

A couple of weeks ago, something happened in the Middle East which I, and I am sure many of you, found utterly absorbing. On a road east of Tehran, just before Shabbos, the scientist who served as the head of the Iranian nuclear program was killed -- somehow. The variety of official Iranian explanations as to how it was done, which ranged from a robot using artificial intelligence to a hit squad of a dozen agents, just underscore both the secrecy and careful and dedicated planning in which this operation was carried out. Nobody will claim responsibility for it, though everyone assumes they know who carried it out.

Why am I always fascinated by secret operations and the intrigue of espionage? I suppose that I, like many people, enjoy the drama and cloak-and-dagger mystery of a good spy story. But what really fascinates me is something else: the quality of *mesirus nefesh*. I can only imagine what it must take to be a spy in Tehran, to live a life where everything that you hold dear -- your family relationships, your sense of identity, your every personal choice, your life itself -- is set aside in service of the overarching goal of serving your country. You live in a place where nobody knows who you really are. You make unending sacrifices for the sake of your country while you hardly ever get to see that country. And when you do something incredible -- perhaps even the day you save many people's lives while risking your own in an operation that has been years in the making -- there isn't anyone you can tell about it. Who knows how many people there are in this country and in Eretz Yisrael to whom we owe our gratitude for our own safety, for their sacrifices that we know nothing about?

It is this quality of *mesirus nefesh* -- selfless dedication to what is right for the sake of Hashem -- that lies at the heart of our spiritual experience of Chanukah. The Chashmonaim who undertook to throw out the Greeks and overturn their decrees had no reasonable expectation of succeeding in the natural way of historical cause and effect. They rallied around what was initially an unpopular cause even among the Jewish people. The military odds of victory were slim, and some of Matisyahu's own sons did not survive to the end of the war. But it was what needed to be done. And without thinking about their own safety, their own popularity or even the utter strategic impossibility of the goal they had set for themselves, they took the only spiritual path forward.

Greek culture gave us the concept of the hero. The heroes of Greece were the greatest warriors, the most superior athletes, the most physically beautiful people -- those who could demonstrate how they rose above everyone else were covered in glory. To the glory that was Greece, said Edgar Allen Poe, because glory was at the heart of Greek aspiration. But the opposite of seeking glory is *mesirus nefesh*. It is the attitude that seeks not to glorify the person who acts but the cause that needs to be achieved. *Mesirus nefesh* is the attitude that allows us to start working towards the goal even when we have no idea yet how we are going to get there. *Mesirus nefesh* is what frees us from the shackles of looking around us and grants us the liberty of focusing on what is in front of us. And *mesirus nefesh* is what allows a jug of oil, which should only have lit for one day, to stay lit until we are able to arrange for a natural solution. We had no plan other than to give it everything we had and allow Hashem to do the rest. And those little lights of the menorah, in a part of the Beis Hamikdash that hardly anyone could visit, spoke to the world of our *mesirus nefesh*, of our commitment to stand and act for the sake of Heaven and never for the sake of our own glory.

I don't have to tell you that the values of the glory of Greece are alive and well. In a society where nothing seems to count unless everyone can see it, we know that the lights of the menorah -- the lights whose mitzvah requires us to publicize them, to engage in the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa* -- tell us that what really covers us in glory is what we do with *mesirus nefesh*, what we throw ourselves into because it is what Hashem wants. That is what makes it possible for miracles to

happen. When we care only about finding our way towards the goal, Hashem suspends even the laws of nature to help us get there. Our own tests of *mesirus nefesh* are much different than they were a few generations ago, but they are no less crucial. And through the shining light of our precious dedication, we pray that Hashem will show us His miracles as He did in those days.