

Fragments from the Teachings of The S'FAS EMES

On the Occasion of
his 59th Yahrzeit

by Fabian Schoenfeld

ON THE 5TH DAY OF SH'VAT the followers of the Gerer Chassidic movement observe the 59th Yahrzeit of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Alter of Ger. The use of the word "movement" is perfectly justified. For Chassidism in general is a *movement*. Although this point need not be belabored, one should always bear in mind that Chassidism succeeded in moving masses of Eastern European Jewry out of the throes of utter despair onto the sublime heights of spiritual and religious fervor. This was particularly true of the great dynasty established by Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, the grandfather of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh. In addition to inspiring in his followers a great, ecstatic experience of love for the Creator, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir made them aware of the fundamental importance of scholarship and learning. To this very day, his talmudic writings and responsa are studied in the great Yeshivos and by all who are engaged in a deeper understanding of the Talmud. His works are universally known as the "Chidushe Harim." He transmitted his love for study and learning to all his followers and students. The foremost of these was his own grandson, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh, whom he brought up after the untimely death of his son Abraham Mor-decai.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh masterfully continued the pursuit of Torah study, and his writings on the Talmud known by the name "*Sfas Emes*," contain a wealth of brilliant logical analysis of Halachic conceptual problems. He was an equally superb thinker, and his reflections reveal profound philosophical insight, though his idiom was that of the Chassidic tradition. Both in his Talmudic writings and in his Biblical commentaries there is a visibly persistent Leitmotif, reflected in the very name S'fat Emeth, namely the relentless quest for inner Truth. Obviously, these few lines cannot claim to describe his thinking and work. One day, perhaps, a voluminous chef d'oeuvre will appear, seeking to evaluate his contribution to Jewish religious thought and philosophy. We may glimpse—through a small selection of his thoughts, the kind of thinking that pervaded his writings. He wrote in a manner that can best be described as stenographic. A great deal of concentrated study is needed to discover the essence of his thoughts.

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One can only hope that the lines that follow are a correct rendering of his cogitations. We are confining this article to three of his thoughts on Chanukkah, which seem to have a particular importance for us during these momentous days of the modern age.

"A Portion In the G-d of Israel"

JUDAISM IS ENGAGED in a tremendous struggle with the Christian world. The threat is not any more the death camp. The real menace stems from the sudden desire on the part of the non-Jewish world to "bury the hatchet"—though, the question of who wielded it in the first place is conveniently forgotten. Assimilation and conversion—these are the germs that endanger Klal Yisrael. The kind of spiritual strife that occasioned Chanukkah is being repeated before our eyes.

The Sfas Emes has this to say: Antiochus and his Syrian-Greek Hellenists forbade the observance of three specific Jewish Laws: Sabbath, Circumcision and the celebration of New Moon. They strengthened this prohibition by the demand that the Jews declare publicly: "We have no portion in the G-d of Israel." The obvious purpose of the prohibition was to sever the relationship that existed between Israel and G-d; to proscribe the particular Mitzvos which are most indicative of that relationship. The Sabbath and Circumcision are uniquely Jewish. The decree concerning them, one can readily understand. However, what purpose was there in prohibiting the observance of Rosh Chodesh? Furthermore, why compel the Jewish people to sever its relationship with a Deity whose existence the persecutors denied. Would it not have been more important, from the Hellenistic standpoint, to make them deny the mere existence of G-d?

In order to comprehend the nature of the decree, one must understand the special nature of Rosh Chodesh. The Sabbath is a fixed day in the calendar. It is unalterable and immutable. It is a day decreed by G-d Himself. The official proclamation of the New Month was a right and privilege which G-d handed to us. The entire structure of the yearly calendar is ordained by the act of a *human* agency, i.e. the Jewish Court. Their reckoning may perhaps be erroneous, nevertheless the date which they select to be the New Month, is in effect the new month. Such days as Rosh Hashanah and Succos, etc., depend entirely upon the decision of human minds and opinions. To the pagan mind this was preposterous, un-

acceptable. That the Deity is willing to share the obligations and prerogatives with mere human beings, the heathen cannot conceive. In his attempt to equalize his subjects and place them on a common religious denominator, Antiochus had to dispose of this typically Jewish idea. He had to compel them to sate that they have "no portion in the G-d of Israel," *no part in His decisions*. He needed a verbal public declaration to this effect and he needed the abolition of the Mitzvah which gave expression to this idea, namely Rosh Chodesh.

The implication vis-a-vis the struggle in which we are involved to-day is rather obvious. It is our *special* relationship to the Elokei Yisrael which our antagonists are seeking to destroy as well as our unique relationship to Eretz Yisrael.

On the Enemy's Ground

HOW ARE WE to react to this danger? Again the Sfas Emes offers an answer. It is an answer which may cause some raised eye-brows. We are told that the light of Chanukkah must be placed at the entrance to our homes, outside the door, in the street. **מצוה להניחה על** (מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ) There are times when we can contain our teachings and learning and confine them within the four walls of the Jewish home. When we are not threatened, when our way of life is not challenged, we can be blissfully ignorant of the world around us. When however, the non-Jewish world and its protagonists invade our sanctuary and our homes; when they threaten to exterminate our way of life then the answer is not merely to defend ourselves, but to carry the battle into the "street," into the camp of the enemy. A brief thought, but replete with meaning for us to-day. We must carry the battle into the camp of the enemy. We must wipe out the threat of wholesale conversion by waging this battle in every area and aspect of the society which envelopes us and seeks to assimilate us. We must place the light outside and not be content to hold on to what we have, for we may not have it much longer.

Awareness

THERE IS, HOWEVER, the problem of making our Jewish people aware of what menaces us. Too many have become victims of a dangerous euphoria that seems to paralyze their ability to think and perceive things as they are. This was the problem of the Jews in the heroic days of the Hasmoneans. We are told that — **לשנה אחרת —** קבעום ועשאוים ימים טובים בהלל והודאה — the Rabbis instituted the observance of Chanukka the following year. The Sfas Emes raises the question why they waited for a full year to pass by, before requesting our people to observe this great event with thanksgiving and praise. Human being, he points out, often do not recognize the immediate danger that surrounds them if it is a spiritual threat that they face. Nor are they able to realize the great importance of the rescue when it does come. They might well exclaim: Where and what is the danger? What was this great act of salvation? What were we

saved from? The Rabbis of that period were fearful of just such a reaction, were they to immediately demand proper recognition of the miraculous rescue. When a full year had passed by, when our people came to realize retrospectively, what had happened to thousands of Jewish youths, when the stark, brutal truth was finally brought home to them, then, and only then, were they in a position to evaluate both the extent of the danger they had faced, and the great significance of their rescue.

Let us hope that these sagacious words of the Sfas Emes will be heeded by those who trance-like welcome the love of Brother Esau, and will inspire them to concentrate their efforts upon the strengthening of Torah and its institutions, both here and in Eretz Yisrael.

Never Lose Hope

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Reality is sometimes more imaginative than anything imagined, and at the same time stronger than all logic. The picture of those youths at prayer, vanquished all imagination, and placed against all our logical analyses, a mighty reality.

We say therefore: Even if a sharp sword lies upon the throat of this generation let us not give up hope for mercy. Let us rise—and extend mercy to this generation.

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