

A chassidic Inauguration

Category: Bo, Shemos

Seventy years ago an inauguration took place, one that had a long lasting effect on World Jewry.

Running From Office

This Wednesday was the inauguration of the new president of the United States. Interestingly, it fell quite close to today's Hebrew date, Yud Shevat, which marks seventy years from the Rebbe's "inauguration"—the day he assumed leadership in 1951.

The Rebbe's "inaugural" ceremony was very different than Wednesday. Unlike a typical presidential inauguration, there were no singers or performers. In fact, the events leading up to the inauguration was entirely different.

You see, politicians run for office. More accurately, they run *after* the office. True Jewish leaders, on the other hand, run *away* from office.

Not long ago, we read about the appointment of Moses. When G-d revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush and asked him to lead the Jews out of Egypt, Moses used every excuse in the book to be absolved of the mission. First he said that Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him, then he said that the Jews wouldn't listen to him, then he complained that he was a stutterer, and when he was out of ideas, he said, "Please, just send someone else." Rashi says that he argued with G-d for a full week, trying to get out of the appointment.

We find a similar story with Jeremiah. G-d appeared to him and said that he had been chosen for prophecy even before he was born, but Jeremiah desisted—"I don't know anything, I'm still young..." He didn't want the job. G-d, however, insisted that he was ready for it; "Don't say you are too young, for I am with you."

Who Will Be The Rebbe?

When the Rebbe assumed leadership, a similar story took place. After the passing of the previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, the Chassidim turned to the Rebbe

and asked him to fill his father-in-law's position. However, the Rebbe adamantly refused. If you refuse the position, the Chassidim asked him, who will fill it? The Rebbe responded that he does not know. "There are other things that I don't know as well. The [previous] Rebbe will take care of it."

But the Chassidim were smarter than that. Instead of asking him to become Rebbe, they simply began directing their questions to him, just as they had brought questions to the previous Rebbe. They turned to him for blessings, medical advice, business advice—and, of course, spiritual advice—and the Rebbe didn't turn them away. They basically established the facts on the ground—that the Rebbe had assumed leadership of the Chabad movement.

Still, the appointment was not official.

Two weeks before the previous Rebbe's first Yahrzeit, three prominent Chabad Chassidim visited the offices of the Yiddish newspapers in New York. In those days, New York was home to hundreds of thousands of Yiddish speaking Jews, and Yiddish daily newspapers were extremely prominent (one of them was the *Forward*). These three Chassidim shared with the editors that Chabad Chassidim had decided to appoint the Rebbe as his father-in-law's successor, and that the official "inauguration" would take place at the Yahrzeit gathering on Yud Shevat. The next day it was all over the news.

When the Rebbe heard about it, he immediately instructed his secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, to call those newspapers and issue a denial. Rabbi Hodakov didn't want to issue the denial, but he couldn't refuse the Rebbe either. Instead, he told the three Chassidim that he would hold back his telephone call until they decided on a plan of action.

They immediately ran to 770 and entered the Rebbe's office. One of them, Rabbi Kazarnovsky, cried to the Rebbe, "What are you doing to us? After all, we need a Rebbe..."

Another, Rabbi Shmuel Levitin (known for his wit and wisdom), argued to the Rebbe that the newspapers had never claimed that that the Rebbe would accept the appointment. They had only reported that the Chassidim had chosen the Rebbe as their leader, and that was undeniable—it was the truth!

The Statement

In the end, the Rebbe agreed to withhold the denial.

On the day of Yud Shevat exactly seventy years ago, the Rebbe held a Chassidic gathering that served as an ‘inauguration.’

During his address, the Rebbe cited the Talmud’s statement, “When you come to a place, follow its custom.” This teaching is learned from the stories of Abraham and Moses. When the angels visited Abraham to tell him that his wife would bear a son, they ate and drank, even though angels don’t need physical sustenance. And when Moses was on Mt. Sinai, he didn’t eat or drink for forty days because he was in the company of angels. From these stories, the Talmud teaches that one should always honor the local custom. (Bava Metziah 86b).

The Rebbe said that in America, everyone likes to hear a statement, so he would deliver a statement as well.

There are three loves, the Rebbe said. The love of G-d, love of Torah, and love of the Jewish people. These three loves, the Rebbe continued, are all one and cannot be divided. If you love G-d but do not love His people, it’s a sign that your love of G-d is lacking. However, if you love the Jewish people, you will ultimately come to love G-d and His Torah as well. The Rebbe cited the Alter Rebbe, who said that Ahavat Yisrael is a conduit that brings you to love G-d too.

A Living Example

During the gathering, the Rebbe delivered a Maamar, a discourse of Chassidic teachings, for the first time. This, more than anything else, is considered a symbol of leadership in Chabad. A Maamar is a profound teaching of Chassidic thought. It is delivered in a very specific style and is considered a sacred moment—something only a Rebbe does.

In the Maamar, he included teachings from all his predecessors, the previous Chabad Rebbes, and he explained that they were living examples of everything they preached. When they preached Ahavat Yisrael, they lived with it as well—and the Rebbe proceeded to bring examples from each Rebbe’s life.

Let me share the first story, about the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad.

One year, in middle of Yom Kippur, the Alter Rebbe took off his Tallis and left the Shul. Chassidim were surprised—where did the Rebbe disappear to? They soon found him at the edge of the village, in the home of a woman who had just given birth. The entire family had left to attend prayers, leaving her cold, hungry and alone. The Alter Rebbe had personally chopped wood, lit a fire, and cooked a soup to feed the woman.

The Chassidim asked him, “Why didn’t you send one of us? We would have happily done so!”

“*Mitzvah begadol*, it is a mitzva for the greatest person to set the example,” the Alter Rebbe responded. (Toras Menachem 5744 vol. 2 pg. 627).

According to Jewish law, we are permitted to violate Shabbat to save a life. If a person needs to go to the hospital, it is permitted to drive him there. The Halacha adds that if a Rabbi rules that Shabbat should be violated, he should be the one to carry out the violation, because if he sends someone else, people might think that violating Shabbat isn’t so ‘kosher’ and hold back from helping the individual in need. Therefore, he should set a personal example and do the violation himself. So the Alter Rebbe had personally gone to care for the ailing woman at the edge of the village.

Just One Mitzvah

The Rebbe concluded the farbrengen by saying that nobody should fool themselves into believing that they had found someone to do the hard work for them while they retire. “Nobody will do the hard work for you,” the Rebbe said. “I will be glad to help as much as possible, but each person has a mission he must personally carry out.”

At this farbrengen, the Rebbe set the tone for the entire generation: the theme would be Ahavat Yisrael, caring for other Jews.

This brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

G-d commands the Israelites to take a sheep and bring a Passover offering. However, only circumcised people were permitted to partake of it, so all the

Israelites had to go get circumcised as well.

Why did G-d command them to do particularly these mitzvot before leaving Egypt?

Rashi cites Rabbi Matya ben Cheresh in the Talmud, who explains that the Israelites had lost any vestige of Jewish observance. When the time came for G-d to fulfill his promise to Abraham and redeem them, He said that they were “naked,” they had no redeeming qualities. There was almost no difference between them and the pagan Egyptians. Therefore, He gave them two mitzvot to allow them to gain merits.

Throughout the Rebbe’s leadership, he followed a similar model: the model of “One mitzvah.” If you can get a Jew to put on Tefillin or light Shabbat candles, even if only a single time, it will create a connection between him and G-d—which can then grow to much greater heights. And that foundation was laid seventy years ago, on Yud Shevat 1951: That through Ahavat Yisrael, we will bring the redemption.