



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

T'TZAVEH

## Giving God Light

The portion opens with the olive-oil lampstand (Menorah) in the Mishkan (Sh'mot 27:20).

Who is meant to benefit from the light?

The Midrash puts into God's mouth the words, "Do I need your light? Does it not say, 'Light dwells with Him?'" (Daniel 2:22).

No; the light is meant for us; there is a verse that says, "The spirit of man is the light of the Lord" (Mishlei 20:27).

With light we can see our way - we can discern our goals in life and follow them.

With light we can read the Torah - we can discern the truths about life and the world that can give meaning to what we do.

With light we can see other people - we can discern that every human being is, like us, a child of the Divine, with a precious soul and a unique dignity.

Why then doesn't God provide us with light Himself and not need us to exert ourselves: to use the Torah's words, "to cause the lamp to burn continually"?

Because God expects us to be His partners in the work of creation, even the creation of light. He endows us with all the means and material to produce light, and empowers us to utilise our potential and turn the ingredients into a result.

## Aharon's Heart

The duties of the Kohen Gadol were highly onerous.

Not only were there ritual obligations in the Mishkan and Beit HaMikdash, but ethical duties, pedagogic tasks and spiritual obligations.

For instance, "Aharon shall bear the judgment of the Children of Israel on his heart before the Lord" (Sh'mot 28:30).

One of the commentators says that this shows that Aharon was like the people's heart. Whatever situation they were in, he felt it in his heart before there was any outward manifestation.

It's not an easy burden to be a leader, because all leadership - of whatever kind - must take its cue from this aspect of Aharon. The leader has to

feel what is going on within the people, and has to know what is going to happen before it happens.

The moment that the heart of the leader loses this instinct, it is time to step down and retire from office.

## PURIM

# Taanit Esther

The day before Purim is called Ta'anit Esther, the Fast of Esther.

Despite the popular view, it does not commemorate the three-day fast described in the Megila (Esther 4:16).

Three days cannot be telescoped into one day, and in any case our Fast of Esther is not mentioned in the Megila or ordained in the Talmud.

The late tractate Sofrim (21:1) does state that the sages of the Land of Israel did fast for three days before Purim, but not on consecutive days because such a long period of fasting would constitute a danger to life.

According to the Bet Yosef (Orach Chayim 686), the one-day fast was introduced by the medieval ge'onim to recall a pre-Purim fast of the entire Jewish people, ordained to pray for protection from antisemites like Haman.

The name Ta'anit Esther is said to have come about like this: those who were involved in the fight with

Haman's supporters had to eat and drink in order to keep up their strength; Esther, safe in the royal palace, did not fight and was able to fast, which she did for the sake of her fellow Jews.

So Purim benefited everyone, but the fast was Esther's fast.

# Every Right to Expect Miracles

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz regards the festival of Purim as the festival of the Diaspora and the Book of Esther as "the scroll of the Jewish people in its exile".

In the Diaspora the challenges were sometimes physical, sometimes spiritual, and sometimes both. What preserved us was centuries of sheer miracles.

Rabbi Steinsaltz writes, "This book (the Megila) is the essence of Jewish life in exile, and of the faith that, behind all external causes, hides the 'guardian of Israel'.

"The Megila teaches us that the Jewish people must learn to live this sort of life, expecting miracles... not miracles like the parting of the Red Sea, done 'by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm', but rather miracles hidden within the tortuous, winding ways of history."

It is an inspiring thought, but how does it square with the rabbinic notion, "We do not rely on miracles"?

Perhaps the answer is that we should never consciously place ourselves in a situation of peril, asserting blithely, "Don't worry; God won't let us down."

We have to opt for the least risky Jewish environment and exert ourselves to be the best possible Jews we can be, maintaining the faith that God will operate through "the tortuous, winding ways of history" to preserve us and protect His heritage.

It may not always happen in open, obvious and immediate fashion: God has to work in His way, even if it takes longer than we expect.

## Religion Absurdly Performed

When Samuel Pepys visited the Sephardi Synagogue in London on Simchat Torah, he was highly unimpressed. He said the frivolity of the occasion was "religion absurdly performed".

The congregational elders took steps to create more decorous conditions from then onwards, and many Anglo-Jewish communities followed their lead in preferring stateliness to celebration.

This was still the norm three centuries later, to the extent that some-one said of the Hampstead Synagogue that Simchat Torah was as mournful as Tish'a b'Av.

My own Hampstead incumbency was the time when some quite restrained dancing with the Torah was introduced, though not without the stern disapproval of some of the congregation.

It is a good job that Pepys did not attend a Purim service; I have no idea what Purim was like at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in his day but we are all well aware that in most places it is marked with considerable exuberance. Some say it is the time when people let their hair down, but I personally find that a problem now that I have hardly any hair left.

The serious question is of course whether there is a case for religion being "absurdly performed".

There are two answers. The first is that we are not without our solemn occasions, probably outweighing the times of frivolity.

The second is that religion is a dimension of the life of a people, and people have to be able to articulate the whole range of human emotions.

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Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH