

## WHAT KIND OF CANDLE DO YOU BURN?

My occasional function as Technical Advisor on motion pictures brings me some interesting -- sometimes amusing -- experiences. Once I was on the set of a film where the scene of a Jewish funeral was being shot. After the outdoor graveyard scene was finished we moved onto the sound stage, to a living room set which was the "house of mourning." I checked the set, and called the prop man's attention to something on an end table.

"What's this doing here?" I asked.

"They told me there's supposed to be a candle burning in the house of mourning." He said.

"That's right," I said, "but not a Hanukkah candle!"

*Ner Hashem nishmas odom*, we learn. "The human spirit is G-d's candle." Certainly, if you're going to burn a candle in memory of a loved one, and all you have is a Hanukkah candle, isn't it better to light that than not to light any at all? After all, the thought behind the action is what counts. *Makhshovoh tovoh khashuvoh l'maaseh* -- in Talmudic language, "a good thought is considered like a deed."

Of course, none of this kind of reasoning could apply to the filmed scene I described. For dramatic purposes, the right props are essential. But to fulfill the needs of life and love and spirit, do we make too much of externals? When we reenact rituals, are we expressing religious emotions and carrying out moral obligations? Or are we putting on a show for ourselves and our families?

My answer is yes to both questions. Ritual and theater are related, and both elements take part in our religious heritage. A professor of Theater I knew greeted each new class with two assignments: (1) attend a Catholic mass, and (2) attend a burlesque show. "All theater", he said, "lies in between."

Religious pageantry stirs the emotions that our rituals are intended to express. A mumbled prayer in the bedroom can qualify as carrying out the duty of daily *davenen*. But joining with a worshipping congregation is better. *B'rov om hadras melekh* -- "in the multitude of people is the glory of the King," says our tradition.

Similarly, the familiar argument that "G-d will accept me in jeans" is one I cannot refute. But when we honor the Sabbath with special clothing and with white tablecloths we have a different attitude.

During most election campaigns, presidential candidates always wore suits and ties. Lately, while they still wear suits or sport coats they tend to skip the ties – and I am certainly no fan of neckties – but does that indicate a different attitude toward the office they seek? The audience, whether for a rally or a debate, arrives in everything from overalls to shorts and teeshirts. Does this show a lack of respect? Maybe so. But consider this: for the last few decades presidential candidates have been cultivating lack of respect. Starting with James Earl Carter who insisted on being called Jimmy. Anyone out there remember voting for Frankie Roosevelt? Or seeing a ballot bear the name of Dick Nixon? Many people "liked Ike" but they voted for Dwight David Eisenhower. I don't know about you, but I felt I would dress differently to go and meet President William J. Clinton and Senator Robert K. Dole than I would to meet Bill and Bob. Bill and Bob sound like the guys who fixed my car last week. And it still doesn't run. . .

The right clothes, the right props, the right presentation -- these factors affect our political life, and they affect our religious life too. Formality can be overdone in religious life, but so can informality. Discarding the external trappings of our holiday celebrations carries a built-in risk: that we may throw out the baby with the bathwater.

A girl can get married in jodhpurs, as one bride in my experience did. But a wedding gown carries a message.

The Torah scroll contains the same words as the printed translation. But it has a special degree of sanctity. Bringing that scroll into an Ark can turn a building into a house of worship. Writing its words must involve a pious and dedicated scribe, who must ritually clean himself regularly before writing the Divine Name. He must use special objects in his work. And the finished scroll must be handled only by those qualified, and with great respect.

I remember once I had to borrow a Torah scroll from the Jewish community of Athens to use on a cruise ship. Although they received a \$10,000 deposit from the cruise operator, the Athens elders made sure I agreed that their Torah would be

handled only by Jewish people, and that I would be personally responsible for it. Then they wrapped it carefully, and I'm sure they said special prayers for it until the day I brought it back.

Reading from the Torah must be done to absolute standards. If the reader makes a mistake, others in the congregation have a duty to correct him.

Why all this?

Isn't the printed text more accurate than the handwritten scroll? Doesn't the public reading of the Torah serve primarily as public instruction? Wouldn't we do better to read and discuss the section in a seminar?

The answers are yes, yes, and yes. But there is another dimension to Torah study. The dimension of respect. By the way we handle the Torah, by the privilege we give to everyone who has an "ascent" – *aliyah*, the privilege of blessing the Torah -- during its reading, by the central position it occupies in the synagogue and the central time slot we give it in the service, we show that respect. Because of that respect, when we learn and discuss Torah we know we are doing something important.

Just the same way, when we have a wedding we want to dramatize the bride's beauty. And when we light a Yortzite light we want to know we are burning the right candle.

They may be window dressing, but externals make a difference. What clothes help you celebrate? What rituals show your respect for your heritage? What candle will you light?