

VAYIGASH (GENESIS 44:18-47:27)

Chanukah Leftovers

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The smell of latkes is slowly dissipating from our homes. The jelly donuts have left their stains on our shirts and their calories on our girths. Another Chanukah has been consigned to our memories and photo albums. Now what?

It's time to clean up our Menorahs. (If we didn't do it yet!) We have to deal with our Chanukah surplus. Not every millimeter of every candle has been melted. Not every ounce of olive oil has been burnt. What should we do with the leftover oil? Salad dressing? Some popcorn, perhaps? One final batch of latkes so the potatoes and oil don't go to waste?

The *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) tells us that we have to deal very carefully with our Chanukah leftovers. Any oil or candles that remain in the Menorah are supposed to be burnt, in order to prevent any personal use of these items. Once the oil has been used for a Mitzvah, it is inappropriate to use it for a secular use. (This rule applies only to unused oil that is already in the Menorah. Olive oil that is still in the bottle was never used for the Mitzvah. Consequently, it can be used for any purpose.)

This concept applies to other Mitzvahs as well. After Sukkos, it is customary not to discard the *Lulav* – palm branch (See “Sukkah-rella”) that was used during the holiday. Rather, many people allow the *Lulav* to dry out and then use it as fuel for burning the *Chometz* before Passover. The sweet-smelling *Esrog* (citron) is pierced and embedded with cloves and used with the spices sniffed at *Havdallah*. Worn-out prayer books that no longer have a practical use are respectfully buried.

G-d has put us here to make the world a better place. When we use our material possessions to fulfill G-d's commandments, we elevate the physical world around us. When we pour a simple bottle of store-brand olive oil into a Menorah, that oil becomes holy. It becomes a vehicle through which we proclaim G-d's greatness to the world. It gives off a sanctified glow. How could we then relegate that oil to a tossed salad?

A similar thought can actually be applied to every moment of our existence. G-d has given us a mind, with which we can, and hopefully do, study Torah. He has given us mouths with which to pray, and hands with which to perform Mitzvahs. How can we take these tools for serving G-d and use them for a secular purpose?

You may ask – are we supposed to spend every waking moment in the service of G-d? Are we supposed to wear our religion on our sleeves? Are we "All Jewish – All the Time?" Can't we have some time for ourselves? Can't we take a break from Torah study and just chill out?!!

The answer is a very Jewish one: Yes and no. We are not obligated to spend every moment poring over Talmudic texts. We must eat. We must sleep. We are obligated to support our families. And yes, occasionally we must take the time to chill out. To play basketball and go fishing and enjoy G-d's world.

However, we must do so with Torah values. King David writes, "*I have set G-d before me at ALL times...*" (Psalms, 16:8) The need to take time for recreation does not mean taking a break from Torah. In the synagogue and in the Yeshiva, we use our eyes to take in the eternal knowledge and inspiration of holy books. Shouldn't we use discretion in choosing the "entertainment" that is available via television, movies, and Internet? Would we not be better off taking a hike out in nature and using our eyes to view the beauty of G-d's world?

The hands with which we build a *Sukkah* and hold the *Lulav* and light Chanukah candles should only be used for holy purposes. What is holier than using our hands to do a favor for someone? What is a greater service to G-d than putting in an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, and using a percentage of the money to help G-d's children who need our assistance? The mouth with which we pray should only be used for holy purposes. What could be holier than giving a few words of encouragement to someone who is sick, or afraid, or alone? And what greater sin, what greater sacrilege, could there be than to use the gift of speech to utter words of gossip, or rancor, or profanity?

The focus of our lives should be the primacy of Torah values. When Jacob traveled with his family to Egypt, he sent Judah ahead to build a Yeshiva where they could study. (Genesis 46:28) Joseph made every effort to insure that his relatives would live together in Goshen, an area that was away from the glitter and hustle-and-bustle of the Egyptian social scene. (Ibid, 33-34)

Our hearts never (we hope!) take "time off" from pumping blood. Our lungs don't take a break from breathing. By the same token, there is no vacation from living by G-d's rules.

Have a great Shabbos.

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