

***Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Remarks at  
the Hanukat Ha-Bayit of the Talner Shtibel  
in Brookline, MA, December 16, 1973***

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The Talner dynasty began with Rabbi Dovid Twersky (1808–1882), a grandson of Rabbi Nochum Twersky (1730–1798) of Chernobyl, Ukraine, who was a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov. He lived in Talne, Ukraine, and became known as the first Talner Rebbe. He was followed by his grandson, Rabbi Nochum Twersky. His son, Rabbi Meshullam Z. Twersky, immigrated to the United States in the 1920s and established a Talner *shtibel* in Roxbury, a suburb of Boston. In 1960, the congregation moved to Corey Road in Brighton, MA, and Rabbi Twersky remained Rebbe until his death on 26 Iyyar (May 10), 1972. Ten years later, in 1982, his son, Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak (Isadore) Twersky, officially assumed the role of heir to his father's position.

Shortly after the death of Rabbi Meshullam Z. Twersky, the *shtibel* was expanded by an addition, which became the new men's section. A program was held in celebration of this new extension on December 16, 1973. It began with the recital of Psalms 84, 122 and 127 and then Psalm 30: "מזמור שיר חנוכת הבית לדוד", "A psalm, a song for the dedication of the Temple, by David." This was followed by the address, presented below, delivered by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who was Rabbi Dr. Twersky's father-in-law. It is based on a slightly edited version of the notes I took at that time. I added English translations of the Biblical and Rabbinic texts the Rav cited and kept the "Ashkenazis" pronunciation in the transliterations to try to capture his original "voice" as much as possible.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Rabbi David Shapiro for his help in clarifying the context in which this talk was delivered.

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The Gemara teaches: אלא אמר רבא כי ביתו מה ביתו אקפנדריא קפיד אינש ארקינה ומנעל לא קפיד אינש אף ב"ה [בית הכנסת] קפנדריא הוא דאסור ריקיה (ברכות סג). "Rather, Rava said, [the synagogue is] equivalent to one's home. Just as [with regard to] one's home, one minds it being used as a shortcut, but does not mind spitting or wearing shoes [there], so too [is the case with regard to] the synagogue. Using it as a shortcut is prohibited, spitting or wearing shoes [there] is permitted." A synagogue is on the same footing as a man's house. Just as a man objects to his house being used as a shortcut but does not object to wearing shoes there, so too is the case with a *beis ha-kenesses*—to use it as a shortcut is *asur* but wearing shoes in it is *mutar*.

Rava addressed himself to the question raised earlier in the Gemara: Why is wearing shoes forbidden in the *Beis ha-Mikdash* and permitted in a shul? The Mishnah (*Berakhot* 9:5) stated, "ולא יכנס להר הבית במקלו, ובמנעלו ובפונדתו ובאבק שעל רגליו ולא יעשנו קפנדריא." "One may not enter the Temple Mount with his staff, his shoes, his money belt, or the dust on his feet, and one may not make it a shortcut." But, in a *beis ha-kenesses* one may enter with his staff, his shoes, his money belt, or the dust on his feet. Why the difference? Rava answers that the reason is because a *beis ha-kenesses* is treated as one treats one's own home.

The inference drawn from this halakhic distinction between *Har ha-Bayis/Beis ha-Mikdash* on the one hand and *beis ha-kenesses* on the other is clear. The *Beis ha-Mikdash* is called *Beis Hashem*. Tens of times the Bible speaks of the *Beis ha-Mikdash* as *Beis Hashem*; for example, (תהלים קכב:א), "בית ה' נלך", "Let us go to the House of the Lord." The *Beis ha-Mikdash* is the abode of the Almighty, the residence or palace where the *Shekhinah* resides. The Jew who finds himself within the *Beis ha-Mikdash* must be aware that he is just a guest for a short time. He is a guest of the *ba'al ha-bayis*, and his host is the Almighty, the *Shekhinah*, who graciously extended to the individual the honor of inviting him to spend a couple of hours in the palace where His Majesty resides. The Jew entering the *Mikdash* must therefore observe proper decorum, must walk with trepidation. (תהלים נה:טו), "בית אלהים נהלך ברגש" (תהלים נה:טו), "In the House of God we will walk with emotion."

As a matter of fact, there is a special *hiyyuv*, included among the *Tarayag* according to the Rambam, that a Jew fear the Sanctuary. A Jew approaching the *Beis ha-Mikdash* or the *Kosel* must experience a sense of awe or dread. "ומקדשי תיראו" (ויקרא יט:ל, כו:ב), "And My Sanctuary you shall revere." And therefore a Jew who comes to the *Mikdash* must take off his shoes. "של נעליך מעל רגליך כי המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת קדש"

(שמות ג:ה) "היא" "Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy ground." It does not belong to you.

In contradistinction to *Mikdash*, the *beis ha-kenesses* does not belong to God but to the Jew; it is not the home of the Almighty but of the Jew. The Almighty is sometimes homeless and we construct a home for Him. "ועשו לי מקדש" (שמות כה:ה). "Make for Me a Sanctuary." But more often than God, the Jew is homeless and he must build a home for himself.

The Jew lives in the *beis ha-kenesses* and spends many hours there. It is the property of the Jew. The owner of the *beis ha-kenesses* is the *tzibbur*. Halakhically it is possible that an individual can own a *beis ha-kenesses* but an individual cannot own the *Mikdash*. The *Mikdash* is *hekdesb*. It is the property of the Almighty. Of course, the *Shekhinah* resides in the *beis ha-kenesses*. "ואהי להם למקדש מעט (יחזקאל יא:טז) אמר רבי יצחק אלו בתי כנסיות (מגילה כט). "I have been for them a miniature Sanctuary." Rabbi Yitzhak said, "These are the synagogues and study halls in Babylon." The *beis ha-kenesses* is a miniature *Beis ha-Mikdash*. Yes, but the *beis ha-kenesses* is different than the *Mikdash*. The *Shekhinah* in the *beis ha-kenesses* is the guest and the Jew is the host. The *Shekhinah* is a distinguished visitor and the Jew extends a gracious invitation to the king to visit him. The Jew entertains this illustrious guest.

Therefore, the element of fear is completely out of context. Why fear the *beis ha-kenesses* or *beis ha-midrash*? Do we fear our home? The Rambam says only "נוהגין בהן כבוד", "one treats them with respect" (*Hil. Tefillah* 11:5). We need to have a dignified and respectful relationship with it, as one must have with one's home as well. Of course the *beis ha-midrash*, the special quarters assigned for the *Shekhinah*, certainly deserves dignity, but that is all.

All this is halakhically correct, but the equation of home and synagogue is not only a halakhic one but is also a historical reality and a social psychological fact. A *beis ha-kenesses* in Halakhah and in history has never been a Temple nor has it ever been a house of worship. Halakhah is not satisfied with it being just a house of worship because it is possible to worship outside of it. It was the home where the Jew lived.

Throughout the generations, the Jewish home consisted of two parts: 1) a small neglected frame house with a roof usually covered with straw, as I remember it; 2) a *beis ha-midrash*. The second is an extension of the house. The poorly built house of the Jew and the *beis ha-midrash* were complementary entities, and together they comprised the Jewish home.

This mysterious quality that turns a house into a home (after all, the stones and bricks are the same; every house should be, but isn't, a home); the mysterious quality that turns a physical structure into something intimate, inspiring a feeling of security and serenity, is found by the Jew in the *beis ha-midrash*. A house that is not appended to a *beis ha-midrash* can never be a home. Only the presence of the *Shekbinah* can accomplish that. When the Jew merges both parts, he creates something unique, a Jewish home.

"מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל" (במדבר כד:ה). "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." Anyone can build an *obel*, a tent or a house, but a *mishkan* is more than a house, more than a dwelling place. It is a home. "How goodly are your tents, Yaakov." Yaakov is an ordinary, small man. Anyone can build a tent. But the beauty is that the *obel* is connected immediately to *mishkan* and with this a Jew is transformed from weak and helpless Yaakov to mighty Yisrael.

This *beis ha-midrash*-home experience belongs to my earliest memories. There was a *beis ha-midrash* across the street from my parents' home. I remember all the lamps burning. I remember hearing *Selichos*. It was a strong and powerful experience for me. I felt the unity of home and *beis ha-midrash*. I was not afraid to be alone at home. It was one big house. All the people in the *beis ha-midrash* belonged to one mysterious family, and I was a member of it.

Later, as a teenager, when I studied under Father, I spent the major part of the day and a good part of the night there during the Bolshevik Revolution. It was cold at home and mostly I was hungry and the *beis ha-midrash* became my home. At the very least, I saw it as an extension of my home and felt good there, as if Mother protected me there as she did at home.

This is probably the reason I could not tolerate the German Orthodox synagogue and cannot get accustomed to the modern American Orthodox synagogue. I resent power structures that surround synagogues. I cannot stand the institutionalization of the synagogue. I do not like the synagogue as an establishment. I cannot tolerate stiff decorum, uniformity and soullessness, where an individual is told when to sit or rise. No one should tell me what to do at home. The *beis ha-kenesses* is my home!

This home-*beis ha-midrash* experience has democratized Jewish society. The Chasidische *beis ha-midrash* has had tremendous power. It has levelled Jewish society to a great extent unknown to non-Jewish class distinctions because it was home. It was everyone's home—scholar, and illiterate, rich and poor, etc. This is true for Misnagdim also, but Chasidim did a lot with a shul that the Misnagdim did not. Chasidim had a

stronger home-shul connection. For Misnagdim, shul activities were restricted to: 1) prayer and 2) study. Literate Misnagdim spent long hours in the *beis ha-midrash* involved in study, by themselves or in different groups. Yes, but there was nothing in the *beis ha-midrash* with which a plain Jew could occupy himself. And so, illiterate Jews came to daven and after the *tefillah*, they left.

But in the Chasidishe *beis ha-midrash*<sup>2</sup> the situation was different. Both literate and illiterate Jews shared many concerns and interests together besides prayer. Chasidim used to arrange *seudos mitzvah*. It was a special institution. They had them on *yahrtzeits* (they observed many *yahrtzeits* for many people, even that of Achiya ha-Shiloni [in Kabbalah and Chasidus he plays a great role; he is connected to Eliyahu and to the Besht] and also on *erev Rosh Hodesh* and on *isru chag*. Misnagdim did not have *seudos mitzvah*. Misnagdim rarely ate in shul except on a great occasion like a *siyyum ha-Shas*. I never saw my father or grandfather eat in shul.

Chasidim also had special gatherings where the *zikenai Chasidus* told stories about the great founders of the movement. I was raised near the center of Chabad in Chaslavitch, near Lubavitcher Chasidim. Itinerant preachers were sent by the Rebbe to disseminate Chasidishe knowledge. When the messenger came to Chaslavitch, the entire town closed up. It looked like a Jewish town after the *seudah ha-mafsekes* on *erev Yom Kippur*. All would dress in their Shabbos best and go to hear the *maggid*. I was among them. I heard words then that I did not understand—*ד' טבעיות, ממלא כל עלמין, תשוקה פנימית*. I did not understand a word, and yet they made an indelible impact on me. When I speak about the religious experience, I am stimulated by these earlier experiences, not so much by what I read later. And, of course, in the evening, the Chasidim ate and drank. Most central was the fraternizing between rich and poor, scholar and illiterate. There is no doubt that this enhanced the entire *beis ha-midrash* experience. The activity of the Chasid in shul was more versatile than that of the Misnaged, and therefore the *beis ha-midrash* was closer to a home for him.

Something else is most beautiful about the Chasidishe *beis ha-midrash*. It is a historic fact that Chasidim abolished family pews, *mekomos* in the *beis ha-kenesses*. My father was the Rav both of the Chasidishe and Misnagdishe communities in Chaslavitch. This is rare in the history of

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<sup>2</sup> The Rav uses the words *beis ha-kenesses* and *beis ha-midrash* interchangeably. Technically, however, there are halakhic differences between them regarding the issue of the appropriateness of eating in those spaces.

Chasidus. It is a historical fact that the Ba'al ha-Tanya told his Chasidim there to choose a Misnaged as their Rav. On alternative Shabbosos he would *daven* in the *beis ha-midrash ha-gadol*, the shul of the Misnagdim, and in the Chasidishe shul.

I remember the *beis ha-midrash* of the Misnagdim. All the seats along the *mizrach* belonged to prominent members of the town and no one else could sit there, even if they came early. This was private property. There are many *she'eilos u-teshuvas* exclusively dealing with this. But Chasidim abolished this and their *beis ha-midrash* belongs to all, to the community as a whole and to every individual. No one could lay claim to family pews. The whole institution of *mekomos* in the *beis ha-midrash* is contrary to the very spirit of the *beis ha-midrash* or the *beis ha-kenesses* as home. Whoever comes first is served first. No one may object. There are no reservations in the *beis ha-midrash* for latecomers.

There was one seat in the Chasidishe shul in Chaslavitch, not in the *mizrach* but closer to the door, which was not occupied by anyone. There was a tradition that the Ba'al ha-Tanya sat there when the intelligence agents of Napoleon chased after him and he stopped there. There is no evidence for this but my feeling as a child was that this is correct. When my father davened in the *beis ha-midrash* of the Misnagdim great people sat near him but in the Chasidishe shul, the ignorant *am ha-aretz* shoemaker sat next to him.

The home-*beis ha-midrash* equation had a tremendous impact on democratizing the tradition of Jewish society in general and on the Chasidishe community in particular. We have here a shul without a power structure, protocol or formalities. I feel at home here. There are no officers, no superiors, no *gaba'im* in the traditional sense of the word. There is a lack of pretense. I do not like pretentious people or pretentious institutions. The more home-like the shul is, the nicer the experience and the more fervent the prayers.

God created and fashioned Man in His image and when Man creates, he too creates in his image. The spirit of the old Talner ancestors hovers here; they are present here, as if they do not trust us with the shul. "וּנֵר אֱלֹקִים טָרַם יִכָּבֵה" (שמואל א' ג:ג). "The lamp of God had not yet gone out." We must keep the light burning before it goes out because once it goes out it is very hard to relight. On Chanukah we have a principle of (שבת כא:): כִּבְתָהּ אֵין זְקוּקָה לָהּ. If the Chanukah light becomes extinguished, one is not obligated to relight it. If one was so negligent to let it go out, one will not be required to relight it. The wood and mortar of a building plays a secondary role. The spirit is primary, the perpetuation of a unique rich tradition.

What is one supposed to possess in order to transmit ideas and concepts and a lifestyle that is so bewildering to the contemporary ear? Which *kochos ha-nefesh* are necessary? Many have tried and failed bitterly, but some experiments have been successful. But it is not true that the battle has been won. There are still small islands in a stormy sea. We need people with charisma, *kochos ha-nefesh*, and talent.

What do we need in order to be apostles to carry Tanakh and *Torah she-be'al peh* as a torch in a technologically oriented, materially minded society? I believe that in order to explain this we need to see a midrash on *Parshat Va-Yeshev* quoted by Rashi. The Torah says "אלה תולדות יעקב (בראשית לז:ב) יוסף" "These are the chronicles of Jacob, Joseph." Right before this the Torah mentions the *alufim* of Esav, "ואלה שמות אלופי עשו" (בראשית לו:מג). "These are the names of the chiefs of Esau." And a serious question arises. Is Jacob able to confront and defeat these *alufim*? (All the names of the ministers of the Arabs sound to me like *aluf*—*aluf* Egypt, *aluf* Kuwait.) How is that possible?

Rashi (*Bereshit* 37:1, s. v. *va-yeshev Yaakov*) quotes the midrash but not completely. It is found fully in the *Yalkut* (*Bereshit, Va-Yeshev* #140; see also *Bereshit Rabbah* 84:5). The *Yalkut* states that there was a blacksmith whose shop was open to the highway and he had a son who was a goldsmith whose store opened onto the highway opposite him. He saw many camels coming into town laden with flax and he was worried where all this flax would be stored. A clever fellow nearby answered him and told him, "One spark of yours and one spark of your son's can consume it all." So too here. Yaakov saw all the *alufim* of Esav and he wondered, how will he be able to conquer them? And so, after mentioning the names of all of them the *pasuk* states the names of Yaakov and Yosef, in keeping with the verse "והיה בית יעקב אש ובית יוסף להבה ובית עשו (עובדיה יח) לקש" "The House of Jacob shall be fire, and the House of Joseph flame, and the House of Esau shall be straw." One spark of Yaakov combined with one spark of Yosef will consume the flax and conquer Esav.

This is a strange midrash, but it teaches something important. We encounter powerful opponents and we need to defeat our intellectual, social and political enemies. What they all have in common is that they resent Judaism's unique way of life and they resent Judaism's claim to the Promised Land. The Gentiles are not anti-Zionist and are not anti-Semites. They just do not understand us, and they resent us, and resent our resistance to assimilation and apostasy. They say to us "נסעה ונלכה" (בראשית לג:יב) "ואלכה לנגדך" "Let us travel and let us go, I will proceed alongside you." Let us travel together to a common destiny, they say.

In order to defeat this, we need two people on the path of history, the blacksmith and the goldsmith, the father and the son. The blacksmith's job is to keep the fire going, and once it gets very hot he can fashion the iron. His main instrument is the bellows that keep feeding the fire with air. In Hebrew, this is called a *nafach*. He blows and keeps on blowing and never gets tired and, finally, because of his determination, the tough iron gives in and can be fashioned into something strong and useful. In order to defeat Esav one needs a blacksmith, fiery faith in an old master, unqualified commitment and absolute determination. People with doubt, skeptics, will never be able to accomplish the task. The fire will go out. Only a blacksmith can pass on the tradition. Only a **גפח שהיה פתוחו פתוח לרשות הרבים**, a blacksmith whose store is open onto the public thoroughfare, can stop partially the march of *aluf Esav*.

But at certain times and places we need a goldsmith, the son. The blacksmith, regardless of his passionate faith and iron determination, often lacks the means of communication to be successful. Often the blacksmith addresses himself on a different wavelength and does not reach out. He radiates heat, is uncompromised in his devotion, yet he is poor in language. He does not speak like his sophisticated contemporaries. There is a problem with his intellectual idioms, his conceptual categories, his language.

In order for the blacksmith to succeed in his efforts, he must get an interpreter, the cooperation of his own son, of a goldsmith, who is as sophisticated and as well-trained as all of the *alufim*, and perhaps better; who commands the respect of the agnostic and uses the beauty of *Yefes* to protect the *oholei Shem*, to make the *oholei Shem* attractive to newcomers. He must do what Achashverosh did to Vashti, **"להראות העמים והשרים, את יפיה"** (אסתר א:יא) "to show off to the people and to the officials her beauty."

The blacksmith was worried what will happen in the future and so the clever Jew answered him, "Don't worry, both you and your son together will prevail."

*The Rav then went on to sing the praises of his son-in-law, Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak Twersky, who undertook responsibility for leading the Talner shtibel after the death of his father.*