

KINDLERS AND CARRIERS OF JUDAISM'S LIGHT

A-315

In discussing the commandment of Chanukkah lights, the Talmud raises a problem which it formulates as: Hadlakah oseh mitzvah, or Hanachah oseh mitzvah. That is, what is the essential mitzvah of the lighting of the Chanukkah light, is it the kindling of the light itself, or the placing of the lit menorah in its proper place. For just as we must kindle the light, so must we make sure that the menorah is placed in a proper spot. Thus, for instance, it must not be too low, and it must not be too high. More important in the days of the Talmud, before the advent of crowded cities and skyscrapers, when every family lived in a house which opened into a courtyard, which in turn opened into the public square, the Chanukkah Menorah was to be placed outside the door, in the courtyard, so as to insure proper pirsum of the miracle -- to publish or proclaim in public the fact that G-d's providence extends over His people Israel. What then is the major aspect of the mitzvah of Chanukkah: hadlakah or hanachah -- kindling the light, or carrying the light to its proper place?

Insofar as the Halakah is concerned, the Talmud must of course choose one or the other: hadlakah or hanachah, kindling or carrying. In the larger sense, however, when we deal with the light of Judaism, it seems to me that both are true. We must have both hadlakah and hanachah, the kindling of the light and the carrying it to its proper place. For the triumph of Torah, for the dissemination of Judaism, we need both kindlers and carriers -- those who will provide the substance of the Jewish spirit, and those who will endow it with proper method; those who will give it content, and those who will shape its form; those who will provide the inner light of the spirit, and those who will drape it with the proper outer appearance; those, in other words, who will kindle Judaism's light and those who will carry it to the darkest and remotest recesses of the hearts of almost lost Jews and Jewesses.

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Our problem in Jewish life has not usually been the absence of Torah. There always have been and always will be at least a few dedicated souls who, no matter what the hardships and how few their number, will strive to live the life of Torah and pass it on to the next generation. Our problem, rather, has been the proper pirsum -- the proper presentability of Torah to the Jewish public at large. Sometimes we have allowed Torah to appear unpresentable. Sometimes we have failed to pay sufficient attention to the hanachah, to where we have placed Torah, to the kind of surroundings we have provided for it. We have sometimes failed to present the light of Judaism in attractive form, in an appearance that will be appealing to the public at large. We have allowed the page in the Torah to turn yellow and brittle, the crown of Torah to tarnish. We have permitted our services to become unkempt and our synagogues unhandsome. We have allowed the schools of Torah barely to subsist in shabby buildings, in a state of disrepair, the face of Torah faded, its image frayed, its scholars and students threadbare and often hungry. We have forgotten the principle of pirsum. We have forgotten the mitzvah of hanachah. We have forgotten to carry proudly as well as kindle properly.

Torah will always exist, but whether, by and large, the people of Israel will live meaningful, spiritual existences depends on how well we carry to them the radiance of Torah's light; how much effort we devote to placing the light of Torah in decent adequate respectable surroundings. I believe it was Samson Raphael Hirsch who once commented sadly that the fate of Judaism often depends on something as picayune as the cleanliness of the local kosher delicatessen. That is no less true today than it was in his day. More important, the fate of Judaism usually depends upon the attractiveness and prosperity of our major yeshivot.

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It is, appropriately, in the Haftorah of this Sabbath Chanukkah, that we read of the vision of the prophet, Zechariah, who sees before him Joshua, the Kohan gadol, the high priest -- the symbol of fate, the guardian of Torah and the Jewish spirit. As befits such a symbol, he was "standing before the angel of the Lord." But there was, in addition to Joshua and the angel, a third individual present: "And Satan was standing at his right hand to obstruct him." Who is it who accuses Joshua? Who is it who scolds him and reproaches him? We would think that it is Satan. But, no, it is not Satan. For Satan is silenced by the Lord Himself -- yigar ha-Shem bekha ha-satan. Of what can he accuse the students of Torah? Of wrongdoing, of cruelty, of barbarism -- when the Torah itself is the source of honor and righteousness and kindness? Remarkably, it is the angel who accuses Joshua. It is the angel who is angry with him.

VI-Yehoshua hayah lavush begadim tzo'im ve-omed lifnei ha-malakh. "And Joshua was dressed in soiled garments and standing before the angel." Has this not too often been the picture of Torah and its students? Always standing reverently before the angel of the Lord but dressed in begadim tzo'im, soiled garments! The guardians of Torah have too often allowed it to be presented to Jews as unappealing, unattractive, unhandsome, and alien. We have allowed the inner beauty of Torah to be obscured by an unkempt exterior. And when we make the dreadful error of thus presenting Torah, we sin grievously against it. For then we guarantee that Jews will reject the greatest spiritual treasure they have. When Jews will see Torah in such a countenance, they will automatically lower it in their estimation. When we show Torah and Judaism in the guise of begadim tzo'im, then people will naturally not welcome it to the parlors of their personalities, but confine it to the cellars of their souls and consign Torah to the slums of the mind.

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And so the angel commands Joshua: hasiru et ha-begadim ha-tzo'im me'alav, "rid him of his filthy garments," and instead: halbesh otekha machalatzot, "I have dressed you in robes, in holiday garments." Away with the soiled appearance, and put on a presentable, respectable face. Then the angel tells Joshua: "Thus sayeth the Lord of hosts: If you will go in My way, if you will observe My observances" -- in other words, if you will observe the contents of Torah, if you will kindle the light of Judaism and observe its precepts; and, in addition, you will also not forget the externals, to support the light of Torah, to provide it with the proper pirsum, "and also you will judge my house and also you will take care of my courtyard" -- you will pay attention to the exterior of Jewish life and Jewish institutions, even the courtyard will be well kept, then -- ve'natati lekha mehalkhim ben ha- omdim ha-elah, then all others will be static and stagnant, Torah and its students will progress, will develop, will go from strength to strength.

It is a tradition of The Jewish Center that we make an appeal on Shabbat Chanukkah for the yeshivot of Israel. They are the kindlers, they perform the hadlakah, they are the modern Joshuas. The importance of the yeshivot, the kindlers, cannot be overrated. All scholarship is important, but Torah is the lifeblood of our people. Without Torah all else is a failure. You may have Jewish schools and Israeli institutions, sponsoring learning of all sorts, but using Jewish lawyers and Jewish scientists, Jewish doctors and Jewish archeologists, but you will have no Jews. Without the yeshivot, without the study of Torah and the illumination of its kindlers, Jewry must lapse into a spiritual darkness, in which Jewish eyes will atrophy, Jewish hearts slow down, the Jewish soul turn insensitive.

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Imagine the tragedy if suddenly Israel lost all of its yeshivot. In other words, if the religious community of Israel lost its light of Torah, its very heart.

For all of us who fought and hoped; who helped and supported the drives of the modern State of Israel, the existence of the yeshivot is extremely significant. For without the yeshivot, modern Israel is just another Levantine state, with no special significance to us or to history. We who have hoped and dreamed of a new light of Zion ought to remember the verse in our prayers which states or chadah al Tzion ta'ir -- "may You cause a new light to shine upon Zion" -- is followed by the prayer, the major import of which is the passage "to obey, to learn, and to teach the words of the study of Thy Torah." The new life of Zion will be meaningless without the study of Torah.

What a pity if we were to allow the sacred schools of Torah to lapse into poverty, their resources meager, their countenance to the public unattractive.

A Malakh confronts each of us today and challenges us with the words hasiru et ha-begadim ha tzo'im me'alav -- it is your sacred duty to r p off the soiled garments from the body of Torah, and halbesh otekha machalatzot, and dress it in the finest finery you can find. Remember: your duty to present Torah attractively is not only a duty towards the students of Torah. It is also something which involves the life of the uncommitted Jew, both in Israel and the United States. Remember the impression made upon the uncommitted Jew when he sees the institutions of Torah impoverished, its facilities crowded, its students hungry. There is nothing that succeeds like success, and there is nothing that fails like failure. Do not allow Torah to be pitied. Torah must be admired and revered, never pitied. Away with the begadim tzo'im;

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give them machalatzot. You must provide the hanachah, placing in the proper environment, what the students of Torah perform with their hadlakah. You must become the **carriers** to their kindling.

We appeal to you my friends to become the carriers of Judaism's light. Give it power and influence, beauty and public acclaim. Do not permit Torah to beg. Give it dignity. Remember that over sixty institutions of Isreal rely upon this appeal we are making this morning.

When we have done this, and only then, will the malakh show us the vision which he showed the prophets: the menorah of Judaism both well lit and beautifully placed, so that all the world will gaze and acclaim: "Not by might and not by strength but by My Spirit, sayeth the Lord of hosts."