

THE LIGHT OF THE MENORAH AND THE ABSENCE OF MOSHE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The purity of oil for the lamps of the menorah/candelabra is emphasized in this week's parsha's opening verse. It seems clear that the Torah requires the purest of olive oil for the fuel to light the menorah/candelabra not only for the physical and practical reason that the flame should not flicker and be weak but also for symbolic and moral reasons.

The light of Torah is dependent upon the moral purity of its source. Just as dregs and pulp contaminate the oil and prevent a steady light from emerging, so, too, grave imperfections of character and behavior weaken the teachings of Torah to students and to the masses of Israel. Recent events here in Israeli religious and secular society only serve to reinforce this standard.

The fuel for the light of Torah must also possess purity within it. King Solomon stated that "dead flies can render the finest oil repugnant." The finest oil is present but it is the dead fly in the ointment that renders the entire mixture to be repugnant.

Unfortunately and tragically there is apparently no escape from this observation about life and human behavior and attitudes. Therefore the Torah places such great emphasis upon the fuel for the lights of the menorah/candelabra. For if the fuel is contaminated and dirtied then the menorah/candelabra is itself demeaned and cheapened in the eyes of the public and its light dimmed and darkened. The Torah makes this point directly and boldly in stating its strict requirements for the olive oil that fuels the menorah/candelabra. Its lesson should not be lost on us.

Another important lesson that emerges from this week's parsha emanates from the absence of the name of Moshe in the parsha. The Torah, its truths and values, its eternity and validity, is never dependent upon one person no matter how great that person may be perceived to be. The Torah emphasizes the mortality of Moshe as well as his human ability to fall below the heavenly standard that was set for him.

The Torah warns us not to deem humans as being perfect or infallible. The Psalmist warns us not to place our trust in humans, even great humans, but rather only in God and His Torah. The tendency to deify humans, even if they be scholars, leaders or holy people, is a dangerous one. It leads to the dreaded "cult of the personality" that has claimed so many victims throughout the past and modern history of the Jewish people and the world generally.

Even though the Torah is always identified with Moshe, this week's parsha shows us that the Torah exists independent of Moshe. His name need not appear for the Torah validates itself even without

him. The modern tendency in the religious world to worship and idolize people is therefore a dangerous one. All humans are subject to sin and failure, temper and error. Worship in the Torah is reserved for only God Himself. It often takes bitter and sad occurrences to remind us of this truth.

Shabat shalom.

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