

FIRST AND BEST

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah dwells on the necessity for taking the finest olive oil to use as the fuel for the great candelabra that stood in the Mishkan and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. Olive oil was one of the great staples of the ancient world. It provided fuel, skin lotion, food and use as a lubricant in all sorts of mechanical devices. If there was an item of necessary multi-purpose use in the homes of our biblical ancestors it was olive oil. The Torah however specifies that the olive oil that was to be used as the fuel for the candelabra was to be pure, the first crush of the olives, beaten fine for the lamp. In this we have the general lesson of the Torah that out of all of the multiple talents and uses that a human being possesses, the first and best of these is to be employed in the service of God and His commandments. God is never to be offered what is second best, inferior, a purely default position and contribution.

Olive oil, with its many essential uses and importance is the symbol of this idea of using the many gifts granted to us by the Creator for His purposes and the betterment of human society. If one is willing and able to offer the best that one has for the advancement of noble and holy causes then that cause is immeasurably strengthened and advanced. The candelabra is the symbol of our lives and achievements. The fuel that we use to light that candelabra must always be of the finest quality obtainable within our talents and means.

I think therefore that this is the reason why that olive oil is the preferred fuel for the performance of other mitzvot as well. In the Mishna there is opinion, though it is not binding according to halacha, that only olive oil should be used to light the Shabat lights on Friday nights. There are many Jewish women today who only use olive oil for their Shabat flames. The miracle of Chanuka was based on the small cruise of olive oil and therefore the preferred method of performing the Chanuka mitzvah is by using olive oil, though again other forms of flames are also acceptable. The latkes and sufganiyot of Chanuka are all fried or baked in olive oil. These are again examples of using the best for God's purposes. It is called in rabbinic terminology mitzvah min hamuvchar - doing the mitzvah in the finest and best way possible.

And that is why the Torah places so much emphasis on how the olive oil for the great candelabra is to be prepared and refined. By using the finest that we possess we can hope to achieve an eternal flame within our souls and within all of Israel as well. For the purpose of the great candelabra was not to provide light for God, so to speak, for He requires no light from us. The purpose was to light the eternal flame within the Jewish people. That goal and purpose must remain high on our agenda

today as well.

Shabat shalom.

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