

עדת אש קודש – מנצסטר

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בס"ד

The antidote to default Yiddishkeit

The secret of life is living it. We are gifted with so much, yet more often than not we seem to just be drifting. Things go on and we just allow circumstances to snuff out our own abilities to think; we become suffocated by indifference and silently lose the spark that is our very being.

Chanukah addresses those in the doldrums; it awakens the dormant spirit that lays within us all, and helps us to realize that in the darkest times we can, indeed we must, create light.

As a writer, I don't like using abbreviations; they don't allow room for variations and tend to limit what they describe. The usage of BT for Baal Teshuvah or FFB in describing Frum From Birth seem to dehumanize those we are depicting. They are just a lazy way to have a conversation. However, one such abbreviation I heard recently carries a certain punch to it: FBD. It means Frum By Default. Now that hurts; it penetrates your very kishkes. Anyone working within our community will know what is being described here; it addresses the malaise many feel, the dullness of their Torah practice as they shuffle through the everyday of their lives. They live as frum Yidden but without that unique fire that defines us. They seem to be part of the Torah community yet don't seem to be ignited by its values. They come to shul, may well daven a bit, and yes, partake in the kiddush, but to many, it's just what they do, not what they feel.

In the times of the miracle of Chanukah matters were much the same. Yidden were in a particularly difficult golus, and had begun to just float along the mainstream of what was the practice of the host culture. No one made much of a fuss; you just went along with things. All but a few that is. There was a nucleus of *firedika* Yidden that refused to give in. They did make a fuss, they did shout and kick. It took great audacity to speak out, to ruffle the feathers of those seeking the quiet life, yet there was no stopping this small group, for the Torah and the Jewish nation were eternal.

We the of the heimishe world are sometimes closeted in a bubble that is Chareidisher Yiddishkeit circa 2014. It would be wise to remember that the vast majority of Jews living in our generation have never tasted a Torah life and find themselves quite comfortable in the ways of their host country. Even in Eretz Hakodesh we are witnessing how difficult it can be trying to create a Torah atmosphere whilst the majority are antagonistic to such a lifestyle.

We are several generations after the Churban and are beginning to detect signs of spiritual stagnation within our tightly knit circle. This is the default position many live in, and woe betide the children brought up in this manner. We must live the Chanukah miracles in our homes and families. Complacency is the enemy of our future, and lighting the candles of Chanukah should signify more than an excuse for a party.

Chassidic stories are often retold; this is because with each new hearing more light is shed. Let me share just one such popular, yet moving tale.

In Bergen Belsen on the eve of Chanukah, a selection took place. Early in the morning three German commandants, dressed in their perfect black uniforms with the skull and crossbones insignia, entered the men's barracks. They ordered the men to stand at the foot of the three-tiered bunk beds. The selection began, and with indiscriminate nonchalance they walked past, and waving a finger, decided who would be subject to the sentence of death. With the shrilling word "*komme*," the men selected were marched outside; awaiting them was a group of S.S. men. They then were methodically beaten with iron poles and truncheons until they were dead. This random mayhem took place all that black day until sunset. When the Nazi devils finally departed, they left behind hundreds of tortured and twisted bodies.

It was then that Chanukah began in Bergen Belsen. The time had arrived to kindle the Chanukah lights. Instead of a silver menorah, they made do with a wooden clog, strings pulled from a camp uniform for a wick, and for the precious oil, well, for that they found some liquid shoe polish.

Not far from the heaps of freshly killed *neshomas*, the living skeletons gathered, seeking to observe the mitzvah of light in the darkest pit on earth.

The Bluzhever Rebbe ztl lit the first light and chanted the first two blessings with a sweet yet sad tune. He then looked around, as if seeking something. Quickly he turned his attention back to the light and recited the third blessing, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season."

Amongst the people present was a Mr. Zamietchkowski, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Bund. He was a clever and sincere fellow who had a passion for discussing issues of truth even in the hell he was living in. As soon as the Rebbe finished the lighting ceremony, Zamietchkowski elbowed his way to him and said, "Spira, you are a clever and honest man. I can understand your need to kindle the lights with the blessing even in this death house. I can even understand the historical note of the second blessing, but the fact that you uttered the third blessing is beyond all understanding. How could you thank G-d for letting us live to this time, when outside your window there are hundreds of dead martyrs? Even those alive are just seconds away from death, and to this you bestow a blessing "who enabled us to reach this season?"

“Reb Yid, you are one hundred percent correct,” sighed the Rebbe. “When I reached that third blessing I also hesitated and asked myself *what should I do with this blessing?* I turned my head, hoping to catch the eye of the Rav of Zaner or one of the other worthy Rabbis, wishing to ask them this question. But just as I was turning my head I noticed that behind me a throng was standing, a large crowd of living Yidden, with eyes expressing faith despite the odds. They were there to see the Chanukah lights with deep devotion. I said to myself, *“If Hashem has such a nation that at times like these, when standing before the Chanukah lights, they see in front of them the heaps of bodies of their beloved fathers, brothers, and friends, and death is lurking in every corner of their lives; if despite all that they stand in such numbers to witness the Chanukah ceremony, then I have been blessed to see such startling devotion and this is deserving of a blessing.”*”

Some years later, the Bluzhever Rebbe received regards from Mr. Zamietchkowski. He had asked the son of the Skabiner Rav to tell the Bluzhever Rebbe that the answer he gave him that dark night in Bergen Belsen had stayed with him ever since and was a constant source of inspiration during hard and troubled times.

Sometimes darkness creeps up on us, and we suddenly find ourselves engulfed by it. We have been spared the hell of the camps. However, many find themselves engulfed in depression and anxiety. We never feel it happening, yet all the while our hearts seem to grow dimmer. When the bleakness seems at its worst we flounder, wondering how there will ever be light once again.

Ours is a generation crying out for light. Let us ignite and illuminate our hearts with fresh vigour.