

The Last Girl

Category: Devarim, Nitzavim, Vayelech

A girl in the far-out Aleutian Islands, the Rebbe's call to increase in light, and the unique covenant in this week's Parsha.

Two Chabad Yeshiva students were once sent to the Aleutian Islands off Alaska to spread Judaism during the summer.

After a week of searching, they had not found a single Jew. Disheartened, they decided to make one last-ditch effort, so they visited a local elementary school. They went from classroom to classroom asking each teacher if there were any Jewish students present, and in one class after another, the answer was "no."

They entered the last classroom in the school and repeated their question.

"Are there any Jewish students here?"

The teacher immediately answered, "No."

But then to their surprise, one little girl in the back raised her hand and said to the teacher, "Mommy, so we aren't the only Jews in the world?"

The mother/teacher was caught off guard. She ushered the boys out of the class and quietly asked them to meet her during the break.

When they met, the mother admitted that being the only Jew on the island she didn't feel comfortable expressing her Judaism. They had a warm conversation, and before they left, the mother asked them to say something memorable to her daughter - something that would help her remember her Judaism in that G-d-forsaken place.

The students decided to tell her about the Mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles. They told her as follows:

"All over the world, Jewish women light Shabbos candles to usher in the holy day. The first ones to light are the Jewish women of Australia. Eight hours later, Shabbos reached Israel and the women there light as well. Seven hours later it reaches New York, and the New Yorkers welcome Shabbos. Finally, several hours

later, it reaches California and the West Coast.

“But you live in the last time zone. You,” they said to the little girl, “will be the last girl in the world to welcome Shabbos with her Shabbos candles. The entire world waits for you; Shabbos isn’t complete for anyone until you light your candles.”

The Rebbe’s Candle-Lighting Campaign

Until 1974, the custom to light Shabbos candles was observed mainly by married women. In most Jewish communities, young girls would watch their mothers partake in the mitzvah, and do no more than that.

Shortly before Rosh Hashanah 1974, the Rebbe held his yearly pre-Rosh Hashana address to women in 770, and he spoke about the “increasing darkness” that was becoming prevalent in the world. As a response to the darkness, the Rebbe called for additional light, and therefore suggested that young girls light Shabbos candles even from the young age of three. This had once been the custom in some rabbinic families, and the Rebbe suggested that it be reinstated and adopted by Jewish girls worldwide. He proposed that girls light one candle, and when they marry, begin to light two candles like their mothers. (This is in addition to their mother’s two candles.)

At the event, the Rebbe called for an immediate campaign to encourage as many women and girls as possible to light candles that very Rosh Hashanah. And since then, Chabad always seeks out ways to encourage women and girls to light Shabbos candles.

A year after the start of the campaign, during a Farbrengen on 6 Tishrei 5736, the Rebbe shared a story about a five-year-old girl who attended a non-religious school in Israel.

Her friend had told her about the custom to light Shabbos candles, and she came home begging her mother to allow her to do so as well. Her mother wasn’t enthusiastic about the idea, but the little girl was so insistent that the mother soon relented.

That Friday night, the little girl was ecstatic as she lit her little candle and

watched it carefully. As the weeks passed, her little candle began to make an impact on the family. They felt uncomfortable turning on the television; the mother felt that it was bizarre for her child to light a candle while she didn't, so she began to light as well, and slowly, the entire family became drastically closer to Judaism - all in the merit of one little girl and her candle.

A similar story happened in England, the Rebbe continued, but in the opposite direction. The mother was accustomed to lighting Shabbos candles when her husband returned from work, even late Friday night. One week, her young daughter heard about the campaign for girls to light Shabbos candles, and received her mother's permission to do so. When the winter months arrived, the girl came home from school and declared that the candles needed to be lit before dark. The girl lit on time while the mother waited for her husband, and he was greeted by a strange scene upon his arrival: one little candle was lit, while the two large ones were not. After a discussion, they decided that they would begin lighting Shabbos candles together - on time.

The One Certainty

In 1988, the Rebbe's wife passed away. In her memory, the organizers of the Shabbos Candles initiative decided to create a weekly advertisement in the New York Times Friday edition. A small section on the bottom of the front page stated, "Jewish women and girls light Shabbos candles eighteen minutes before sunset." It included the candle-lighting times for that week in New York City and a phone-line where you could punch in your zip code and get the time for your location in the United States.

The ad was a huge success. Appreciative comments poured in, and it brought many people to seek a greater connection to Judaism as a result.

In the year 2000, the New York Times published a mock-up of their front page in 2100, which contained all sorts of futuristic news. But surprisingly, on the bottom left corner, the little box remained. "Jewish women and girls light Shabbos candles..." (There was a futuristic element; instead of a phone number, it said, "touch here.")

The non-Jewish editor was asked why he inserted the time, and he gave an amazing response. "We don't know what will happen in one hundred years," he

said, “but one thing is certain. Jewish women will be lighting Shabbos candles.”

Progress in the Covenant

In the week preceding Rosh Hashanah, we always read Parshat Nitzavim, where Moshe makes a covenant with the Jewish people.

It’s not the first time we read of a covenant. Hashem made a covenant with Noach (Noach 9:9), where he commanded him and his descendants to fulfill the Seven Noahide Laws, to believe in G-d and act in a civilized manner.

The second covenant is the *Bris Bein Habesarim* with Abraham and his descendants (Lech Lecha 17:1).

And the third was at Mount Sinai, between G-d and the Jewish people.

When we evaluate the three covenants, we find an interesting development.

When G-d spoke to Noach, He didn’t request Noach’s agreement or approval. G-d simply told Noach what He expected of him, and didn’t await any response.

With Abraham, we see some progress. G-d requested that Abraham participate in the covenant by doing something, and doing something painful – by doing a circumcision.

But at Mount Sinai, when G-d made a covenant with the Jewish people, we find something original: G-d asked for their agreement. He gave them the Torah only after they declared “*Na’ase venishma*, we will do and we will listen”; after agreeing with their own free will.

At every covenant, G-d requested more input. Noach wasn’t asked for a response at all, Abraham was asked to circumcise himself, and the Jews at Mount Sinai had to promise to fulfill all the Mitzvot before they were given the Torah.

But in our Parsha we see something else entirely. This time, Moshe initiates a covenant between the Jewish people and G-d, “*Atem nitzavim*, you are standing here today...to pass into the covenant of G-d.”

Until here, it was always G-d initiating the covenants. But here, Moshe turns to the Jewish people and says, “Now you are entering the Land of Israel. You have

matured; you are big boys now. Now you need to take personal initiative and responsibility in your covenant with G-d. It is now up to you to carry the message forward.

We read this Parshah before Rosh Hashanah because "*Hayom, today,*" the day of that covenant, represents Rosh Hashanah. This is the time when we renew our covenant with G-d.

But this covenant is a covenant that *we* make with G-d. This Parshah tells us, "Don't wait for G-d to appear to you and give you a special invitation. The invitation already stands since Mount Sinai. Now the ball is in your court."

Therefore, Rosh Hashanah is an appropriate time to begin lighting Shabbos candles again. If there is a girl - or woman - who didn't know that she could participate in this beautiful Mitzvah, now is the time to encourage her to begin doing so. Because now is the time to renew our covenant with our Creator and receive His blessing for a happy and sweet new year.