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FOR PARSHAS EMOR 5779

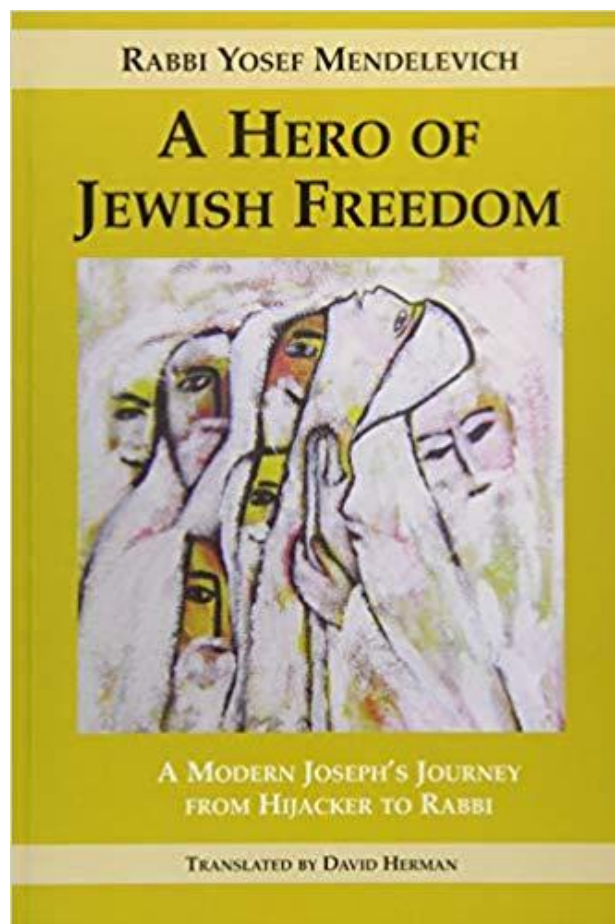
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A Tale of Jewish Valor

By Tzvi Fishman



When speaking about the Holocaust, one doesn't immediately think of the Jews of Russia, but they were victims of Nazi atrocities. In fact, it was his encounter with the horrors of the Holocaust, as a young assimilated Russian

student, which sparked Yosef Mendelevich's decision to become a fighter for the freedom of Soviet Jewry.

Just a hundred years ago, Russia was the center of world Jewry, with many great yeshivot and famous Torah Gedolim. But under a cruel Communist dictatorship which was determined to eradicate Judaism, Torah learning was banned, and Torah scrolls were burnt, along with tefillin, prayer books, and holy Jewish texts. Synagogues and yeshivot were closed. Any Jew caught observing the Torah's holidays and commandments could be imprisoned for years.

Jews lived in fear of the KGB, Russia's secret police, which had undercover agents and informers everywhere. Within a generation, the Torah was nearly forgotten. Only the most dedicated and daring continued to learn from books they had hidden, at the risk of severe punishment. Jews who wanted to immigrate to the Jewish homeland were denied permission to leave Russia. For them, darkness spread over their lives, as deep as the darkness of Egypt.



Yosef Mendelevich at the White House in 1981 with President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush

Among the six-million Jews who lived in Russia, there arose a small Jewish underground resistance. They met clandestinely to learn about Jewish Tradition, the Land of Israel, and how to speak Hebrew. A small group even tried to hijack an airplane and escape to the State of Israel. They were arrested on the runway and brought to trial in Leningrad.

News of their plight spread through the Jewish world, igniting the "Struggle to Free Soviet Jewry." Yosef Mendelevich was sentenced to twelve years in prison.

His incredible dedication to Torah, under the harshest conditions, and his unwavering dream of reaching the Land of Israel, even when he was thrown into solitary confinement for weeks on end in a tiny, cold cell in the Gulag, at the furthest ends of Siberia, is one of the most heroic stories of our times.

On several occasions, he conducted long hunger strikes to protest his not being allowed to wear a kippah, study Torah and to keep its commandments. Today, he teaches at the Machon Meir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. His new book, “A Hero of Jewish Freedom,” translated by David Herman, recounts many of his ordeals in a reader-friendly fashion certain to strengthen everyone’s faith.

What ignited your activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry?

I had just started high school in Riga when a friend dragged me along with him to clean up the Rumbuli Cemetery where some fifty-thousand Jews slaughtered by the Nazis were buried in several mass graves, including one for children. The victims had been murdered in the month of November, 1941. The area had been neglected by the Russian authorities, who refused permission to put up a sign commemorating the site as the burial place of Jewish victims.

It was here, at the very place that Amalek sought to destroy us, that my nationalist Jewish awakening crystalized.

I was surprised to see that a crowd of Jews were already at work with shovels and rakes, building a rudimentary monument to the dead. I had learned a few things, here and there, about Jewish history and Zionism, but it was here, at the very place that Amalek sought to destroy us, that my nationalist Jewish awakening crystalized.

All at once, that very day?

My feelings matured and deepened over time, but the lightning bolt from Heaven was here. I volunteered to be a worker at the site, where the work of creating a memorial park continued. On Sundays, Jewish activists would gather at the cemetery, which we called, “Little Israel.” Singing Israeli songs, it was my initial experience with the feeling of brotherhood and pride in being Jewish.

Continuing to sing Hebrew songs on the bus back to the city, we caused other passengers to flee in fear that they would be associated with a group of proud Jews. In our unity, we all discovered a reservoir of valor and strength.

One Hannukah, at the Rumbuli Cemetery memorial service in 1965, we discussed the need not only to remember the dead, but to take concrete action to ensure the survival of Judaism and the Jews. In the freezing cold Russian night, after lighting the Hanukah candles and reciting Kaddish, I spoke about our obligation to the dead to carry on the flame of Jewish life and freedom. From that moment, I made an inner commitment to determine the course of my life for

myself, and for the Jewish People, rather than allowing my actions and beliefs to be determined by others.

“Our fate is in our hands,” I declared. “We must act to resist the forces of assimilation and oppression, and emigrate to Israel. I propose that we establish an underground Zionist organization. All those in favor, raise your hands.”

Afterward, the main group of activists gathered at my home. “Our fate is in our hands,” I declared. “We must act to resist the forces of assimilation and oppression, and emigrate to Israel. I propose that we establish an underground Zionist organization. All those in favor, raise your hands.”



Recent photo of Rabbi Yosef Mendelevich

You were raised in a secular home. How did you become so determined to keep the Torah?

The KGB learned of our plans to hijack an airplane to Israel. When we reached the airport, they were waiting for us. Before our trial, my interrogators tried to convince me to squeal on other Jews in the Jewish Underground Movement, whereupon they could be arrested as traitors to the Soviet regime. Of course, I refused.

‘Mendelevich, don’t be a fool,’ the investigator told me. ‘You are still a young man. You have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t throw it away. Give us

the names of the other members of your group, admit that you made a mistake in betraying your Motherland, and we will lighten your sentence. Otherwise, you may be sentenced to spend the rest of your life in prison, or even be executed.'

I kept silent, unwilling to betray fellow Jews.

'You are a Russian,' the investigator continued. 'You were educated as a Russian. Give up your foolish insistence on being a Jew and on immigrating to Israel. There is no G-d. Your Torah is just a make-believe fairytale that no enlightened Russian can accept, and you will only suffer for your stubborn rebellion.'

'I am a Jew, and I am proud to be Jewish,' I answered, not flinching from the look of hate in his eyes. 'It is true that I was born in Russia, but my Motherland is Israel. And the laws of the Torah are the laws that I must follow, not the unjust and immoral laws of the Soviet State.'

The interrogator growled and sent me back to my cell. I felt a great turmoil inside of me, enraged that the Russian authorities were trying to strip me of my Jewish identity. I sensed that I must hang on to my Jewishness at all costs. If not, they would succeed in breaking me, and turning me into a traitor to my friends and to the Jewish People.

But, I had a problem which seemed even more insurmountable than the bars of my cell, the hostile interrogators, the uncaring guards, and the frightening dogs that patrolled the perimeters of the exercise yards. I knew very little about Judaism - just things that I had gleaned from our underground meetings. Confronted with beatings and arrests, Jews were afraid to act like Jews. But here and there, I had learned some things from my father and uncle.

There were no Sabbath candles at home, the holidays came and passed with little celebration, and I hardly knew how to pray, or to Whom I was praying to. But now, in defiance of my prison captors and the evil Soviet government that wanted to stamp out the faith of our People, I understood that I had to act like a Jew in every way that I could, just like Jews had throughout history, from generation to generation, in defiance of endless persecution, from the time of our slavery in Egypt, up to the bondage of my brothers and sisters in Russia, decent peace-loving people who were treated as criminals if they wanted to keep the Torah and return to their own Jewish Homeland in Israel.

Didn't your family celebrate Pesach when you were young?

Not for most of my childhood. My father wasn't a believer. Even though he was a steadfast Communist, he was arrested for being a Jew and imprisoned for two years. My mother died of heartbreak. When my father returned and Pesach arrived, he decided to hold the rudiments of a Seder. He said he had been attending a few Seder Nights at the home of my mother's parents in the early years of their marriage.

We didn't have a Haggadah, so he told us about Jewish History from the time of Avraham, through the Exodus from Egypt, until the establishment of the State of Israel. This was my father's way of observing the mitzvah, "And you shall teach your children." All of the saga was a big revelation for me. Growing up, I knew nothing about Judaism or Jewish History.

Let's jump forward to your own personal Exodus and freedom after eleven years in Siberian work camps and prisons. How did it transpire?

After prison authorities confiscated my Chumash and Siddur, I went on a hunger strike for 55 days until they returned the books to me. After recovering in what was called a medical clinic, I was sent back to the prison factory, hauling coils of heavy wire weighing 60 kilos. At the end of one work day, two officials appeared in the barracks and told me to pack my belongings because I was being transferred. Handcuffed, I was driven away in a jeep through a dark forest, squeezed between an armed KGB agent and a huge guard dog, panting as if it couldn't wait to get a taste of my bones.

No one bothered to explain where we were headed. I was confident they wouldn't kill me because my struggle had become well known in the West. I figured I was going to be interrogated as a disobedient political prisoner. After a long train ride and an almost equally long airplane flight, I was driven to some prison and left alone in a cell. After a nervous two weeks, I was once again told to pack my belongings.

This time I was led to a large office in the prison where a small squadron of KGB captains and generals were sitting. One held up a large piece of paper and read aloud: 'Decision of the Supreme Soviet Council. In light of the criminal and anti-Soviet behavior of the exceedingly dangerous prisoner, Yosef Mendelevich, the Supreme Soviet Council has decided to cancel the criminal's Soviet citizenship and to expel him from the boundaries of the Soviet Union.'

After a startled moment, I exclaimed, 'Baruch Hashem.'

'What did you say?'

'Russia is not my homeland. The opposite,' I told them. "You are expelling me from a foreign land to the Homeland of my People.'

'I thanked G-d for the miracle he has done for me,' I replied.

'Swine!' he shouted. 'He is expelled from his homeland and he is happy!'

'Russia is not my homeland. The opposite,' I told them. "You are expelling me from a foreign land to the Homeland of my People.'

When I left the room, my handcuffs were removed, and I was driven to the airport with an escort of motorcycles like an important person. I felt like Yosef in Egypt who was taken from prison, dressed in clean garb, and brought before the king. Before boarding the airplane,

I said to the KGB commander, 'Eleven years ago, the KGB arrested me on an airport runway to prevent me from leaving for Israel. Now you have brought me to this airport to make sure I depart. And tens of thousands like me will follow. You should admit that you made a mistake.'

'We didn't know you people have such unbreakable spirit and resolve,' he said.

Agents led me to the airplane before I could answer, not that he would have understood what I wanted to tell him. It wasn't only the spirit of the Prisoners of Zion, and the resolve of the people throughout the Free World who supported our struggle, that brought down the Iron Curtain.

Just like in the Exodus from Egypt, the power came from our Father in Heaven and from clinging to His Torah.

Reprinted from the May 2, 2019 email of Arutz Sheva.

Rav Avigdor Miller on Preparing to Visit Eretz Yisroel



QUESTION: Must one undergo a special spiritual preparation in order to go to Eretz Yisroel?

ANSWER: And the answer is, absolutely! Yermiyahu Hanavi said, ותבאו ותטמאו את ארצי - "You came and you defiled My land" (Yermiyahu 2:7). And therefore, it is of the utmost importance that someone should be ready to behave if he wants to go to Eretz Yisroel.

He should learn how to conduct himself perfectly *al pi haTorah* before he goes to Eretz Yisroel. And even if he is good here, he must make a resolve to be even better there. There are no two ways about that. It's *Eretz Hakodesh* and it's only for Jews who live *b'kedusha*.

Now you'll ask me, what about the Arabs? First of all, the Arabs don't ask us any questions. They're not asking me for my opinion. And second is that an Arab, we consider him just like a bird. The birds who fly into Eretz Yisroel don't have to have any *kedusha*. An Arab or a gentile doesn't have any *tumah*. It's like nothing to us. It's like the grass that grows there.

But the Am Yisroel is a different story. They are *poigem*, they cause damage. When they do a sin they cause great harm in the world. And therefore it's of the utmost importance that a Jew, before he goes to Eretz Yisroel, must make up his mind to be there *b'kedusha*, even if it's just for a visit.

Nobody should go unless he'll go *b'kedusha*. If he takes along his wife, he must make sure that she's dressed completely properly, because this is a land that will vomit out the people who live there if they don't suit its taste.

The land of Eretz Yisroel has to have something made to its taste. It's a land of *וַתִּקֵּא הָאֲרֶץ אֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ* - "And the land will vomit out its inhabitants" (Vayikra 18:25). Eretz Yisroel is finicky. It's a delicate land and only those people who behave properly can please the land.

Reprinted from the April 12, 2019 email of Toras Avigdor (Tape #200 – January 1977).

The Shmuz on Parshas Emor

Your Gashmius Is My Ruchnius

By Rabbi Bentzion Shafier
Founder of TheShmuz.com



“And when you gather the cuttings of your land, do not cut the corner of your field when you harvest, and the fallings of your harvesting do not gather. For the poor man and the convert, you should leave them.” — Vayikra 23:22

The Torah reading on the first days of *Sukkos* outlines the *yomim tovim* of year and their sacrifices. In the middle of the detailing of all the holidays, the Torah repeats the *mitzvah* of *leket*, *shikchah*, and *peah*, the commandment to leave a portion of your harvest for the poor.

Rashi is troubled by the placement of this in the middle of the descriptions of the holidays. He explains that the Torah is teaching us if someone gives *leket*, *shikchah*, and *peah* to a poor person properly, it is as if he built the Holy Temple and brought all of his sacrifices there.

This Rashi is very difficult to understand. What possible comparison is there between this simple *mitzvah* of leaving a portion to the poor man and the colossal *mitzvah* of bringing all of the sacrifices on each holiday? Even more, how can giving charity be equal to the building of the *Bais Hamikdash*?

The Heart of Our Nation

The center point of each *moed* is the *Avodah* done in the *Bais Hamikdash*. It is difficult for us to imagine the holiness invested and the spiritual accomplishments attained when the *korbonos* are brought.

A *kohain* is a holy Jew who spends his life dedicated towards spirituality. From his earliest youth, he is trained in learning to eventually join the ranks of the Torah teachers in Israel.

Only when he is twenty-five is he ready to begin his apprenticeship as a *kohain*. He will spend five years learning, preparing, practicing, and then he may finally serve, but only for the next twenty years. As there were thousands of *kohanim*, each *kohain* would only get to do limited parts of the actual service, and even that for only two weeks out a year.

For each *yom tov*, a team of hundreds of the holiest people of the generation were involved in the preparations and the actual service. With the *levi'im* singing, and the rest of the Jewish nation waiting, the assigned *kohain* goes through the actual process. Scripted from beginning till end, he must maintain the exact intentions throughout the service and follow the procedure to the letter.

These *korbonos* affect both the upper worlds and the physical world in a profound manner. The *Gemara* tells us that if the gentiles would have known the impact of the sacrifices, they would have surrounded the *Bais Hamikdash* with armies and not allowed anything to interfere.

So how can Rashi say that when a man leaves part of his produce for the poor man, it is equivalent to all of this? All he did was refrain from picking up the droppings from his harvest and leave a corner of his field to the poor. In what way can this be compared to the spiritual impact of having built the Holy Temple and bringing all the sacrifices?

The answer to this can best be understood by focusing on a concept that *Chazal* share with us.

The Great Opportunity to Help Another

“More than what the rich man does for the poor man is what the poor man does for the rich man.” (*Medrash Rabba Rus*: 5:9).

The reason behind this *Chazal* is based on very purpose of Creation. HASHEM created man to give to him. By placing man in this world and giving him free will, HASHEM allowed him the opportunity of perfecting himself so he could enjoy the greatest pleasure: basking in HASHEM’s presence forever. In accordance to the level of perfection that he reaches here, he will be able to enjoy closeness to HASHEM.

The measure of all perfection is HASHEM. The more like HASHEM a man is, the more perfect he is, and the closer to HASHEM he is. The Torah is the system of spiritual perfection. Its *mitzvos* bring a person nearer to HASHEM by making him more like HASHEM.

HASHEM needs nothing and does nothing for Himself. This entire Creation and everything in it was fashioned to benefit others. HASHEM is the Benefactor.

And so, the more of a giver a person is, the more like HASHEM he is, and thereby, the more perfect he is.

HASHEM is Perfect

There is, however, one critical observation that bears mentioning. HASHEM is very good at doing what He does. He doesn't need help running the world. And He has lots and lots of money. If HASHEM wished it to be, there wouldn't be poor people. Even more, the entire concept of poverty and wealth wouldn't exist. HASHEM created a world with different sorts of people. Some are strong, and some are weak.

Some are brilliant, and some are not. Some are wealthy, and some are poor. But it wasn't by accident, and it wasn't because HASHEM ran out of money. HASHEM created the world this way to allow people the opportunity to use their strengths and talents, their resources and situations. If man uses his opportunities wisely, not only does he grow, but he is credited with the accomplishment.

If a wealthy person sustains a poor man, it is considered as if he gave life to that person. Even though it's HASHEM's world, and even though HASHEM gave wealth to the rich man, if the wealthy man gives to the poor man, he is credited with saving him.

This seems to be the answer to the Rashi.

Granted, when the *kohanim* brought the *avodah*, it was a spiritual act of extraordinary impact. But the source and measure of all holiness is HASHEM. The way that HASHEM shows Himself in this world is through giving. When man gives to others, he is acting as HASHEM does. There can be nothing holier.

The Torah is teaching us that when you leave over your *leket* and *shikchah*, you are acting as much like HASHEM as you possibly can. When I take care of another's needs, that is spirituality. It's not second rate, not some add-on. This is the highest level of spirituality.

This concept has particular relevance, as we find much of the spiritual aspirations today are focused on certain *mitzvos*. While all *mitzvos* are holy, we need to remain cognizant that their aim is to bring us closer to HASHEM. The way we do that is to be like HASHEM as much as we are able. The more that we are focused on the needs of others, the more like HASHEM we become.

Reprinted from this week's website on TheShmuz.com This is an excerpt from the Shmuz on the Parsha book.

The Obligation to Provide Our Children with a Proper Jewish Education

**From the Talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Zt”l**



This week's Torah portion, Emor, begins with a fundamental teaching about the education of children: "Speak to the priests...and say to them." Our Sages explain that this repetition alludes to the mitzva and obligation placed on adults to instruct their children in the proper path. Parents, the Torah insists, must provide the next generation with the proper Jewish education.

But why is such a fundamental concept not mentioned until now, halfway through the Torah? Would it not have been more appropriate for this mitzva to be given immediately after the revelation at Mt. Sinai? Furthermore, why is this mitzva mentioned in connection with the priests?

In explanation, bear in mind that the Torah portion studied during any given week has particular significance for that time of year. Its selection is not arbitrary; its teachings are especially applicable at that particular time. The commandment to

educate the young must therefore apply most specifically now, during the month of Iyar, a month primarily characterized by counting the Omer.

The essential concept of Sefirat HaOmer, counting the Omer, is education. The Jews were educated and refined as they counted the days before the Torah was given on Mt. Sinai, seven weeks after their exodus from Egypt. The release from bondage was, so to speak, the "birth" of the Jewish nation, which was then followed by a period in which they were educated for the great event to come.

This learning experience was not, however, in the fundamentals of Judaism; G-d had already said of Abraham, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of G-d." This process of refinement, achieved through counting the Omer, refers to an even higher degree of perfection.

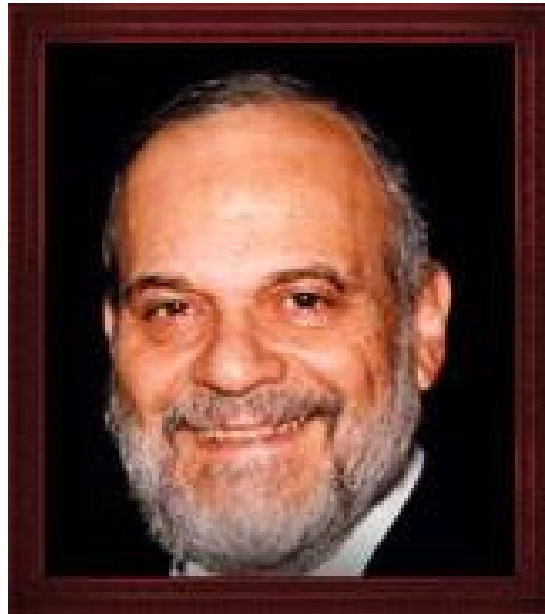
Furthermore, this type of education has a special connection to the service of the priests, for their job was to bring the Jews closer to G-d through the sacrifices brought in the Holy Temple. Because the priests raised the sanctity of the entire Jewish nation, it is to them that the commandment to instruct the young was addressed.

We learn from this that the duty to provide our children--and every Jewish child--with a proper Jewish education involves more than teaching them just the basics of Judaism. We must also endeavor to instill in them the desire for perfection in the service of G-d.

Today, as we stand on the threshold of Moshiach's imminent arrival, this lesson is particularly apt, for it prepares us for that time when "the entire world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d, like the waters of the sea cover the earth."

Reprinted from the Parashat Emor 5753/1993 edition of L'Chaim Weekly (Issue #263), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.

Rabbi Berel Wein on Parashat Emor



The opening subject matter in this week's Torah reading deals with the existence of impurities in Jewish and human society. In our world today, especially in the realm of the intelligentsia, there is a great deal of chatter and worry about the pollution of our atmosphere.

When the threat of global warming proved to be unfounded, the environmentalists amongst us changed the focus of their dire warnings, about the extinction of our planet, to now be under the new slogan of climate change.

There is very little if any scientific evidence to support their claims that the world as we know it will disappear in the very near future because of fossil fuels, carbon emissions and the natural behavior of cows. Nevertheless, it is clear that all of us have to be against pollution of the atmosphere.

The pollution referred to in our Torah reading is of a different nature completely. It concerns itself with the impurity that comes from death and not from life, from sin and the non-performance of good deeds and noble aspirations. It prohibits the priestly descendants of Aaron from willfully rendering themselves to be impure. This is a matter of ritual law, but it is also a matter of a value system and a personal and societal outlook.

All of us, not only the priestly class of Israel, are to avoid whenever possible both physical and spiritual impurity. This type of impurity pollutes the atmosphere that we live in subtly. Its influence upon us is inescapable and tragically, many times, permanent. G-d demanded of us that we be a holy nation, but spiritual, mental and physical pollution will always prevent us from reaching that desired goal.

While it is difficult to maintain cleanliness of body and clothing in a physically polluted world, it is even more difficult to maintain cleanliness and purity of thought, dress and outlook in a very polluted emotional, mental and spiritual world.

By removing all previous inhibitions, mores and social manners of Western society, built up over generations, regarding speech, dress, public and private behavior, a terrible cloud has enveloped society. Since the Jewish people exist in the main within the confines of Western society, with its attitudes and behavior patterns, there is no question that we also have been dirtied simply by existing.

The advanced technological achievements of our time have unfortunately been put to the service of those individuals and ideas that intend to make us impure for their own personal, political or economic gain. They have done so with fancy sounding slogans that espouse all types of freedom, but really impose upon those who disagree with them the tyranny of enforced conformity.

In many parts of the world today, especially in the Far East, people wear masks over their noses and mouths to prevent the air pollution that surrounds them from being inhaled. There is no question that we all need such spiritual masks as well to allow us to counter the destructive pollution and impurity of much of the norms of the society that we live in.

Reprinted from this week's website of Rabbiwein.com

We're all Ambassadors

Rabbi Eli J. Mansour



In Parashat Emor the Torah presents one of the most important of the 613 Biblical commands – the prohibition against “Hillul Hashem,” defaming the Name of G-d: “You shall not desecrate My holay Name” (22:32). A religious Jew who acts in a discourteous or unseemly manner dishonors G-d, thereby desecrating His Name.

We currently find ourselves in the period of Sefirat Ha’omer, the weeks between Pesah and Shabuot, when we observe a number of mourning practices. Weddings and celebrations are not held, and we refrain from haircutting and shaving.

During these weeks, we mourn the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva’s 24,000 students, who all perished in the brief period between Pesah and Shabuot as a result of a severe illness. These students were outstanding Torah scholars, but, as the Talmud teaches, they did not treat each other respectfully (“She’lo Nahagu Kabod Ze La’ze”). They were punished for this disrespectful behavior, and all 24,000 students died a painful death.

Many have wondered why G-d visited such a severe punishment upon Rabbi Akiva’s students. Certainly, it is understood that the Torah demands respectful treatment of other people, not to mention toward Rabbis and Torah scholars. But where do we find disrespectful behavior toward one’s peers as a capital crime, which is punishable by deadly illness?

Two famous rabbis – the Ben Ish Hai (Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909) and the Hafetz Haim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin, 1839-1933) –

both answered that in truth, Rabbi Akiva's students were punished for transgressing the sin of Hillul Hashem.

The manner in which they spoke to, and treated, one another left people with a very bad impression of the Torah world which they represented. It made them think that Torah tarnishes, rather than enhances, a person's character, and that the Torah encourages unseemly behavior, G-d forbid.

And it was for this defamation of the Torah that Rabbi Akiva's students were punished so severely. Failure to treat others respectfully does not, in itself, render one liable to severe punishment, but Hillul Hashem indeed ranks among the most grievous sins in the Torah, and thus Rabbi Akiva's students were killed.

This terrible tragedy should send a stern warning to all observant Jews today. As one Rabbi put it, all religious Jews today serve as ambassadors of Torah. We are easily identifiable to outsiders, and they reach conclusions about religious Jews based on how we present ourselves.

We must exercise extreme care to act and speak politely and with consideration not only because this is what the Torah demands, but also so that we make a favorable impression of Judaism. Even if we do not always realize it, each one of us is an ambassador, and bears the obligation to present the proper image of Torah values.

We must learn from the tragic mistake of Rabbi Akiva's students, and ensure to speak to all people in a polite, courteous and respectful manner.

Reprinted from this week's website of the Edmund J. Safra Synagogue in Brooklyn, NY.

Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Parties Embrace Technology And Emerge Stronger

By Isabel Kershner



Modiin Illit is an urban settlement in the occupied West Bank, inhabited by some 70,000 people, nearly all Ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews. CreditCredit - Dan Balilty for The New York Times

MODIIN ILLIT, West Bank — The business center in the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Modiin Illit employs scores of strictly observant women in financial services and technology firms. It has long been touted as a sign of modernization and “Israelization” in insular communities.

Before this month’s parliamentary election in Israel, opinion polls and analysts suggested that integration among the younger, smartphone generation might have translated into less power for ultra-Orthodox parties and more openness to their more mainstream counterparts.

Instead, the rapidly growing ultra-Orthodox Israeli population, also known as the Haredim — Hebrew for “those who fear God” — proved overwhelmingly that its voters obey the dictates of rabbis.

“In the Haredi community it’s only about the rabbis,” said Liora Cohen, 34, an ultra-Orthodox employee of a company that provides software services in the Modiin Illit business center.

“Only a minority of a minority act according to their own opinions,” she said, standing outside a photo store where an ultra-Orthodox couple sat editing pictures on a computer and people shopped for Passover to lively klezmer background music.



In Israeli parliamentary elections on April 9, 97 percent of the votes cast in Modiin Illit went to the two main ultra-Orthodox parties.Credit - Dan Balilty for The New York Times

In Modiin Illit, an urban, almost entirely Haredi settlement of 70,000 people in the occupied West Bank, 97 percent of votes cast on April 9 went to the two main ultra-Orthodox Israeli parties.

Voter turnout was nearly 84.5 percent — more than 16 percentage points above the average.

Nationwide, United Torah Judaism, or U.T.J., the party that represents the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Israelis of European origin, and the Sephardic Shas Party, which appeals to Israelis from the Middle East and North Africa, won eight seats each, increasing their combined strength to 16 seats from 13 in the 120-seat Israeli Parliament, the Knesset.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, heading into a fifth term, is counting on both ultra-Orthodox parties to supplement the 35 seats won by his conservative Likud Party and build a coalition with a parliamentary majority.

The Haredi parties, in turn, are expected to exert ever more leverage over decisions about contentious issues of religion and state. These include increased budgets for religious institutions, the strictly Orthodox monopoly over marriage and divorce, and restricting public works, like railway repairs, on the Sabbath. Disputes with the more liberal majority of North American Jews over a shelved agreement for a pluralistic, egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, and over non-Orthodox conversions, may be exacerbated.



Aryeh Deri, center, the leader of Shas, an ultra-Orthodox religious party, at an election event in Jerusalem. Credit - Dan Balilty for The New York Times

“There is a very strong discussion about how we can strengthen the Jewish values we hold dear in this environment,” said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the

New York-based Union for Reform Judaism. “I think we are going to see things we have not seen.”

More immediately, though, the emerging coalition faces a showdown over legislation to draft more yeshiva students into military service and limit the exemptions they have received for decades.

Another crucial coalition partner, Avidgor Lieberman’s ultranationalist and secularist Israel Beiteinu Party, which won five seats, insists on passing a relatively soft version of the Haredi draft law by July, a deadline set by the Supreme Court. But United Torah Judaism has rejected it, insisting that every student who wants to study Torah full time must be allowed to do so.

Mr. Lieberman and U.T.J.’s leaders have vowed to fight even to the point of forcing new elections, which would create a coalition crisis before the coalition was even formed.

The ultra-Orthodox sector makes up about 12 percent of Israel’s population of about 9 million citizens, and is growing rapidly, with an average of seven or eight children per family. Nearly 60 percent of the sector is aged 19 or younger.



Israel’s rapidly growing ultra-Orthodox population proved overwhelmingly that when it came to voting, the only consideration was the dictate of the rabbis. CreditAtef Safadi/EPA, via Shutterstock

The results in Modiin Illit were, with some variation, repeated in other ultra-Orthodox localities. Likud received less than one percent of ballots cast in Modiin Illit. Vote totals for other mainstream parties were in double or single digits.

If current voting patterns continue, according to calculations by Gilad Malach, an expert at the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem, United Torah Judaism's representation could reach 11 seats by the end of 2034. Support for Shas, which won 17 seats in its heyday by appealing to the less Orthodox but traditional Sephardic public, also is expected to climb.



The ultra-Orthodox sector makes up about 12 percent of Israel's population of about 9 million citizens, and is growing rapidly, with an average of seven or eight children per family. Credit - Dan Balilty for The New York Times

The most conservative ultra-Orthodox are ambivalent about the Jewish state or reject it outright because they believe it should come into being only after the arrival of the Messiah. And yet, many have pursued secular higher education over the last decade, and more men have joined the work force instead of remaining in seminaries — and on welfare. Several thousand serve in the military.

The ultra-Orthodox also have created their own feisty digital media presence, with sites trading political news and gossip.

But none of this appears to have affected voter loyalty to Haredi parties.

Rabbi Yitzhak Pindrus, who was the eighth candidate on United Torah Judaism's list, which allowed him to barely make it into the new Parliament, called talk of political change stemming from modernization among the ultra-Orthodox "a lot of baloney."

"It's an illusion, a fantasy that the Haredi community is falling apart," he said in an interview. "Even if 500 drop out, I still have thousands more — 95 percent are staying in."



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men praying in Modiin Illit. Credit - Dan Balilty for The New York Times

Attributing U.T.J.'s success to its achievements in restoring rights and funding for the ultra-Orthodox over the last four years, he added: "I can send you a WhatsApp right now. It doesn't mean I'm not religious."

The ultra-Orthodox parties made efforts during the campaign to appeal to younger Jews. United Torah Judaism created a Facebook page; Shas did the same with a Telegram account. Octogenarian and nonagenarian sages helped, traveling around the country by minibus and helicopter to attend mass rallies.

In one widely circulated U.T.J. video clip, a disciple asks Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, 91, a revered authority, in Yiddish, how to talk with voters who

support parties that disregard the laws of the Torah. After a long pause the rabbi replied, “They will have children like that.”

The message clearly resonated.

“In the history of the Jewish people,” said Yaakov Rosenkrantz, an editor and a resident of Modiin Illit, “when people began to ignore the rabbis, they became non-Jews.”

“Those who vote for other parties and wear a skullcap are cutting themselves off, and the next generation will not be there,” he added. Like many in Modiin Illit, he carried only what he called a “kosher” cellphone, a basic model for only making or receiving calls, not a smartphone with internet access. Those are still scorned by the most strictly observant.

For the first time, an ultra-Orthodox woman, Omer Yankelevich, will enter the Knesset on the centrist Blue and White Party roster, led by Benny Gantz, a former military chief.

Israel Cohen, a political analyst for the ultra-Orthodox radio station Kol Berama, said that Ms. Yankelevich would have little influence (some Modiin Illit residents had not heard of her) but that the mainstream parties wanted to reflect the diversity of Israeli society, “like in a reality show.”

In the past, the ultra-Orthodox were swing parties, willing to join left-wing or right-wing governments. Their leaders were amenable to peace with the Palestinians and at first were reluctant about settling the West Bank.

In recent years, they have stuck with the right.

“Today there is no diplomatic solution on the table,” Mr. Cohen said, “and the left has adopted anti-religious positions like the recognition of Reform Judaism and civil unions.”

“You can have a smartphone, a television at home, your kids can go to karate, but at the end of the day what are you? Haredi or not?” he said. “With all the advancement, in the end people still listened to the rabbis.”

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