

CHANUKAH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Chanuka, fifth night, 5631

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a quote from his Grandfather. The Chidushei HaRim, in turn, is commenting on a statement in the Gemara (Maseches Shabbos, 23b). As you will soon see, that statement cries out for explanation ' for it comes across as a total non-sequitur. Thus: 'Ha'ragil be'neir...' ("If a person takes the lighting of candles -- for Chanuka or for Shabbos -- as a regular feature of his life, his sons will be talmidei chachamin. ").

To say the least, this statement is puzzling. Why? Because no connection is apparent between lighting candles regularly and having one's sons develop as talmidei chachamim. How did the Chidushei HaRim handle the puzzle? He pointed out that lighting candles in a context of mitzvos can convey a vital message to one's children (and to oneself!). That message is: even in a setting of hergeil (habit, routine), one can rise in one's Avoda. How? By bringing to bear the elucidation (he'ara) and freshness (hischadshus) that newly lit candles symbolize. Thus shielded from the deadening power of hergeil, a person (and his progeny) can reach higher levels of ruchniyus. As noted, the message can help the potential talmidei chachamim in two ways -- either via its impact on the sons directly, or indirectly, via its impact on the potential facilitators, the parents.

Mention of the word "hergeil" leads the Sfas Emes to another phrase where -- if one looks with eyes inspired by the Sfas Emes -- one can also find the word "hergeil". But to understand what comes next, we must go back to first principles.

The reason why we light candles on Chanuka is for 'pirsu'mei nisa'. (That is: to broadcast news of the miracle that we experienced on the first Chanuka). The reason for the candles to be lit is to enable passers-by to see them, and remind themselves of the miracle. Accordingly, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim, 672,b) tells us that Chanuka candles may be lit: "ad she'tikaleh ha'regel min ha'shuk". In a non-literal translation: "until traffic in the market-place stops". In a more-or-less literal translation: "until the feet [of passers-by] are no longer in the market-place".

So much for the plain, simple meaning of the phrase: "ad she'tikaleh ha'regel". The Sfas Emes leads us forward now to another dimension of meaning. The word ha'regel means "the foot". But working with allusion (remez), the Sfas Emes reads the word as "hergeil" -- habit, routine. Thus the Sfas Emes is telling us that we light the Chanuka candles to bring renewal and remove habit from our Avodah.

Doing mitzvos as a matter of unthinking routine is a constant threat to the active, conscious way in

which we should strive to live our relationship with HaShem. The Sfas Emes is telling us to let the Chanuka candles remind us to focus our mind and our emotions on our actions when we do mitzvos. "Hergeil" (routine; habit) is the enemy. We should be aware of what we are doing rather than live our Yiddishkeit as unthinking creatures of habit.

"Ad she'tikaleh hergeil min hashuk!"

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