

The Light of the Synagogue Shines on the Future of Judaism Parashat Beha'alotkha

By Rabbi Jason Miller

Some advertising campaigns become so ingrained in your mind. For instance, if I said the name "Tom Bodett," would you know which advertising campaign I was referring to? Tom Bodett is the recognizable icon for Motel 6 hotels who famously says in the commercials, "We'll leave the light on for you." I learned from the Internet that Tom Bodett, a radio voice who had no prior affiliation with Motel 6, actually ad libbed the tagline, "We'll Leave the Light on for You" in the very first session he recorded for the company. Fifteen years later, Bodett remains the spokesperson for Motel 6 and has relied upon those same words in commercial after commercial, whether on the radio or on TV. The campaign is one of the longest running advertising campaigns in history, and continues to win awards for its creativity and effectiveness in the hotel industry.

So, what is the effectiveness of this marketing campaign? Specifically, why is this catchphrase so successful? The answer I believe has to do with the operative word "light." Leaving a light on for someone is a sign that they are welcome to join you. You are letting them know that you will open up your house, or hotel, or synagogue and make them feel at home. They will feel invited, accepted, embraced and safe. It is a statement of inclusion.

In this morning's parsha, B'ha'alotcha, Adonai speaks to Moses telling him that he should command Aaron to light the Menorah in the Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting. The Kohanim, the priests, were responsible to make sure that this light would never be permanently extinguished. Of course, it is not the first occasion of an eternal flame in the Torah. We can look to the Burning Bush in which God first appeared to Moses. That light, the fire of the bush that would not be consumed, was an invitation. It was an invitation for Moses to lead the people to freedom.

But getting back to the menorah, the rabbis in the midrash ask what the point of the light of this menorah is in the first place. After all, Israel already has a light, amud ha-esh, the pillar of fire that God illuminates the camp with each night. So, what is the purpose for the light created from this menorah? The response of the rabbis is that it serves as balance. The pillar of fire is God's light that shines on us humans, and we in turn reciprocate by shining a light on God. The light is a statement of safety and love. God's fire illuminates the camp providing protection and a sense of security. Our light, the light of the menorah, shines upon God in appreciation for God's gifts bestowed upon us.

Judaism understands light in a very positive sense. Light is life. Light is learning. Light is Truth. The rabbinic sages emphasize the peaceful nature of light. Light is not a violent force and we are to take this notion seriously. As the prophet Zechariah explains in his vision upon seeing the menorah, "Not by might, and not by power, but only by the spirit of God." And we take this statement to understand our responsibility to the rest of the world. We Jews are to be an Or Lagoyim to the rest of the world. Therefore, the menorah was a constant reminder of our mission to be "a light unto the nations" – a paradigm of virtue and education, of peace and tolerance. While we no longer have the lit menorah because we no longer have the Temple, we are reminded of our responsibility to be "a light unto the nations," and to be welcoming to all by the ner tamid, the eternal light that hangs in front of the Torah in every synagogue.

But the menorah is still with us today as well. Almost twenty centuries after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the menorah became the seal of the State of Israel. It is also the icon of Agudath Israel. It is one of the first symbols that greets the guests of our synagogue. It is the same statement that the rabbis make in the midrash. God shines light on the people of Agudath Israel, and we in turn, acknowledge God's presence in our lives, in our families, and in our community by emphasizing the light of the menorah. The light of the menorah proclaims our willingness to be inclusive of all, and to be a guiding light for our followers and neighbors alike. The menorah has also served as a symbol of my sojourn here as Rabbinic Intern.

Agudath's light has shone on my rabbinate. The menorah in the Ohel Moed had to be tended to so that it would not be extinguished. The light of Agudath burns bright because of the dedication and constant nurturing of its leaders and congregants. What is so meaningful about that light is that I had the opportunity to help keep it lit over the past few years, and for that experience I am grateful.

The menorah that stood in the Ohel Moed was a seven branched lamp stand. So, in tribute to Rabbi Silverstein who modeled for me the benefits of enumeration, and in honoring the memory of the seven-branched menorah that once shed its light in the Temple, I offer the seven most important lessons I've gleaned while being Rabbinic Intern at Agudath Israel.

Candle 1 is for the lesson that each family has members who represent head, heart, or hand Jews. In Pirkei Avot, we learn that the world is sustained by Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chasadim. From Rabbi Silverstein, we learn that our community is sustained by the head Jew, the heart Jew, and the hand Jew. And we don't discriminate among them – they are all beneficial to our community and to our faith.

Candle 2 is for the lesson that Agudath was a Synaplex shul before it officially became a Synaplex shul. With or without a Synaplex grant, it is minhag ha-makom, the custom of this community, to make Shabbat a "family affair." Coming to shul early on Shabbat morning and staying at shul well past three o'clock in the afternoon is standard operating procedure here. And that is a model for other congregations, regardless of denomination. At Agudath, kids want to come to shul. I've heard on more than one occasion of parents who tell their kids they cannot attend shul on Shabbat because they are sick, and the kids are extremely disappointed. This really says something.

In his column this week, the editor of the New Jersey Jewish News writes about the growing dichotomy between the extremely large, cold synagogues or churches and the small, heimish ones. Most synagogues today fall either into the cathedral-like mega-shul category or into the small, participatory alt-shul category. Agudath should take much pride in being in its own "just right" category. We are large enough to enjoy the resources of a mega-shul, yet small enough to be a warm, welcoming, participatory, and friendly kehillah. A wonderful model for the Jewish community.

Candle 3 is for the lesson that a lay leadership that feels ownership over the educational program of the synagogue will lead to success. The key to Agudath's achievement on Shabbat mornings, as I've learned, is the dedicated cadre of congregants who fuel their energy into the youth educational program. I've lost count of the times I've seen Susan Werk lead a group of amazed visitors on the requisite tour of our Shabbat morning offerings for youth. At the end of the tour, they are out of breath and eager to return to their communities to report on their findings here.

Candle 4 is for the lesson that every synagogue needs a caring committee. The amount of chesed that takes place in this community is beyond belief. Agudath's philosophy is that it takes a village. Not merely that it takes a village to raise a child, but that it takes a village to sustain a kehillah kedoshah, a holy congregation. From the devotion of our congregational nurses to the countless caring individuals who take the time to drive our seniors, provide comfort and meals to the mourners, and assist the downtrodden with nothing but good feelings in return, Agudath has much to be proud of. You truly are repairing God's world, letaken olam b'malkhut Shaddai.

Candle 5 is for the lesson that a congregation that is serious about its commitment to Israel must take action. The phrase that Hillel, the Jewish campus organization, uses regarding Israel, that "no matter where we stand, we stand with Israel," applies well to this congregation. We have congregants who reside on all points of the political spectrum, but as we have seen by the money raised for Israel and the number of visits by congregants in recent difficult years, Agudath Israel members unquestionably stand strongly with Israel.

Candle 6 is for the lesson that the "Ladder of Observance" must be taken seriously. The ladder is not just a metaphor; it is a way for human beings to visualize where they want to be in their religious and spiritual

lives. It encourages congregants to take leaps of faith and to discover new levels of comfort in Jewish ritual observance. Rabbi Silverstein, in preaching about the ladder and persuading higher ascension up that ladder, has helped so many congregants embrace the religious options available in an ideal Conservative Jewish lifestyle.

Candle 7 is for the lesson that raising the bar leads to excellence. Agudath Israel's mission to promote Jewish observance, outreach, and greater inclusivity never ends. We boast over 100 families who erect a sukkah each year following the mitzvah of the holiday, but we still encourage more families to follow suit for the next Sukkot. The number of Torah readers of all ages on Simchat Torah is impressive, but Cantor Caplan and others continue to train new layners for the future. In the past several years, many new families have begun to keep kosher homes, walk to shul, and attend daily minyan, but the bar must be continually raised in order to continue to be the congregation of excellence that we are. Similarly, the lesson I've learned is that a community must constantly evaluate its readiness or willingness to be inclusive. Shining our light, being welcoming, to the traditional/nuclear family is easy. But can we do a better job shining our light on non-traditional families? The Jews by Choice, the single parent households, the same-sex couples, the unmarrieds, and the intermarrieds. The bar must continue to be raised and excellence shall be achieved.

The lights that shine, the lessons learned. As you can see by this bright menorah of kindled lessons here at Agudath, there is much for a budding, young Rabbinical Student to learn in this community. And each one of you, the neshamot kedoshot, the holy souls, are responsible for that. Each of you helps nurture those flames. Each of you, in your own distinctive ways has contributed to my rabbinate – to the lessons I will take with me into my future role in the Jewish community. You help Agudath's flickering menorah burn brightly into the future, and that is a most valuable contribution to the Jewish people.

In addition to each of the congregants, the leaders and learners of this kehillah, it is important for me to thank those who came before me and who showed me the way. Therefore, I would like to first express my appreciation to Rabbi Mickey Safra, my predecessor who left big shoes for me to fill. I hope I did his legacy justice by continuing many of the superb programs he initiated.

It is no secret that Rabbi Silverstein's mentoring is second-to-none. During the first year of this internship, we would meet weekly. I would knock on his office door and hand him an agenda with one major theme listed. I would then sit back and listen for about an hour. Trust me, there is no comparable class at JTS on practical rabbinics, or in any other seminary for that matter.

Cantor Caplan is more than just a great cantor, he is a rabbi's cantor. His magic has touched so many aspects of this congregation and community-at-large. For me personally, he was a blessing because he had the patience to work with me on my nusach and trope skills. And for those who don't know, listening to me sing is about as much fun as getting a root canal. Without anesthesia.

Susan was more than a co-worker and colleague to me here. She also served as my mentor for a year, as I did my practicum in our religious school as part of my Masters Degree in Jewish Education. We had the opportunity to discuss her vision of Jewish education as well as many contemporary issues in the field. She is a seasoned veteran and I feel grateful to have worked alongside her. She is a true Rav to so many in the congregation. I also had the privilege to work with Randi on several projects, including the Hands-On-Shabbat. Watching her attention to detail, ability to delegate, and untiring commitment to the shul will benefit me greatly in the future. I thank them all for sharing their knowledge and experience with me.

I would be remiss if I did not thank all of the other teachers in the congregation, in the religious school, in Chai/Prozdor, and on Shabbat mornings. And like every other professional here at the shul, I would be unable to do my job well without the help of Art Cohen and the synagogue's wonderful support staff. Unlike many of my colleague's internships during rabbinical school, mine differed in that I live in the community where I serve the internship. And as such, I have really gotten the "total package" from Agudath Israel, and that experience would not be the same with out the great friends we've made here.

So, I thank all the Sloppy Joe Men and their families, the Men's Club Softball Team, the minyan, all the surrogate bobbies and zadies to Josh, and of course, our close friends from our havurah, the Sinclairs, the Goldsteins and the Biers.

As I stated earlier this month in the Voice, there is one person who can really take responsibility for bringing us out to Caldwell, and that is our close friend Rabbi Paula Drill, who is in London this weekend to officiate at our classmate's wedding tomorrow. She still says that she did it out of selfish reasons... she just wanted another rabbinical student to drive to school with!

Acharon acharon chavivi, last but not least, I thank my eshet chayil, Elissa, for being willing to take the chance and move from the City, where so many of our friends were. I know that the Agudath experience has been as memorable in her mind as it has in mine and for that we both thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.

We will miss you. It has been an honor and a privilege. So many of you have expressed how you will miss us and we are deeply touched by that. But don't worry we'll come back and visit. Just don't forget to leave the light on for us!

Shabbat Shalom!