



GEULAS YISRAEL

BY RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
Ram, Yeshivat Har Etzion

Jewish History Is Like Olive Oil

Our Nevi'im compared us to numerous elements of Nature. Shlomo Hamelech, for example, in Shir Hashirim 7:3 likened us to wheat, while Dovid Hamelech, in Tehillim 80:9 compared us to grapes.

The opening pesukim of Parhsat Tet-zaveh imply that we are similar to olives and to olive oil. In describing the oil of the menorah, the Torah writes

ואתה תצוה את בני ישראל ויקחו אליך שמן זית
וך כתיב למאור להעלות נר תמיד

Aside from olive oil, the Torah doesn't delineate the manufacture of any other mishkan material. Interestingly, the Torah also prefaces the description of the oil and the menorah with the redundant phrase *ואתה תצוה*. Each mishkan detail and every mishkan dimension were divinely commanded, yet the production of olive oil is introduced with this unnecessary phrase. By underscoring the production of olive oil, and by prefacing it with a phrase explicitly mentioning Hashem's command, the Torah highlights olive oil as a metaphor of Jewish identity.

LIGHT

The obvious reason that we are compared to olive oil is that our people provide light and illumination for humanity. Famously, Yeshayahu refers to our role as *Ohr La'goyim* three times (42: 6, 49:6, 60:3), emphasizing our mission to spiritually enlighten our world. As it burns steady and without much flicker, emits

minimal soot, and discharges no unhealthy fumes, olive oil is uniquely suited to provide light. Additionally, olive oil is very stable and easy to store for future usage. Our comparison to olive oil showcases our mission of casting light into a dark and sometimes nightmarish world by modeling a godlike lifestyle.

HIGHER CALLING

Beyond illumination, olive oil, and oil in general, allude to lives of spirituality. Because oil molecules are relatively light in weight, when mixed with water they rise to the top, while water, which is more dense, sinks to the bottom. The "rising" effect of oil signals Jewish spirituality. We are placed in a material world and expected to embrace it, enjoy it, and channel it for religious experience. Yet, we are also expected to slightly detach ourselves from it and to live at a healthy distance from it. The mandate of *Kedoshim Tih'u* demands that we *temper* our engagement with this world while avoiding excess indulgence. "Kedusha" doesn't mean *holiness* but, more literally, refers to *separateness*. קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני ה' אלך. קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני ה' אלך. Just as Hashem is the ultimate "separate Being", completely "different" and unlike anything in our world, similarly, we strive to be apart from the physical world and its excesses. Our sweeping system of mitzvot and prohibitions prevent full engagement and entanglement in the pleasures of this world.

Oil rises and we rise. We aspire to

something beyond Nature and beyond the physical. Though we don't flee from this world, we desire something more heavenly and more eternal. Like olive oil, we rise.

TOGETHERNESS

Though oil is *lighter* than water it *feels heavier*. This is due to its viscosity, which means that its molecules cling more closely to one another and, consequently, oils, like other viscous materials such as honey, flow relatively slowly. The viscosity of oil symbolizes the *inseparability* of our people. Due to our strong familial, cultural, and religious bonds our people are interlinked, leading lives of greater interconnection. Our oil-like “viscosity” has enabled us to survive the extended odyssey of exile. Though we inhabited different regions and climates, our religious and cultural “viscosity” glued us together, despite the miles which separated us. Though physically scattered, Jewish “molecules” remained strong and viscous.

INSULARITY

Finally, oil doesn't easily mix with water, as witnessed when trying to remove grease or other oily substances using water alone. We have always lived separate from our surrounding society, preserving our cultural insularity. Throughout history, communities calibrated their cultural insularity differently. Some adopted more of the surrounding societies while others staunchly banned any cultural influences. Either way, we always carved out distinct cultural spaces and maintained uniquely Jewish lifestyle habits to prevent the loss of Jewish identity.

These are the four aspects of Jewish identity which oil captures: we are meant to illuminate humanity with religious inspiration. Secondly, we obey cultural separateness, maintaining distinct communal and religious

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habits. Thirdly, we rise above this world and its busyness, just as oil rises to the top. Finally, we adhere to one another, remaining deeply interrelated. Oil is a symbol of Jewish historical identity, and its features provide a road-map for Jewish destiny and mission.

VIOLENT OIL

However, often, when these four “oil-like” Jewish qualities manifest in exile, violence erupts, which, ironically is a fifth “Jewish” quality of oil. The harvesting of olives and the extraction of their oil are each violent. Olives are swatted off trees and, subsequently, are pressed under heavy beams to obtain their oil. Extracting light from oil is a violent process.

Throughout galus, our oil-qualities assured our cultural and religious survival. Preserving cultural insularity, we lived among ourselves, rather than disappearing into the broader population. Halacha, and in particular dietary

and marital laws, sustained our separateness from the general population. Furthermore, we didn't just live separately, but lived 'higher' lifestyles of personal moderation, financial restraint, education, scholarship, family values, and community. Jewish literacy rates always soared above the rates of the surrounding population. Instead of pursuing pleasure and addiction we looked for meaning and future.

Society generally respects cultural insularity, and views "separatist" cultures as quaint and charming. Indigenous societies such as the Amish and the Aborigines of Australia, which pursue extreme insularity are admired. Living on the extreme margins of society, apart from social trends, they make no effort to influence or shape the course of human moral and religious history.

We were always different. Like oil, we lived apart, in separate and tightly knit communities. However, like oil we aspired to illuminate general society by living morally and religiously surpassing lifestyles. It was this combination of oil's "contrary" features which puzzled and often infuriated our hosts. How could we be *separate* but also *shape* society, all the while as guests in foreign countries? This explosive combination of oil-like qualities often induced rage and hatred. Pursuing Jewish mission outside our own sovereign country stirred up fear, suspicion, and animosity.

Ironically, the more violence we faced the more light we provided. Jewish history has cycled through the various qualities of olive oil. We produced light, which incited antisemitism and oppression. Though persecuted, we produced even more light, which, in turn, provoked greater loathing and jealousy. The more light we produced,

the more disgust we engendered. The more discrimination, the more light.

OUR MENORAH

We are slowly returning to our homeland, to provide the final radiant light of the end of history. Back in Israel, we are finally able to project our values as a nation, rather than as scattered but interconnected individuals. Aptly, the Menorah has become the symbol of the modern state of the Jews. It symbolizes thousands of years of producing light.

Yet the world isn't fully ready for our light. They oppose our light with darkness, hatred, and murder. We are not fully "there" yet. The cycles of light and darkness are still wildly spinning. One day it will be all light.

BITTER, THEN SWEET

There is one final reason that we are compared to oil. Olives ripen relatively *late* in the season, and therefore, the olives remain bitter until the very end of the harvest. Finally, and with much patience, at the tail end of the season, the olives turn sweet. Jewish history is like a summer harvest. Jewish history is beginning to sweeten but, as we have discovered, there is still so much bitterness.

We know that, one day, when the harvest ends, Jewish history will be entirely sweet. We just need the patience and the faith to wait until the end of the harvest. ■

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