "and Jacob sat in the land of his father's residence". So that even Jacob was at times a "sitter". And listen to the Rabbis biting remark

Wherever man sits, Satan jumps;

wherever man becomes inactive, Satan raises his ugly head and he becomes active. Here was Jacob, an old man who was tired and weary of a life of wandering and running away. He felt that his energies were spent in wrestling with Angels, in warding off Labans, and in protecting himself from Esaus. He now had 12 children and he was ready to retire. "Enough done in one life time", he thought, "now is the time to get a little Nachas, the time to sit back and relax". And so Jacob sat back and relaxed where his father had once lived. And what happens? - Satan becomes active. Once Jacob sits, jealousy invades his home, and his sons begin a struggle with each other over a mere colored shirt. Once a Jacob sits, then one son speaks evil of another. Once a Jacob sits, then he finds that his Joseph, as the Rabbis relate, spends more time combing himself

in front of a mirror than in poring over his school books, and that he soon begins to dream high-handed dreams of conquest and royalty. Aye, once a Jacob sits, then his family is torn apart and some sons sell other sons down the river and into slavery.

And sitting, in this sense of inactivity, leads not only to family dissension, but also to downright immorality. Here was Israel, a "Holy nation and the Kingdom of Priests", wandering in the desert and then suddenly  $\text{וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר מִדְבָּר מוֹאב}$  "And Israel sat in the plains of Moab"; and what happens when a nation sits? -  $\text{וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר מִדְבָּר מוֹאב}$ , and the children of Israel entered into immoral relationships with the daughters of Moab. So that sitting leads to immorality as well. Indeed, once stagnation sets in, once there is only sitting or standing, but no going or progress then  $\text{וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר מִדְבָּר מוֹאב}$ , Satan jumps, he becomes terribly active.

What is the Jewish way? Certainly not sitting or standing, but going and walking. In the great vision that Abraham beheld, G-D's command was clear and to the point:  $\text{וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲבְרָהָם בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵרֶת שָׁרֵן וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲבְרָהָם בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵרֶת שָׁרֵן$ , "Walk before me and be perfect". When a man walks, not sits, then he has a chance of becoming perfect. Or take today's Haftorah. Joshua the high Priest stands before Almighty G-D and Satan is at his right hand, attempting to obstruct him, and after G-D promises Joshua the ultimate redemption of Israel, he tells him  $\text{וַיֵּלֶךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵרֶת שָׁרֵן$ , "If you will walk in my ways", then  $\text{וַיֵּלֶךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּעֵינֵי ה' וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵרֶת שָׁרֵן$ , "I will give you places to walk among those that stand". Yes, the world is full of sitters and standers, those who in their inactivity and stagnation invite the company of Satan. But the Abrahams and the Joshuas are committed to a policy of walking and going, of constant activity and good deeds. For such is the policy of the Jew in all ages, and it is perhaps best represented by one those new and ultra-modern advertisements which one sees in gas-stations nowadays. That sign reads, "Activated", and the words themselves are in constant motion and activity.  $\rightarrow$

So too is the Jew activated, an activation symbolized by the Progressive Candles of his Chanukah Menora. MA'ALIN BE'KODESH.

How unfortunate, therefore, that so many of our modern Jews, while lighting the candles, forget their meaning. How often a Rabbi hears the following remarks: "You see, Rabbi, it's true I am not an Orthodox Jew, I don't put on Tefillin, I don't observe Shabbos, I don't observe the dietary laws; but, Rabbi, let me tell you that I have a good heart; it's all in here". My dear friends, that is precisely what Rabbis are afraid of - that it's all in here, that the good heart is something which lies buried between ribs and behind the diaphragm, and whose warm heart-beats cannot be heard without the aid of artificial instruments. The "good heart" is the excuse of the sitter or the stander. The "good heart" excuse is in the tradition of Greece, and not Israel. I am very weary, indeed, when all a person has to offer is a good heart; whose good intentions cannot be reflected in good limbs and good pockets and good deeds. Imagine what would happen, if we would translate that "Good heart" idea into actual medical terms. Just imagine what would happen, if all the blood would be drained from your body, from the fingertips to the tips of your toes, and would concentrate in your heart. It would certainly be a good heart because it would contain all the blood in your body. But such a situation can only lead to death, because a good heart is not enough; you have got to have a heart which can circulate this goodness all over the body. Good intentions without good deeds and good actions are the characteristics of the Greeks and not of the Jews. I feel sure, for example, that this synagogue was not built by good intentions or good hearts, but by good deeds and good actions. The U.S.A. was not made by good hearts alone; the Yeshiva University was not built by good intentions alone. They required good hands + good heads + good actions.

With this mind, my friends, we can understand part of the special AL HANISSIM prayer. In the course of that prayer we praise G-D, and thank him for assuring us victory over the Greeks, who, we say, wanted to לְהַחֲרִיב אֶת הַתּוֹרָה וְאֶת הַמִּצְוֹת, to cause us to forget the Torah and to transgress G-D's commandments. This statement is, seemingly, not true from a historical point of view. We know that Antiochus promulgated only three harsh laws against the Jews, and those were לְהַחֲרִיב אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, לְהַחֲרִיב אֶת הַמִּצְוֹת, וְלְהַחֲרִיב אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת; he forbade the observance of Shabbos, the festival of the New Month, and the rite of circumcision. But nowheres do we find that this mad emperor prohibited the study of Torah. The answer, however, lies in the idea we have been trying to convey; and that is, that if the Jew is forbidden to observe the practical commandments, the CHUKKI RETZONECHA, so that the study of the Torah can lead to no action, then it is the same as if he were prohibited from even thinking about the Torah; it is the same as לְהַחֲרִיב אֶת הַתּוֹרָה. Of what use is Torah, if it does not lead LI'YEDEI MAASEH, to concrete action and noble deeds? And if, therefore, Antiochus did not allow the Jews to observe their commandments, then he stands accused in the eyes of history of destroying their study of the Torah. Because for the Jew study without implementation is of no value. Creed must give birth to deed; contemplation must result in behavior; thought must end in action. MA'ALIN BE'KODESH.

The light of the Progressive Candles is, therefore, for us, an enlightening commentary on what Jewish life should be. They inspire us to better behavior, challenge us to greater deeds and urge us on to new and broader horizons, with that ever-valid commandment, "Rise in Holiness".

Benediction - [was made - asked for Divine guidance for New President J. F. Kennedy]