

# A DIFFERENT LIGHT

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week the Jewish nation is told that they are held to a higher standard. The Torah commands us to heed its words and follow the *Chukim* (decrees), "for (those laws) are your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations, who shall hear all these decrees and declare, 'surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation.'"

The Jewish People were the founders of moral civilization. The famed apostate Benjamin Disraeli once retorted to an anti-Semitic invective by parliamentarian Daniel O'Connell, "when the ancestors of the right honorable gentlemen were brutal savages on an unknown island mine were priests in Solomon's Temple."

This is easily understood in the context of *Mishpatim*, or laws that have seemingly clear reasons. The Torah's judicial system and codification of tort law are the blueprint for common law the world over. Yet the Torah does not emphasize observance of *Mishpatim* as such. It tells us that in order to be an example of wisdom and clarity unto the nations, we must observe the *Chukim*, laws that are difficult to comprehend even for those born as Jews.

The question is obvious: wouldn't the open observance of the esoteric laws of Judaism bring question if not contempt to the eyes of the nations? Why are *Chukim* specifically rendered as the acts that will have the world look at us and say, "surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation."

**In 1993, six years after the death of my revered grandfather, a biography, "Reb Yaakov, the Life and Times of Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky," was printed by Mesorah Publications. Based on years of my uncle, Rabbi Nosson Kamenetzky's research and the fine writing of Yonason Rosenbloom, it was an instant success. The book shed unseen light on a Torah giant, perhaps never known by the masses. In addition to the splendid biographical research, the book is filled with hundreds of encounters with myriad personalities who were touched by the brilliant sage. From young children to Prime ministers and United States Senators, Reb Yaakov was able to relate to each of them on their level.**

The book also relates how Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan revealed to an Orthodox publication how surprised he had been when Reb Yaakov made a prescient prediction that the Soviet Union would cease to exist.

Our Yeshiva had purchased 10,000 volumes of the book as a fundraising -educational mailer. I did

not realize that the Senator's name happened to be on our mailing list until I received a beautiful letter on United States Senate stationery. After thanking me for sending the "wonderful book," the writer said, "If I may quibble with one small point in an otherwise brilliant volume, the author reports that I was surprised by Rabbi Kamenetzky's prediction of the fall of the Soviet Union.

"Truth be told, I was never surprised by Rabbi Kamenetzky's insights. They only reaffirmed to me the age-old biblical promise that Torah knowledge is your wisdom and understanding before the nations of the world."

It was signed Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

We tend to flaunt Judaism with the reasonable laws: honoring parents, charity, and all of the basic tenets of moral life. To the outside world, however, we tend not to display the more difficult issues: *Kashruth*, *Shatnez* and the like. We are afraid that they are too bold and incomprehensible; surely they cannot designate us as a light unto the nations.

This week, the Torah tells us that there is nothing farther from the truth. It specifically exhorts us that through our *Chukim* we will be considered as a "light unto the nations." After we have set standards of morality and honesty we earn esteem in the eyes of the world. Then no Torah law or vision will be viewed archaic or inconceivable. We can predict the collapse of the second-most powerful nation on earth in its prime. Foreign relation experts may react with shock and surprise, but deep down they will wait for the prediction to materialize.

The Torah chides us this week that there is nothing in its writings that will embarrass us. Any command, even the most complex and difficult to comprehend, when performed with faith, honesty, and commitment, will cast us as a light unto the nations.

***Good Shabbos!***

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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