



THE PERSON

IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

A Candle of God is the Soul of Man

I no longer remember which Israeli artist colony I was visiting. Perhaps Jaffa. But I will never forget the crude, almost primitive paintings, which were on exhibit. They were all very different in color, style, and size. They varied from somber dark browns and grays to tropical oranges, reds, and yellows. Some were very realistic, some impressionistic, some totally abstract. One was a large mural. But in the corner, there were postcard-sized miniatures. In every painting, a candle predominated.

The artist was obsessed with the image of the candle. A tall, slim candle, wax dripping down its side, the wick erect, the flame flickering. Somehow, each candle evoked the picture of a person.

I made a note of the artist's name, hoping that one day I would be able to afford one of his works and would then find him, but I lost the scrap of paper with his name and address long ago.

The memory of the candles bedecking his workroom walls has remained with me. As long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by candles and by their human-like quality. In my early teens, I was taught to meditate in front of a burning candle and to associate my meditation with the biblical phrase, "A candle of God is the soul of man."

"What are some ways that human beings resemble candles?" This question was assigned to me by the old rabbi who was my first spiritual guide. In my early adolescence I was part of a group of six or seven peers who met with this rabbi once a month in a dark and, you guessed it, candlelit room.

It was our task to gaze at a burning candle and imagine the affinities between candles and men. At the end of the month, we were to report on our findings.

I never returned at the end of that month. Without that closure, it is no wonder that I still reflect, fifty years later, on the resemblances between people and candles.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat

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Beha'alotecha, speaks of the candles that Aaron lit in the ancient Tabernacle. The Bible speaks not of the "lighting of" the candles, but of the "raising up" of the candles. The commentaries eagerly point out that it is not sufficient to kindle the candle; one must see to it that the flame will continue to burn on its own.

There are things that we can do which will benefit not only a single particular other but an entire group

The candle thus becomes a metaphor for the process of teaching: parent to child, or master to disciple. It is never sufficient to merely touch the child with the flame of knowledge. Rather, one must "raise up" the flame so that it will grow and will nurture the student for a long time. The task of the teacher is to ensure that the flame will continue to burn on its own, that knowledge will be a lifetime process.

There is another traditional Jewish saying which inspires me: "A little bit of light can dispel much darkness." The little candle teaches us how much good a single person, or even a single act, can accomplish. It is not necessary for one to try to ignite powerful floodlights. If all that one can do is light a match, that paltry act can achieve unforeseen illumination.

Finally, there is a Talmudic dictum, "A candle for one is a candle for a hundred." There are certain things in life, an item of food for example, which can only meet the needs of one person. There are other things, certain

tools for example, which can only meet the needs of one person at a time. But one candle can benefit the single individual who needs illumination, and it can shed equal illumination for many others in the room.

A candle for one is a candle for a hundred.

And so it is in the human realm. There are things that we can do which will benefit not only a single particular other but an entire group, an entire community, an entire world. If we teach, for example, lessons that are useful practically and that are spiritually uplifting, those lessons are not limited to who hears them. Rather, they can benefit many unseen others. Intellectual accomplishments and religious achievements are candles not just for one, but for hundreds.

I have listed but three of the infinite number of ways in which the soul of man is the candle of God. Candle lighting symbolizes the teaching process; the single act can have massive consequences; and we can affect a much wider circle than we think.

The opening verses in this week's Torah portion render the candle image so central to the Tabernacle and Temple service, because the Torah wishes us to think about the candle, to meditate on it, and to discover for ourselves the manifold analogies which lie embedded in the candle image.

"Behold the candle," the Torah exclaims. It is one of the oldest, and certainly one of the simplest, human tools. But it can be a metaphor for the power and the potential of the human soul, which is no less than the candle of God. ■

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