

MITZVAT HANUKKAH (II)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

In Memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise, HK"M

I

THE SUGYA

In last week's shiur, we analyzed the central sugya in the Gemara which presents the various levels of performing the Mitzvah of Hadlakat Ner Hanukkah:

Our Rabbis taught: The Mitzvah of Hanukkah is:

- 1) one *Ner* for a man and his household;
 - 2) the *M'hadrin* (zealous - those who wish to beautify and enhance the Mitzvah) [kindle] a light for each member [of the household];
 - 3) and the *M'hadrin min haM'hadrin*:
 - a) Beit Shammai maintain: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced;
 - b) but Beit Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased.
- (BT Shabbat 21b)

As promised, this week we will share some insights of Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook zt"l relating to this sugya. First, a few words of introduction to the writings of Rav Kook.

II

RAV KOOK AND THE 'EIN AYAH

Rav Kook, born in 1865 in Grieve, Latvia, made Aliyah at the beginning of this century to serve as Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv/Yaffo. He later ascended to the position of Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, a position he served with distinction until his passing in 1935. Among his many achievements as Halakhist, theologian and communal leader, Rav Kook's greatest legacy is likely his prodigious literary output. Among the many works already published (there are many more still in manuscript

form), "Ein Ayah", his commentary on the Aggadot of the Gemara (the collection known as Ein Ya'akov) is among the most insightful and profound. To date, only three volumes of the Ein Ayah commentary have seen the light of day. Fortunately for us, the third volume includes the discussion relating to Hanukkah in Massechet Shabbat - and it is from this work that we will quote Rav Kook's analysis on our sugya.

Rav Kook's many contributions to Jewish thought in this century are often overlooked, as he is the ideological father of modern Religious Zionism and most of his fame outside of the world of those Yeshivot which are guided and inspired by his weltanschauung is limited to this politically-oriented and hotly debated ideological position. Nonetheless, for those of us who have had the opportunity to be exposed to some of the breadth and depth of his writings, Rav Kook never fails to challenge, stimulate and inspire; engaging the mind as well as speaking to the heart.

It was Rav Kook who, while decrying the blatantly anti-religious sentiment present among the early Zionist leaders, understood the "Divine Spark" which motivated their zeal on behalf of the People and the Land. In a sense, he was the father of modern-day Outreach in that he was able to illuminate the glory in every Jewish soul, regardless of how far from tradition that person had strayed.

Most of the Ein Ayah was composed before Rav Kook made Aliyah, during his tenure as the Rav in Boisk, Lithuania. During that time, the ferment of political Zionism was felt throughout Europe and engaged the rabbinate - most of whom were ardent opponents of the nascent political movement. I believe that much of the commentary presented below (in abridged form - due to space limitations) reflects some of the divisions felt within the Orthodox community at the time. I will comment on this towards the end of this shiur.

One word about this presentation:

Rav Kook's writing is among the most difficult to translate, due to his lofty language and the many allusions and double-entendres which he employs. Instead of translating "loosely", this presentation will include a literal rendering (as much as is possible) of his essay, followed by an explanation and commentary. Although it would be easier to translate his frequent use of "Yisra'el" and "Yisra'eli" as "Jew" and "Jewish", respectively, I prefer to keep greater fidelity to the original.

Now...to the Ein Ayah.

III

NER ISH UVEITO

"The victory which God granted through His servants, the Kohanim [Hashmonaim] who overcame the Greeks - who desired not only to uproot Am Yisra'el from their material position but also to uproot the character of life which Yisra'el impact upon the world, which must be rooted in Torah, that purity and dignity should be the chief goal in family life and from there will follow all of the other Yisra'eli attitudes and traits. This is what the Greek nation abhorred, seeing in it an enemy and foe to their

culture, wherein they raised the banner the enjoyment of life and the many physical and imaginary pleasures; therefore the hatred of the Greeks for Torat Yisra'el was very great. In the moderate way by which a Yisra'eli comports himself, even if he is not an extraordinary individual, nonetheless within family life, we recognize the 'Ivri' light, the purity and dignity, trustworthiness and all of the character traits which branch out from this for the good; these are easily seen in all of their glory in every Yisra'eli house which follows the way of Torah and Mitzvot - therefore, the obligation of Mitzvat Ner Hanukkah is 'Ner Ish uVeito.' "

Comment and Analysis:

The attempted Hellenization of Judea was the first time in our history that we had encountered a deliberate attempt to sway us from our national ethos - from the value system which informs the life of Torah commitment. Whereas we had fought wars against enemies who desired our land - or even our demise - this was the first real kulturkampf which we fought. The Greeks were not interested (for the most part) in Judaicide - rather in the Hellenization of all of the "barbaric peoples of the East". Rav Kook sees the fundamental celebration of Hanukkah as marking the cultural/spiritual defense against the onslaught of Hellenes.

One of the hallmarks of Hellenistic culture was the focus on personal excellence - in a word, you were only as good as the latest achievement you had demonstrated. This performance could be athletic in nature, or in the marketplace of ideas and wisdom. Whether in art, science, battle or philosophy, the Greeks introduced us to the notion of personal excellence. This focus was rooted, however, in a fundamental lack of respect for the human being per se - you were nothing if you had not achieved, in a measurable way, something grand and impressive.

Much as we hail the achievements of great individuals (especially in the battleground of the Beit Midrash, but also in the laboratory and on the battlefield), this does not diminish our regard for every person, even those who are far from excellent.

The Greeks used to "dispose" of disabled children and send their invalid old away to die (an approach adopted by our tormentors of two generations past). The innate dignity which we, contradistinctively, accord each person, is the product of our recognition of the image of God which is the stamp of each human.

Greek excellence was an external demonstration, in the arena, marketplace and theater. Jewish excellence begins, first and foremost and most critically, within the four walls of our homes. We recognize bravery as being proved in restraint as much - if not more - than in conquest. "Who is mighty?" ask Haza"l, "He who conquers his own urges". (Avot 4:1). The respect which we show towards each of our loved ones, the intense care we have for family is a reflection of that understanding of sanctity. The concentration of Jewish excellence is found in the private, personal lives of regular people, restraining their anger when a loved one errs, restraining their passions when a loved one requests privacy and controlling their appetites when consumption is outside of the

bounds of sanctity.

All of this said, it was the Jewish home - i.e. the way that Jewish families demonstrated courage and sanctity in the private domain of average individuals - that irked the Greeks and was a thorn in their side. It challenged the entire Hellenistic enterprise. As such, the first and most fundamental battleground in the kulturkampf was the Jewish home. That being the case, it is the Jewish family upon whom the most fundamental celebration of this victory devolves - hence, the basic Mitzvah is "Ner Ish uVeito."

By the way, although far from the original intent of Rav Kook's words, we can even see this phenomenon among relatively non-observant Jews today. Many of our brothers and sisters who are not scrupulous about Kashrut in their own lives, insist on maintaining a Kosher home. So many "lines in the sand" drawn in contemporary Jewish life are defenses of the Jewish home and family - even among those who are still far from personal observance.

A note on Rav Kook's very sensitive use of words. Although he usually uses "Yisra'el" here, when describing the "light" which emanates from the Jewish home, Rav Kook refers to "the Ivri light". As we pointed out in an earlier shiur (in the Yonah series), the word "Ivri" is always used in T'nakh to describe us from the perspective of our separateness from pagan nations and our affiliation with the universal God. Since Rav Kook is referring to this light as it permeates the outside (more on this later), he makes mention of the "Ivri" light.

IV

MEHADRIN

"The extraordinary individuals in Yisra'el, whose lives themselves stand ready to experience the Divine sanctity which the complete Torah has imprinted on them - it is appropriate that such people be of the 'Mehadrin - [that have] one candle per person'. Even in the individual life, the glow, splendor and light of Torah which accompanies him in all of his paths will be recognized, as long as he is very careful to guard his ways according to the Torah, then he will experience the fulfillment of 'and all of the peoples of the earth shall see that Hashem's Name has been proclaimed over you and they shall stand in fear of you.' (D'varim 28:10)."

Comment and Analysis:

Whereas every Jewish home, regardless of the stature of its constituent members, reflects the light of Torah (as long as it operates according to the ethos of Torah), by dint of the holiness expressed in the mode of interpersonal relationships therein - the extraordinary individual carries this light with him wherever he goes. Although individual sanctity may have its drawbacks, from a perspective of cultural interaction and social impact, the person who can carry the light with him at all times is clearly positioned to impact more intensely and consistently on his surroundings. Thus, such a person should be represented by his own individual light.

V

MEHADRIN MIN HAMEHADRIN (I)

"Among those extraordinary individuals whose every step is weighed "B'Shekel haKodesh" (lit. "with a holy weight" - meaning, always considered against the measure of holiness which will be brought into the world as a result), to the point where not only their family lives exude Godly holiness but also their personal lives, there are found saintly people whose entire focus in their lives is not for their own benefit - even spiritual (i.e. the World to Come), rather their entire desire is to bring about God's will in His world.

"In analyzing how the miracle of Hanukkah can arouse the hearts of such holy people to bring about this noble desire, there are two general approaches, each of which divides into two particular paths:

"There are great people who look deeply at God's will in this world; and since they recognize that the Master of all Souls created Man as a general being in His image and all creatures in the image of God, He certainly intended to benefit them in their end, that they should rise above the depth of evil and foolishness which surrounds them until they are worthy of the level of the righteous who delight in God and His good. It is true that God prepared Yisra'el to be the recipients of the of Godly light in the world; but only then will the goal which elates the heart of all who are upright be realized, when the goal is completed by Yisra'el to bring all citizens of the world to the light of God and a holy life.

"From the perspective of this approach, the internal tendency which guides the hearts of the upright will be to walk in the path of God according to the Torah not only because it brings goodness to Yisra'el specifically, but rather because of this ultimate and most enlightened purpose, since the good of Yisra'el will eventually bring goodness to all of Mankind. Such a tendency, which is passionate, could lead one to believe that an orientation which singles out the goal of Toraic actions on account of the general welfare of Yisra'el is not the loftiest of tendencies and should be raised even higher to overcome the tendency of love of Yisra'el.

"For such people, national fellowship cannot be the source of their lives, rather the love of God and His Torah - since this ultimate goal can be found within the Torah; a goal which is so lofty that they could only appropriate national fellowship as a means to this end."

Comments and Analysis:

[Although this selection does not conclude Rav Kook's analysis of the Mehadrin min haMehadrin, the language and ideas are abstruse and recondite and it is probably advisable to intersperse a few observations here.]

Rav Kook is pointing out that although the "Mehadrin" may represent those excellent individuals, whose very lives exude holiness and promote Torah wherever they go, they are usually motivated by self-interest (albeit, of the noblest form). The desire to "grow in Torah", to become an authentic "Talmid Hakham", to increase ones measure of kindness and to develop ever finer character traits is

usually motivated by the ambition of personal greatness. There is no question that this is a necessary and praiseworthy ambition - but it is still "self-centered" and lacks the idealistic purity of the "Mehadrin min haMehadrin".

The "elite" described here, who may engage in the same behavior as the "extraordinary", are motivated by a wholly different set of concerns. As opposed to asking "how can I become closer to God?", "how can I become more knowledgeable in Torah?" etc., the question asked is "How can God's Name be enhanced in this world - and what can I do to promote that?".

This ideologically driven person can fall into one of two categories - and only the first has been adumbrated in this paragraph. Such a person accepts several postulates about the world - that God is good, that He created all creatures in His image and that, therefore, God desires to bring all of them (since He is good) to a realization of their potential (being in His image). As such, the ultimate goal - the idyllic vision - of creation is to bring all of creation and all of Mankind to a level of awareness of God and sensitivity to the values by which His world can thrive. Such a person views the life of Torah, the fulfillment of Mizvot etc. as oriented towards this great goal. That being the case, any nationalistic ties we have, any special allegiance we carry for fellow members of Yisra'el, are ultimately a hindrance to reaching this goal and can only be seen in a positive light as a means to achieving this end. The reason that this fellowship is a valid means is because Am Yisra'el, as the recipients of the Torah, are uniquely positioned to demonstrate to the rest of the world how a holy people should comport themselves - but that is, again, merely a vehicle for the ultimate goal.

Rav Kook is defending/explaining a school of thought which was very popular in the nineteenth century in Europe (a school most often associated with R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch - although it has roots which reach back much earlier in Jewish literary history). This school views Am Yisra'el chiefly in its role as teachers of the world, who are situated throughout the Diaspora in order to inspire, instruct and illuminate the non-Jewish world around us. This school is fond of the adage of Haza"l:

"R. Elazar says: HaKadosh Barukh Hu only exiled Yisra'el among the nations in order that converts should be added to their ranks." (BT Pesachim 87b)

One final note: Rav Kook does an exquisite job of shedding light on the curious title: Mehadrin MIN haMehadrin. Instead of understanding this as a hierarchical title (i.e. "greater" than the Mehadrin), he uses the language to identify this as an elite sub-group within the Mehadrin.

VI

MEHADRIN MIN HAMEHADRIN (II)

"There is another approach, in which the heart of an extraordinary person will contemplate and reach the conclusion that it is indeed true that self-love is not fitting for the greatest level of profundity, even if it is expanded to include a love for the whole nation. Nonetheless it is appropriate to love the good on its own merit - therefore it is right to accord to the goal of public life the greatest content

possible in life. Since the Divine treasure is hidden within Yisra'el, therefore they are certainly qualified to become completed to this degree such that their life should be the desire of any upright person, not because of the self-love of "a man is prejudiced regarding himself"; rather because of the truth and uprightness itself.

"Therefore, the treasure of Yisra'el should be the focus of all spiritual life, and it is upon this that the objective of all of Torah should be built. It follows that there is room in the simple sensitive heart of national fellowship, to make it an appropriate trait in the paths of Torah., since even according to the depth of Divine justice the final objective will remain the purpose of Yisr'ael. [This is] because the final goal should not be based upon the quantity of lives, rather their quality, and the most wondrous quality will e'er remain the legacy of Yisra'el as testimony of the Divine choice and their treasure."

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