

A LIGHT MISSION [ONLY HALF THE CALORIES]

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

As Rashi points out at the beginning of Parashas Bereishis, the first mitzvah the Jewish people received from God is the mitzvah to sanctify the new moon in this week's parashah. This is the mitzvah to observe the new moon, testify to its sighting before a Bais Din (Jewish court), and then announce the official beginning of the new month.

It might seem strange that this mitzvah was the first to be given to the newly freed nation (Egypt had lost their control over the Jewish people the previous Tishrei, though they still remained in Egypt). How anti-climactic! There must be at least a dozen mitzvos far more relevant to the leaving of Egyptian oppression, mitzvos such as the slaughtering of the Passover Offering, an Egyptian god, that the Torah could have started with. One would like to believe that the mitzvos were given and recorded according to the role they played in leading to the redemption from Egypt.

As the prophet Yishayah (Isaiah) teaches, the Jewish nation left Egypt with a mission, a mission that would only begin by receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai 50 days later. It is mission encapsulated by the time-honored phrase, to be "a light unto nations."

What does this mean? In simple terms, it means to advance mankind morally, by acting as a conduit of sorts for the wisdom of Torah, as it is relevant to the nations of the world. The method for achieving this end is to achieve national moral perfection, as much as possible, given the demands of daily life. If the whole nation shows commitment to the values of Torah it is bound to catch the attention of the world, and inspire them to live according to a higher standard of morality.

However, if the Jewish people live without unity, fracturing into several groups, each radically altering the message and mitzvos of Torah from its original form according to their own vision, then all the world sees is a nation in confusion. At such a point, the principles of Torah lose their brilliance in the eyes of the world and their ability to inspire. The world then rejects Torah as a guiding principle for mankind and as a repository of Divine Wisdom. The "light unto the nations" becomes a derision of the nations instead, and the rest of the story has been a long and embittered history within the non-Jewish world.

This is why the first mitzvah in Egypt, prior to the "birth" of the Jewish people from Egypt, was the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon. The main property of the moon is that it does not create its own source of light. Rather, it reflects the light of the sun, and quite well at that. Even during the blackness of night, when the sun can no longer be seen, the moon can still gather in the hidden rays,

and reflect them earthward for mankind to find direction in the midst of night.

The rabbis teach that the Jewish people are compared to the moon. Just as the moon waxes and wanes, so too has the Jewish nation cyclically grown and contracted. And like the moon, the Jewish people keep coming back despite of the efforts of the most powerful nations to overcome and annihilate them. However, the most important comparison of the Jewish people to the moon is not in terms of its appearance, but rather, in terms of its mission.

Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so too are the Jewish people meant to reflect the "light" of God. The "light unto the nations" is really a "reflector" of God's holy light to the nations (especially when God seems less apparent), bringing the light of God's morality to every last dark corner on earth. To not fulfill this function is to become "eclipsed," which results in historical darkness, and worse, terrible anti-Semitism, to which history testifies.

Hence, it is quite logical and very meaningful that the first mitzvah to be given to the Jewish people should be the sanctification of the new moon once a month. What better way is there to remind the Jewish people the purpose for which they were freed from Egyptian bondage? What better way is there to point out to the Jewish people, once a month, the mission for which they were hand-picked by God Himself, than to have them focus their attention on the new sliver of moon that is fighting to bring light to the darkened sky? It was the acceptance of this first mitzvah that acted as the spiritual "threshold" across which each Jew in Egypt had to cross to "earn" his or her freedom. It is the acceptance of this mission, the Torah is teaching, that each Jew must continually accept throughout the generations to maintain that freedom. This is why the Haggadah commands us to look at ourselves as if we too left Egypt, in order to rekindle within our own hearts a sense of commitment to the Jewish mission.

The Torah sanctions originality. The rabbis teach that everyone has his own place within Torah, some novel idea waiting to be revealed specifically by him. And anybody who has been to a Sheva Brochos and has listened to some of the divrei Torah (words of Torah) knows just how original someone's interpretation of Torah can be! (Perhaps a little too original for some people's tastes!)

However, the principles of Torah are fixed. They are axioms of creation, Divine wisdom beyond reason, that built this world, and which also maintain it. Our job is not to create them, or recreate them, but to reflect them. Our task is to become committed to understanding them as much as we can, and then perform them to the best of our ability, as if they mean something special to us. In this way, the light of Torah becomes increasingly more apparent, and like the moon, reaches a crescendo of light, which, we are promised, will eventually never wane again.

May it be Your will ... to fill the flaw of the moon, that there be no diminution in it. May the light of the moon be like the light of the sun and like the light of the seven days of creation, as it was, before it was diminished ... (From the Prayer, "Kiddush Levana"-Sanctification of the New Moon- said by Jews around the world over the new moon, every month). So too will it be for the Jewish people, as well.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

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