

# Parsha Pearls

Yom Kippur 5768

חמש טבילות ועשרה קדושין טובל כהן גדול ומקדש בו ביום (מסכת יומא פ"ג מ"ג).

## **The kohein gadol performed five immersions and ten hand-washings on Yom Kippur. (Yuma Chapter 3, Mishnah 3)**

In 1922, the Munkaczer Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapiro, known as the Minchas Elazar, traveled to Gur, Poland to meet with the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter. The subject of their meeting was the Agudath Israel organization, which had recently spread to many Polish Chassidic communities, including the Gerrer community. The Minchas Elazar agreed with the importance of founding a unifying Orthodox organization, but objected to some of the Agudah's innovations, notably their policy of establishing farming colonies in Eretz Yisroel. "This," he said, "is an imitation of the Zionist pioneers, and it serves no purpose for religious Jewry, physical or spiritual. Instead we must support the Old Yishuv through the charity of Rabbi Meir Baal Haness, as established by our fathers and teachers." He respectfully told the Gerrer Rebbe that although he might not be aware of everything done by the Agudah, the Agudah activists were using his name and prestige to promote their activities. He proposed to modify the platform of the organization, and then he and other Czechoslovakian and Hungarian rabbis would lead their communities in joining it.

The Gerrer Rebbe replied, "True, this is how it should be. But what will people say? You and I both have enemies, and

they will say, 'They met together and suddenly spoiled all the arrangements for the organization that, until now, would encompass the whole world.' Besides, I have no power to do this, according to the Agudah by-laws. How will we do it?"

"You will choose ten rabbis, and I will choose nine rabbis, making a total of 21," said the Minchas Elazar. "You will be the head, and we will meet together in Warsaw no later than the first of Tammuz of this year, to discuss this plan and put it into practice."

The Gerrer Rebbe agreed to the plan. Before leaving, the Minchas Elazar added one final word of caution. "Please do not let any of those close to you who are strong Agudists change this decision that we have reached together."

"Why do you suspect that any of my household or close followers would be against this?" said the Gerrer Rebbe. "We have no personal interest. I am only the honorary president, and our sole objective is to work for the benefit of the public."

"Even the greatest of men can have personal interests," said the Minchas Elazar. "The Gemora in Sanhedrin 18b says that the kohein gadol may not

participate in the conference of rabbis who decide whether to add an extra month to the year, lest he be affected in his decision by personal interest. He knows that on Yom Kippur he will have to immerse himself five times in a mikveh, and if an extra month is added to the year, Yom Kippur will be later and the water will be colder and more uncomfortable for him. The question is: what kind of personal interest is this? The adding of the month takes place in Adar, seven months before Yom Kippur. The water was not so cold in any case, since they would place pieces of heated iron into the mikveh to warm it up (Yuma 34b). This extra month might mean that the water was a tiny bit, perhaps 2 degrees, less warm. And there are times when the weather is warmer in Cheshvan than in Tishrei, especially in Eretz Yisroel, where, as Chazal say, the end of summer is hotter than the summer. If you took a simple Jew today in the month of Adar and asked him if he would pay even one penny so that the mikveh on Erev Yom Kippur that coming year would be 2 degrees warmer, he would laugh at you. All the more so that the great kohein gadol, who entered the Holy of Holies, should be above such concerns. So why is he unfit to participate in the conference?

"The answer is that Chazal kept to the rules of disqualifying a judge because of personal interest even in the most extreme cases, so that in case some great man in future times is affected by personal interests – through his family members or disciples – no one will think badly of him. A man cannot be a witness for his own relative, no matter how righteous he is - even Moshe and Aharon (Bava Basra 159a).

"Nevertheless, we are relying on the Rebbe and his followers to make sure this gathering of 21 rabbis takes place by the appointed time." (Tikun Olam, Chapters 18 and 20)

In the end, Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, a close follower and associate of the Gerrer Rebbe, set forth the Minchas Elazar's proposal at a meeting of the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah. The Moetzes was prepared to meet with the Hungarian gedolim, but only on condition that they be elected democratically by a congress of Hungarian rabbis, just as the Moetzes of Poland was an elected body. This requirement was an almost insurmountable obstacle, in view of the difficulties of convening a rabbinic congress from the many different countries and regions that were formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: the Carpathians, Russian, Czech, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Galicia. This was an abrupt change from the original agreement between the Minchas Elazar and the Gerrer Rebbe, that each would select a number of rabbis on his own (ibid. Chapter 23).

And so the proposed meeting between Polish and Hungarian rabbis never took place. "In retrospect," wrote Rabbi Moshe Goldstein, a Munkaczer Chassid, "perhaps this was the best thing, and so it was arranged by Divine Providence, so that later when more serious problems with the Agudah became well known, and their leaders had already been entrusted with the fate of the Jewish people, there would be at least one portion of the Jewish people that escaped untainted by this breach" (ibid. Chapter 25). Goldstein wrote these words in 1936. What would he have said, had he seen how the Agudah activists in 1947-

49 led their followers into full-fledged participation in the Zionist enterprise, without the benefit of any ruling even from their own rabbinical council?

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk was invited by the German architects of Agudath Israel to their founding conferences in 1909 and 1912, but afterwards he withdrew his support from it. Family members relate that Rabbi Chaim gave the following analogy to explain his opposition to the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah: In the old times, everyone had a candle in his house to give light. It was a small candle, but a candle nonetheless. And even if someone did not have a candle in his house, there was always a candle in his neighborhood that he could use. But then they built an electric power station to

supply light to the entire city at once. Once the electricity was running, nobody kept candles in his house anymore, and if, G-d forbid, the power station stopped working, the entire city would be in the dark, with no source of light.

Rabbi Chaim in his wisdom foresaw that a worldwide Orthodox organization could be a good thing, but could also be a very bad thing. As long as every rabbi is independent, even if some rabbis err, there will always be some still on the right path. But when all rabbis subscribe to a single organization, if something goes wrong with that organization, all of its members go down with it. With eerie accuracy, Rabbi Chaim's analogy foreshadowed events that took place many years after his passing.