

A REAL OIL JOB

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Command the Children of Israel, that they should take clear olive oil that was crushed to give off light and to go up as continuous candle. (Shemos 27:20)

This year, Shushan Purim falls on this Shabbos, which, interestingly enough, is really Chanukah-oriented (it is even the eighth parshah of Sefer Shemos, a Chanukah number). But then again, it is no contradiction, for Purim and Chanukah are really similar ideas, just seen from two different angles.

The reason why this is a Chanukah-parshah is because it starts off talking about "shemen-zayis-zach" -- clear olive oil -- for the Menorah. It is amazing how central a role olive oil plays in Jewish observance, being the symbol of spiritual fuel as well as physical fuel. Ultimately, it is the symbol of one of the highest Jewish values:

Yoav sent to Tekoa, and took from there a wise woman. (II Shmuel 14:2). Why did he send to Tekoa? Said Rebi Yochanan: They are accustomed to use olive oil, therefore, wisdom could be found there. (Menachos 85b)

However, shemen zais is the symbol of something else important as well:

And let him dip his foot in oil. (Devarim 33:24). This refers to the portion of Asher, which produces oil like a well (Menachos 85b)

Then, the Talmud goes on to recount how a simple man, who appeared to have very little at first, from the tribe and territory of Asher was able to supply a foreign people with a phenomenal amount of oil, and became a hero (and rich man) because of it. The Talmud ends the account with the posuk:

There is he who makes himself (appear to be) rich, yet has nothing; there is he that makes himself poor, yet has great riches. (Mishlei 13:7)

And, it is a symbol of something even greater, as the Talmud says further:

Command the Children of Israel, that they bring to you pure olive oil (Vayikra 24:2). Rebi Shmuel bar Nachmani said: It says to "you" and not to "Me," for, (says G-d), I do not need its light. It is, rather, a testimony to the entire world that the Shechinah rests upon Israel. And, if you claim that I need its

light, then how is that possible? For, the entire period that Israel wandered in the desert they did so after My light. You must therefore admit that it is a testimony for the entire world to know that the Shechinah rests upon the Jewish people. And, what was the unusual thing which served as the testimony? Said Rabba: This refers to the extreme western candle in which the quantity of oil was as much as in all the other candles, yet, it was from this candle which all other candles were ignited, and, it was also the last one (to burn until the priest fixed it). (Menachos 86b)

What is so special about shemen zais, that it has all these wonderful properties?

Everything in life has its distinct advantages and disadvantages, its own "pluses" and "minuses." G-d is completely fair, and though someone may have something we desperately want, we usually have something THEY desperately want too. We're here in this world to use our free-will to choose to be like G-d, and that demands that there be a choice, and, that demands there be struggle. One has to be concerned, in This World, not about struggle, but, about an apparent lack of struggle.

However, the first point is the main point here, and it seems to apply even to the world of fruit. For example, grapes are naturally tasty and energizing, and can even be used to produce expensive and rare wines. However, try putting your expensive concord grape juice into your Shabbos candle holders and igniting it. Unless you are Chanina ben Dosa and his daughter, more than likely, the grape juice will not burn for you.

On the other hand, olives are naturally bitter -- very bitter. Before they can be eaten in any normal way, they have to be pickled for quite a time. The "juice" they produce is considered so NOT enjoyable to the point that you don't make a blessing before consuming it, even for health purposes.

However, as we all know, put that greenish-yellow oil into a candle holder, add a wick and light it, and you will get a wonderfully yellow flame, warm, bright, and inspiring. Unlike grape juice, orange juice, or any other fruit juice whose taste we enjoy, olive "juice" burns really well.

Thus, the olive, more than any other fruit, stresses the goal of life in this world (no, not to be bitter!): to see past the layers of "tasteless" physicality into the light-core of all that exists. It is to locate that internal "shaft" of spiritual energy, first within ourselves, and then, within in the world outside around us.

To locate it, and to tap into it. And, when we do, physicality seems to become less limiting, and miracle, more a function of everyday life.

Shabbos Day:

It shall have two shoulder straps attached to its two ends, and it shall be attached. (Shemos 28:7)

There is Pshat, there is Remez, there is Drush, and then there is Sod. On the Pshat-Level, this posuk is talking about the Kohen Gadol's Ephod, the special tunic that he wore as part of his officiating "uniform." Usually the Remez-Level and Drush-Level tell you how a particular clothing or implement from the Temple service alludes to a moral lesson for life.

However, the Sod-Level of a posuk or idea is usually something altogether different, as the following piece on the above posuk will, b"H, reveal.

This will take a lot of background, but I'm only going to supply a little. And, you may wonder why I am doing this at all, and the answer is very simple: just to reveal a little of how deep a posuk can go. All that I am going to write here is based upon the Zohar and the Arizal's "Sha'ar HaGilgulim."

To begin with, Adam HaRishon before his sin was different than he was after his sin -- this the Talmud itself makes clear (Chagigah 12a). He was much bigger physically, but, more importantly, he was much bigger spiritually. In fact, his soul, before the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, included just about every soul that has ever been, and will ever be.

As we have said on numerous occasions, the physical world mimics the spiritual world. Everything in the physical world is the way it is because it is only a projection of its own spiritual self in the invisible spiritual world. Thus, if we have a hand, it is because there is a spiritual version of a hand, and, if we have a shoulder then, the spiritual world also has a shoulder, so-to-speak.

People have different natures and "natural" abilities that are very much dependent upon the type of souls they have, or rather, from where in the spiritual "body" of Adam HaRishon their souls have come. So, it would not be incorrect to view Adam's original, pre-sin soul as being the almost-complete repository of human souls.

In one discussion, Sha'ar HaGilgulim, in Chapter Thirty-One, discusses the division of Adam's soul, and teaches how Kayin and Hevel were from the "Shoulders" of Adam HaRishon, the Left and Right Shoulder respectively. Now, again, we must not think in physical terms, even though that is exactly what we are using to discuss the spiritual world, for, all these physical terms are also just conventions to describe different spiritual levels in the Sefiros as well, of which the physical world is only a "projection."

It is said that, one of the unique aspects of the "Shoulders" in the spiritual realm is that the light that travels from the "Brains" of the Sefiros to the lower parts of the Sefiros, must do so via the "Shoulders." Thus, the light splits into two paths, moving downward to the lower levels through the Right and Left Shoulders simultaneously, only to unify once again on the level of Sefiros called "Yesod" (Foundation).

Here is the actual quote:

When the "drop" (of light) goes from the Shoulders until the Yesod, the Yesod is then called "Kapas (chof-peh-tav) Tamarim," which has the letters of "shoulder" (chof-tav-peh). And, once the two

Shoulders unify in the Yesod, since a drop from both of them descends to the Yesod, then the following applies, " It shall have two shoulder straps attached to its two ends, and it shall be attached" (Shemos 28:7), for, the two have become joined through the Yesod. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah 31)

It would take a few parshah sheets, and a couple years of background, to adequately explain all of this.

However, on one level, it is not unlike the physical body itself, which has a system for sending signals and blood to different parts of the body, often a function of electrical impulses that originate in the brain and move down the spinal cord to more remote sections the body. The light in the Sefiros works very much in the same way, no wonder.

You may not be able to repeat this d'var Torah after reading it to another, at least not in any meaningful way. However, once in a while I think it is important to at least see how such a simple, seemingly mundane posuk from the Torah actually alludes to the deepest of Kabbalistic ideas. By showing how unlimitedly deep Torah really is, we gain a slight appreciation of how unlimitedly deep we ourselves are, and become ever so slightly in touch with our own phenomenal but often hidden potential, another aspect of the Purim message. That too, I believe, is very important to learn.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

You shall make an Altar on which to bring incense up in smoke Shemos 30:1)

This passage is talking about the Mizbayach-HaKetores, the "Incense Altar," the last of the vessels to be made for the Mishkan (Tabernacle). It was also called the "Golden Altar," and the "Inner Altar," because it was made of gold and its place was inside the Sanctuary (Kodesh), and not outside in the Courtyard like the larger Altar upon which the sacrifices were burned.

It was made of wood, and overlaid with pure gold. Encircling the top was a gold rim, symbolic of the crown of the priesthood, one of the highest positions G-d gave to His people (Shemos Rabbah 34:3). Aharon was commanded to burn the Divinely-prescribed mixture of incense on the altar every morning and afternoon, at the time of the Korban Tamid -- Continual-Offering -- which is mentioned in this week's parshah, just before this section.

Even after the Mishkan, with all its holy implements, had been completed, and, the Shulchan and the Menorah had been put in place, and, all the Inauguration-Offerings had been sacrificed, still, the Divine Presence had yet to descend. It was only after the Incense was offered that the Shechinah finally came down to dwell in the Mishkan, to the sublime delight of the people.

One of the reasons for the uniqueness of the Ketores was that, unlike all other offerings, the Ketores

was offered to bring joy and happiness to the world. For this reason, it was the most beloved to G-d of all the offerings (Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 15). And, it was the life-preserving qualities of the Ketores that the Angel of Death taught Moshe on Mt. Sinai, which worked to save lives in the disagreement with Korach.

Among the other healing properties of the Ketores was that it was the part of the daily service that specifically atoned for loshon hara -- derogatory speech about others (Yoma 44a). It was also a way to increase one's wealth, as the Talmud indicates:

The brisa teaches: It never happened that a person repeatedly offering incense. Why? Rebi Chanina said: Because, the Incense-Offering enriches (Yoma 26a)

Why all these special properties of the Ketores, more than any other offering? The answer lies in the following:

How do we know that one should make a blessing over pleasant fragrances? For, it says, "Let all souls praise G-d" (Tehillim 150:6). Now, what thing does a soul enjoy that a body does not? Only a good smell. (Brochos 43b)

For, if the body enjoyed it too, such as in the case of food, a blessing would be made for that reason alone. We need something that the body does not enjoy, but, yet, there is pleasure from the thing. That, says the Talmud, is a pleasant fragrance, and that, we can say, is the basis of the importance of the Ketores-Offering.

For, with other sacrifices, especially animal sacrifices, there is something physical to be enjoyed. Even in the case of the Burnt-Offering, which is completely burned on the Altar, the skin itself goes to the kohen to keep. However, when it comes to the Ketores, before burning, it is merely powder, and, after burning it, is completely consumed. All that remains is the spiritual quality of smell, which, the Talmud satisfies the soul, and not the body.

Thus, in a very real sense, the Ketores represents the part of our service that is completely for the sake of spiritual reasons, for Heaven's sake. Nothing impresses G-d more than service that is genuinely performed for the sake of the purpose of creation, to bring G-d closer into everyday life. It is the symbol of the ultimate transition from the world of the physical to that of the spiritual.

And, thus as the rabbis teach, the more devoted we are to our spiritual development, the more G-d helps with our physical needs, as well as our spiritual needs. That is true joy, when one can rise above the mentality of the physical and the mundane, and, have a consciousness that can ascend heavenward unfettered by bodily concerns. That, too, is the message of Purim.

MELAVE MALKAH:

For the Conductor, on the Nechilos, a psalm by Dovid. Hear my words, G-d, perceive my thoughts. Pay attention to the sound of my outcry, my King and my G-d, for to You alone do I pray. (Tehillim 5:1-3)

The ultimate expression of "hester panim" -- the "hiding of (G-d's) face" -- is that evil not only exists, but, that it even allowed to prosper, and, even at the cost of good people. Nothing is more convincing that good is a relative concept lacking absoluteness than the fact that it does not exercise its absoluteness.

(Incidentally, next month a convention is convening in Beirut, the purpose of which is to assemble all the "evidence" available to disprove the Holocaust. It is the ultimate affront! How can people, within 60 short years -- many of which probably weren't even alive at that time -- have the incredible chutzpah and hatred to even consider "disproving" so heinous a crime against the Jewish people and all of humanity?! Answered one believing person, "If the Jewish people, within 60 short years can forget about the Holocaust and stop fearing another one, does that not, from THEIR perspective, give credence to their claim?")

This, of course, is all for the sake of free-will. Free-will demands that there be a choice; good is not something to be assumed in This World, but something to be chosen. And, not just chosen once, but, all the time, and, on every level possible until one's last moment of life. Even within the realm of good, there is still the possibility of choosing even better versions of that good, and fighting against the resistance to change that the yetzer hara wages.

The tzaddik knows this and lives this. He understands that, "according to the effort is the reward" (Pirkei Avos 5:22) and is real with it. He understands and knows that evil is merely a fa-E7ade, a Divine mirage intended to stimulate free-will choice, though it may not always be clear at the time of the suffering how, other than struggling to realize that all power is G-d's, and nothing else, no matter how powerful it may appear to be.

As a result, evil people and their evil plans can hamper a righteous person's path to growth in fear and service of G-d. Therefore, while less righteous people pray only for redemption from their enemies in order to resume life as before -- to return to the status quo of peaceful living -- righteous people, like Dovid HaMelech, instead pray for deliverance from those things -- such as physical suffering -- to be freer to enhance their service of G-d. This is what Dovid HaMelech is pleading for here, in this psalm.

May You doom the speakers of deception; a bloodthirsty and deceitful man G-d abhors. (7)

Yet, there are so many of them -- and they keep coming back. One goes and another one comes. But, in they all disappear, once history comes to an end and free-will is no longer possible, just into the Period of Moshiach (Succah 52a).

But I, through Your abundant kindness I will enter Your house; I will bow down toward Your Holy Sanctuary in awe of You. G-d, guide me in Your righteousness, because of my watchful enemies;

make Your way straight for before me 8-9)

"Dear G-d," says Dovid HaMelech, "give me the presence of mind and clarity of thought to see past the elaborate illusions of life. The evil person may believe in himself, but, help me not to believe in him, in order that I should not empower him." This was Mordechai's message to himself, Haman, and the Jewish people: Believe in Haman, and you empower him; disbelieve in him, and you empower yourself. Who won in this end; whose vision was accurate in the end?

Every fourteen and fifteenth of Adar, we celebrate the victory of Mordechai's vision of reality, for.

All those who take refuge in You will rejoice, they will sing joyously forever. You will shelter them; and those who love Your Name will exult in You; when You bless the righteous; G-d, You will envelop him with favor like a child. (12-13)

A perfect ending for the parshah, and Purim.

A freilechen Purim and a Great Shabbos,
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