

Of Jews and Olives

Introduction

The parasha for this week, *Tetzaveh*, begins with instructions for the kindling of the menorah in the Tabernacle:

וְאַתָּה תְצַוֶּנָּה | אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת לַיהוָה כִּתִּיתָ לְמִאֲוָר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד:
You shall further command the Israelites to bring to you pure oil from crushed olives for lighting, for kindling lamps continually. [Ex. 27:20]

Only olive oil must be used, not any other kind. Why?

Israel is like an olive tree

The prophet Jeremiah compares Israel to an olive tree:

The Lord has called you a leafy olive tree, beautiful, with choice fruit. [Jer. 11:16]

King David writes in the same vein in *Psalms*:

-But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever. [Ps. 52:8]

-When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. [Ps. 128:1-4]

Reasons

The Talmud, Midrash and other sources find many reasons for this analogy:

1-Olives must be squeezed hard to yield their oil. Likewise, the Jews must be beaten, oppressed and persecuted before they repent and release their

full potential of strength and wisdom for the benefit of the world. [Menachot 53b; Ex. R. 36:1]

2-An olive is first bitter, then tasty. Likewise, the Jews suffer now, but will enjoy great good in the World to Come. [Midrash Pitron Torah to Num. 13:2]

3-Oil does not mix with other liquids. Likewise, the Jews are unique and separate from all other nations. [Ex. R. 36:1]

In the Torah, the prophet Balaam says:

[Israel] is a nation that will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations. [Num. 23:8-10]

4-Oil is always on top of other liquids. Likewise, the Jews are the chosen people and will always be morally guiding the world if they follow the Torah: [Ex. R. 36:1]

Now, if you obey the Lord your God and observe faithfully all of His commandments... [He] will set you high above all the nations of the earth. [Deut. 28:1]

5-Oil provides light. So do the Jews, giving the light of Torah to the world. [Ex. R. 36:1] The prophet Isaiah says:

-And nations shall walk by your light. [Is. 60:3]

-I [God] will give you as ... a light to the nations. [Is. 42:6]

6-Oil spreads on anything it is poured on. So do the Jews: They spread all over the world (of necessity), and are always curious and eager to acquire new knowledge.

7-The leaves of the olive tree do not fall off. Likewise, the Jews will not be cast off, neither in this world nor in the World to Come. [Menachot 53b]

-Also, Jews remain Jews when times are hard.

8-The olive branch is a symbol of peace. Likewise, the Jews are not warlike. Torah says that when you must wage war, you must first propose a peaceful settlement to the enemy. [Deut. 20:10]

9-The olive tree is a survivor. Even in difficult terrain, it can last as much as 1,500 years. On average, it lasts 500 years. Likewise, the Jews have survived much and are here to stay.

Questions

How can Jews spread the light if they do not mix with non-Jews?

The Maharal of Prague, 16th century scholar: [Netzach Yisrael, Ch. 25]

Non-Jews are like water:

Release me and rescue me from great waters, from the hand of strangers. [Ps. 144:7]

whereas Jews are like fire:

God came from Sinai ... and presented the fiery Torah to them with his right hand. [Deut. 33:2]

When fire and water mix, the water extinguishes the fire -- unless there is a barrier between them. Only with that barrier can the fire heat up the water and bring it to a boil.

So, too, with the Jews and the nations. Our mission is to heat up and ignite the world with a passion for God and His moral laws. We can only do this if we remain separate from our neighbors. If we remove the barrier, our fire will be extinguished by the waters of assimilation and we will fail in our mission to be a light unto the nations.

Does antisemitism preserve Judaism?

Like olives, which must be squeezed hard to yield their oil, Jews must be oppressed before they yield their wisdom. [Ex. R. 36:1]

-Is it the pressure of persecution that motivates Jews to excel – to “show” the world?

-Note: Jews do not welcome suffering. Talmud:

Rabbi Yoḥanan fell ill. Rabbi Ḥanina entered to visit him, and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him: [I welcome] neither [this suffering] nor its reward. [Ber. 5b]

-See my other d’var: *Does antisemitism preserve Judaism?*