

THE LESSON OF THE MENORAH: FOCUS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah instructs Aharon and through him all of his successors, the High Priests of Israel that when lighting the great menorah one should make certain that the six outside lamps should all face into the center lamp. There are various opinions amongst the commentators as to how this was to be accomplished. The wicks were bent inwards or perhaps the lamps themselves were tilted towards the middle lamp - or it could have been that this was only one of the recurring miracles that defined the Mishkan and later the Temple in Jerusalem. These are just some of the ideas advanced to explain how this matter was in fact accomplished.

Be all of this as it may have been, the greater question obviously is what lesson is the Torah imparting to us by this instruction that the outside lamps should face the middle lamp. I think that the idea that the Torah wishes us to internalize is that the light of the holy menorah requires focus.

We know that in the physical world the more intense and concentrated the focus of the light, the greater is its ability illuminate and reveal. Diffused light creates mood and atmosphere but it does not really show what lies before us. The light of the menorah is symbolic of Torah in Jewish life. Torah, its study, support and observance, requires focus and concentration. It cannot serve its true purpose in our lives when it exists amongst us only in a diffused and generalized sense.

Our rabbis taught us what the focus of Jewish life is and should be: Torah, Godly service, human kindness and consideration for others. Other causes are only to be granted diffused light and they, by themselves, will not serve to erase the darkness of our existence and society. Every human life, every family, even every educational and commercial enterprise requires focus and concentration in order to be successful and productive.

We all have priorities in our lives. These priorities become the plans, actions and ideas that we focus our attention, talents and resources upon. Judaism demands that we focus upon love and study of Torah and its observances. We should concentrate upon our daily conversation, so too speak - our prayer services - with our Creator.

We are required to serve God and do His bidding. And that requires effort, sacrifice and devotion. It is perhaps the most challenging area of our religious life - and demands total focus and concentration. And kindness towards others certainly requires focus. In theory, in a world of diffused

light, we all subscribe to the notions of good behavior, social responsibility and charitable ideals. However when we are faced with the individual test of performing a specific human kindness to a specific human being we oftentimes shirk that responsibility.

Our focus is not present and thus we are prevented, not out of malice but simply out of lack of concentration and devotion, from performing the necessary act of kindness that lies before us. Thus the lesson of the menorah is one of focus - the focus that will allow the light of spirit and Godliness to light our way through our lives.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com