



The Jewish Melting Pot

The vision of the Menorah – One Piece of Gold.

Russian-French Clash in Israel

The entire world has been watching in horror as Cherson sinks under immense floods. Neighborhood after neighborhood has been simply disappearing. It's not just 'another city.' The Jewish community of Cherson has, in fact, a very storied history.

I have a personal connection to the city as well. During my most recent trip to Israel, I asked the heavily-accented taxi driver if he was from Russia, and he immediately corrected me, "Ukraine." From which city, I asked, and he responded, "Cherson."

He told me that he made Aliyah twenty-five years ago, so I asked him if he knew Chabad in Cherson. My own sister and brother-in-law, Rabbi Avraham and Chaya Wolf—today the Shluchim in Odessa—began their Shlichus in Cherson thirty years ago, and then brought his brother Rabbi Yossi to take them over when they moved to Odessa.

"Avraham and Yossi?" He exclaimed, "Of course I know them!" His grandfather had been the chazzan at the Chabad shul in Cherson, and would often bring his young grandson with him. This grandfather actually made Aliyah at the age of 98, and lived to be 102!

It was too good to be true, so I called my sister immediately. She indeed remembered the grandfather very well; she said that he had known all the prayers by heart and had been full of enthusiasm and a driving force in the shul.

The taxi driver told me that he already has grandchildren. I said to him, "Well, you used to go to the synagogue with your grandfather, and now you're the grandfather, so you have to take your grandchildren to the synagogue."

He replied that he has a synagogue right next to his house.

“Well, do you visit there sometimes?”

He started laughing.

At this point in the conversation, we were already old friends. I asked him where he lives, and he replied, “In Netanya.” That’s an upscale city, so I told him, “Well done,” but like every Jew, he must complain a bit. He said, “You’re right, but recently, many Jews who immigrated from France settled in Netanya as well...” It seems that the Russian and French cultures are a bit of a clash.

During the same trip, I met another Jewish person from Russia, who was also a taxi driver. I asked him the same question, where he lives, and you guessed it right: Netanya. He also mentioned that recently, immigrants from France have been settling there.

The Melting Pot

In the United States, there is a concept called “the melting pot,” where millions of immigrants have come from all corners of the world, and America has assimilated them and created the new American.

In the 1950s, David Ben-Gurion declared that Israel should be a melting pot. He argued that Jews arriving from all over the world had nothing in common. During those years, Jews came from Yemen, Morocco, and India, while also coming from Hungary, Poland and Russia. So he fashioned the Israeli school system, and later the Israeli army, to be the melting pot where the new Israeli, the Sabra, was created. A person who spoke Hebrew, was no longer a diaspora Jew, and knew how to defend himself.

He invested a great deal of effort in this idea, and they even tried forcefully to compel the younger generation to abandon their parents’ traditions and become the new Israelis. However, all historians agree that this attempt did not succeed. The Israeli melting pot did not work. The next generation did indeed speak Hebrew and serve in the army, but they continued the traditions of their parents, and to this day, one can still identify the differences between communities and ethnic groups.

Why did the melting pot succeed in the United States, but not in Israel?

The Menorah Repetition

The weekly Torah portion of Beha’alotcha begins with the commandment of kindling the Menorah. The Almighty instructs Moses

to speak to Aaron and tell him that when he lights the Menorah with its seven branches, he must do it in such a way that the six lamps will shine toward the central lamp. The wicks of the lamps should be positioned towards the central lamp.

The Torah recounts that Aaron followed the instructions, and then the Torah continues, “And this was the workmanship of the Menorah: hammered gold, from its base to its flowers, it was hammered work.” It was forbidden to take seven separate branches and join them to create one Menorah. Instead, it had to be crafted from a single piece of gold.

The Rebbe (Toras Menachem v. 60 p. 435) asks why the Torah repeats the instructions on how to make the Menorah here. After all, in Parshat Terumah, when G-d commanded Moses to construct the Tabernacle, the Torah already provided a detailed account, spanning ten verses, of how to make the Menorah. Again, in Parshat Vayakhel, when the Torah recounts the actual construction of the Tabernacle, it describes the Menorah in detail.

On the other hand, the Rebbe continues, if for some reason the Torah saw the need to repeat these instructions for a third time, why did it only emphasize one specific detail, namely, that the Menorah should be made from a single block of gold, while omitting the other instructions? Why does it only mention “a hammered work” without mentioning the requirement for the Menorah to have seven branches and be adorned with cups, knobs, and flowers?

The answer, says the Rebbe, can be found in this week’s Haftarah. The Haftarah is the vision of the prophet Zechariah, who describes, “And behold, I saw a golden Menorah... with its seven lamps.” What does the Menorah symbolize? The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:8) explains that the Menorah represents the people of Israel. When Zechariah saw a Menorah entirely made of gold, it was a message from G-d that every individual in the nation of Israel, without exception, is pure gold.

The Alter Rebbe (Likkutei Torah B’haalosecha 29c) explains that the seven branches of the Menorah symbolize seven different types of Jews: some connect to G-d through prayer, others love to study Torah, some engage in volunteering, while some contribute to charity. Each person has their own way of connecting to G-d and the Jewish people.

However, in truth, says the Rebbe, the seven types of Jews are not seven separate entities, but rather one essence—like the branches of the Menorah, which all derive from the same source.

Externally, Jews may appear different from one another, but in reality, we all share the same Jewish soul. Just as children inherit the same genes from their parents, the Jewish people inherit the same spiritual DNA. We all come from the same source, from “One Father” (Malachi 2:10).

The Difference

This is the difference between the American melting pot and Israel.

In the United States, people who had no connection with each other arrived. The early immigrants sought refuge from countries where they were not allowed to practice their faith, and they came here and established a land that cherished religious freedom for all individuals. The subsequent immigrants sought to migrate to the land of opportunity. These immigrants wanted to leave their past behind and start anew in the United States.

In Israel, it's an entirely different story. No one immigrated to Israel because it was the land of opportunity, especially not in the 1950s, nor in the 1970s, and not even afterwards. The Jews who came to the land of Israel weren't seeking a new identity; on the contrary, for thousands of years, they dreamt of Jerusalem. In every prayer, we yearn for the return to Zion. On every holiday and joyous occasion, we remember Jerusalem.

The Jew who arrived in Israel came to fulfill his true identity, which in many cases had to be concealed in exile. Finally, they arrived in the land where they could shed the disguise and present themselves by their Jewish name, no longer a “Max” but a “Mordechai.” These Jews didn't seek to become Israelis; they wanted to openly live what they had been doing in secret for generations.

I remember, for example, as a young yeshiva student on Chanukah, we visited an absorption center where dozens of families from different backgrounds lived. In one apartment, there was a Jewish family from Russia, in another, a family from India, and on the top floor, an American Jewish family. They all came from different cultures, spoke different languages, and struggled with Hebrew. But when we knocked on their doors and offered to light the Chanukkah candles, their eyes lit up. They opened their doors wide, invited us in, and were thrilled to light the Menorah. The same thing happened when we distributed matzah before Passover. It didn't matter who that Jew was, where they came from, or what language they spoke. Everyone was delighted to receive a Shmurah matzah from Chabad.

The Torah here emphasizes only the specific detail—that the menorah should be made of a single solid gold piece—to teach us that the Jewish people are not just a random collection of individuals. We are “one menorah,” we are all interconnected and bound together as one.