



Eternal Values

Rav Menachem Zupnik

Time for the Truth

When I first came to Beis Medrash Govoha over fifty years ago, many of Rav Aaron Kotler's great *talmidim* were still learning in Kollel. They set the tone for the Yeshiva community, and for the entire fledgling Olam HaTorah. They learned and lived in a way that reflected the spirit they had absorbed from their great Rebbe. Rav Chaim Epstein *zt"l*, one of those premier *talmidim*, was commonly viewed as the embodiment of all that Rav Aharon had aspired to create in America. Even after Rav Chaim eventually left Lakewood, we would eagerly anticipate hearing him speak again on the many occasions that he returned to Lakewood.

Thirty years later, our *kehillah* in Passaic initiated a yeshiva *bein hazemanim* program. I looked forward to bringing Rav Chaim to speak to the younger generation, so that they, too, might develop into true *bnei Torah* by experiencing the genuine *Torahdig ruach* that he projected.

But even then, over twenty years ago, Rav Chaim was quite reluctant to come, and it took quite a bit of persuasion on my part until he agreed. He argued, quite emphatically, that people weren't interested in hearing his message anymore. "Nowadays, people think I am *meshuga*!" It was painful to hear him say this. It was clear that the Rav Chaim Epstein that I remembered from my youth had not changed — we had.

Today, more than ever, we need to reinforce in ourselves the true *ruach haTorah* that our *gedolei Yisrael* have demonstrated and implanted in us. It's up to us to continue heeding their message, so as to ensure that *Yiddishkeit* as it is intended to be will survive intact and will be passed on to future generations.

"Torah Jew" — Undermined

The *frum* world has recently been expressing great concern about the designs and policies of the Israeli government, and the

damage that the inroads of Reform may have on Klal Yisrael. The new government is certainly set on causing problems for *Yiddishkeit*, yet, as we have seen in the past, the core body of observant Jews will survive *be”H*.

However, this external challenge is relatively minor when compared to a potentially greater issue that is threatening us from *within*. There is a foreign lifestyle infiltrating our ranks, which, with increasing momentum, is undermining our own identity as Torah Jews.

Torah Judaism is defined by meaning and purpose. The Torah in its entirety is intended as a guide for human beings to live a life of divinity. This, by definition, runs in contrast to the glorification of physical pleasure as the highest value in life. Attempting to uphold the Torah life while practicing a lifestyle dedicated to the pursuit of physical pleasure is akin to attempting to play basketball by following the rule book for baseball. It's simply the wrong game.

Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:17) writes: “Now what hope is there for Hashem’s creature if he does not devote the labor of his soul and his primary occupation to those things for which he has been created?” The virtues that the Torah teaches us to strive for are intended to elevate a person above the mundane and to choose a life which fully rejects materialism as a goal unto itself. Living with the proper perspective is not just another attribute, it is the very definition of a Torah Jew and the very purpose for Creation. What, then, is the hope of the Am Hashem if the pursuit of physical pleasure is glorified, rather than a life of dedication to Hashem? These two opposite goals are incompatible and are an inverse relationship.

Modern Hedonism

The Chazon Ish says that a human being without the refinement of Torah is “in constant pursuit of his natural desires, like a raging river.” Western society has gleefully jumped into this river, enjoying being swept along by the raging current. When we are surrounded by a world that has set the highest barometer of materialism as its goal in life, this places us all in dire spiritual danger.

This erroneous life approach is not new. The

ancient Roman hedonistic culture wasn’t merely about *taavah*. As the dictionary defines it: *Hedonism: the ethical theory that pleasure (in the sense of the satisfaction of desires) is the highest good and proper aim of human life*.

Allow me to quote a secular historian portraying a Roman banquet of antiquity:

A proper Roman dinner included three courses: the hors d’oeuvres (*gustatio*), the main course (*mensae primae*), and the dessert (*mensae secundae*). The food and drink that was served was intended not only to satiate the guests but also to add an element of spectacle to the meal. Exotic produce, particularly those from wild animals, birds, and fish, were favored at elite dinner parties because of their rarity, difficulty of procurement, and consequent high cost, which reflected the host’s affluence. Popular but costly fare included pheasant, thrush (or other songbirds), raw oysters, lobster, shellfish, venison, wild boar, and peacock. In addition, elaborate recipes were invented... These often required not only expensive ingredients and means of preparation but also elaborate, even dramatic, forms of presentation.

And here is the conclusion of that essay:

In sum, the Roman banquet was not merely a meal but rather a calculated spectacle of display that was intended to demonstrate the host’s wealth, status, and sophistication to his guests, preferably outdoing at the same time the lavish banquets of his elite friends and colleagues.

The *frum* community is sadly not immune to this influence. Proudly insisting on only the finest cuts of meat, drinking only award-winning wines, and wearing only Italian custom-tailored suits has increasingly become an accepted norm in our circles — even somewhat of a *defining* feature of today’s *frum* Jew. I would suggest that had we lived in that point in history, we would never have considered attending those decadent Roman banquets. Yet, isn’t there a striking similarity between some of our very own *simchos* and events, and the historian’s description, barring the wild boar, shellfish, and togas...?

The behavior of large segments of a society eventually takes on the full force of a movement. The more this culture is allowed to penetrate our camp, the more powerful it will become. There have been

many movements that have openly attempted to redefine Judaism and have devastated segments of our people. At first, they were not quite so radical. There were many who did not see the danger when Reform and Conservative Judaism were taking root. *Taavah* has always been – will always be – a challenge, but it is an entirely different issue when fulfilling one's earthly desires has become a legitimate and highly-regarded life goal. We must be mindful to ensure that we do not allow ourselves to believe in our hearts and minds that we can faithfully uphold Torah while leading a lifestyle which places self-indulgence on a pedestal.

Identifying Our Approach

I was recently in a rather affluent out-of-town community for Shabbos. I went to the store to purchase a bottle of wine for our host and the most expensive bottle of wine on the shelf was \$29. I am already used to more expensive prices and was taken aback. But as I contemplated my predicament and watched the other shoppers, I began to understand where the difference lay. That selection of wine reflected a community for whom *kavod Shabbos* was still the essential focus. Therefore, the store provided a fine array of reasonably-priced wines to fulfill the need to make *kiddush*. Some of the wine stores I am familiar with seemed to be catering to an entirely different need. Their clientele is seeking the best in fine wine; Shabbos seems to be merely the excuse.

The same can be said about the promotion of *Yamim Tovim* in lavish and exotic destinations. Is the goal *simchas Yom Tov*? Or are *mo'adei Hashem* being used as an opportunity to pursue goals of self-indulgence? When *Yiddishkeit* is being used to *achieve* the mundane instead of *uplift* it, the essence and purpose of Torah Judaism is slowly being distorted and redefined.

From All Sides

Unfortunately, we are being bombarded by this message on so many fronts. The outrageous prices in the liquor stores, the decadent creations in the supermarkets, and the glitzy ads in *frum* publications are all pages out of the textbook of this new and foreign “religion.” On a shopping trip for a bar mitzvah suit, our precious *bachur* is exposed to astronomically-priced designer ties that cannot be found even in many high-end department stores. All of us, along with our impressionable children, are absorbing this toxic message on some level.

We are slowly, subconsciously, accepting this trend. By now, it has become almost impossible to draw the line between “normal” and “excessive.” What was outrageously over-the-top just a few years ago has become the norm. This is part of the reason that it is so hard to resist joining the flow. But we must find ways to hold back, because surrendering to this trend poses an existential threat to Klal Yisrael.

Battle for the Soul

Today's thriving Torah world is comprised of many stripes of Jews. We need *yungeleit* and *marbitzei Torah*. We need *rabbanim* and *askanim*. We need doctors and businessmen. We need them all, and we need them to live a Jewish lifestyle, not a hedonistic one *ch"v*. Wearing the most expensive *tefillin*, attending a *daf yomi shiur*, and even the blackest black hat — cannot mask an indulgent lifestyle.

This is not about advocating *perishus*, nor is it about telling people how to spend their money. It is about defining the very essence of who we are as the Am Hashem.

The first and most important step is to understand that the Torah was given to us in order to elevate us above the rest of humanity. We need to ensure with absolute clarity that hedonistic values has no platform within Torah Judaism. We need to take steps as individuals to ensure that we ourselves are not unwittingly falling in. We need to limit our own and our children's exposure. And, as a *tzibbur*, we need to find ways to counteract this trend by strengthening our collective message that our mission in life is exclusively Torah and *avodas Hashem*. Once we have secured the proper perspective, we can hope to take steps in the right direction.

I once heard Rav Chatzkel Levenstein *zt"l* quoting what he had heard from the Chofetz Chaim. Lamenting the rapid decline in *Yiddishkeit*, the Chofetz Chaim said sadly, *מיר רעדען וועגען משיח, אבער צו וועמאן וועט ער קומען?* “We speak about Mashiach, but who will be left for him to come to?”

Mashiach will come to those who upheld true Torah Judaism. We have witnessed with our own eyes the lesson that Rav Aharon taught: Only Torah in its purest form can persevere and flourish, against all odds. And by rejecting this new trend and holding firm in our resolve to retain our basic purpose as a people – to become closer to Hashem and His Torah – we and our children will be *zocheh* to greet *pnei Mashiach Tzidkeinu*. 