The JEWISH SPARK

A true story.

Ben Gurion Airport. Immigration. I hand my ancient British Passport to the lady behind the desk. She opens it and turns to the photograph. Looking back at her from those pages is a Hollywood leading man with a Douglas Fairbanks mustache and a very self-satisfied look on his face.

She looks at the picture and looks back up at me. Rabbinical beard. Sidelocks tucked smartly behind the ears. Black Gortex™ raincoat. Black Fedora. She looks back down at the picture. She looks up at me.

She pushes the passport away from her, folds her hands, and in a voice which manages to combine tremendous sympathy and total bewilderment she says “What happened?” I reply with two words in Yiddish — I don’t know a lot of Yiddish, but these two words I do know — “Pintele Yid “ I say. “Mah?” comes the reply. Apparently, her Yiddish is about as extensive as mine.

“Nitzotz HaYehudi “ I say to her in Hebrew. It means “the Jewish Spark.”

Chanukah, the festival of light, is in the middle of winter. The darkest time of the year. You cannot know what light is until you have been in the darkness. The domination by Greece is symbolized by darkness. Throughout that darkness, there is a little spark that burns on through the darkest night. Through oppression and assimilation. Like a prisoner in the darkest dungeon. Like a tiny pin-prick of light at the end of the darkest tunnel. The Jewish Spark.

The Greeks defiled the Sanctuary of the Holy Temple more than any other nation. That was their specific power: To enter the very holiest place and taint its purity. This ability to invade and pollute the Sanctuary — the Heichal — can be seen from the Hebrew language itself. The gematria (numerical equivalent) of Heichal is 65. The gematria of Greece — Yavan — is 66. The spiritual pollution of the Greeks could dominate the holiness of the Jewish People. They had the power to overcome, to invade and to violate.

For this reason the Greeks specifically contaminated the oil. Because the oil is for the Menorah. Because from the oil comes the light.

But throughout all their defilement, there remained a pure flask of oil. Untouched, untainted. Like the pure spark in the heart of every Jew, however distant he may be from his people and the One who watches over them.

A pure flask of oil sealed with the imprimatur of the Kohen Gadol — the High Priest. For even though the Greeks were able to violate the Heichal — the Holy— they were not able to touch that one flask of oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. For the Kohen Gadol is on a level above the Heichal, above the Holy, he is on the level of the Holy of Holies — the Kodesh Hakodashim. For it is only the Kohen Gadol who may enter the Holy of Holies, once a year on Yom Kippur.

That little flask of pure oil is the “pintele Yid.” The little spark, the little point of purity, the Holy of Holies.
The littlest letter in the Hebrew alphabet is the Yud. It is a little dot. A small point. The pintele Yid is the pintele Yud. The numerical value of Yud is ten. Ten always connotes completion. In the decimal system when you go beyond nine, you go back to “one.” You have gone back to the beginning, but on a higher level. Ten is an entire level higher.

The Kohen Gadol is on an entirely different level than the ordinary Kohen. An entire level higher. The domain of the ordinary Kohen is the Heichal, and the Greeks were able to dominate the Heichal. The gematria of Kohen is the same as Heichal — 65. But the Kohen Gadol can go into the Holy of Holies. It is his seal that was on the flask of pure oil. And over that the Greeks had no dominion. Because even though the Greeks could dominate the Holy, they could not dominate the Holy of Holies, whose measurements are 10 by 10.

That little ten, that little Yud, that little flask, that little point of light in the Jewish soul can never be dominated by “the Greeks” of every generation.

The Silent Letter Of Holiness

Whether you say the word “Heichal” or you write it out, all its letters are represented, with one exception. When you write Heichal, you write Heh, Yud, Chaf, Lamed. But when you say Heichal, you don’t hear the letter Yud, because you could equally well make the sound that the Yud makes by putting two dots — a tzeirei — under the Heh.

In other words, when you speak, you don’t sense the Yud. It’s as though the Yud is hidden in the word. It’s hidden in the word Heichal. The Yud is hidden in the Heichal! That little spark, that ten, that small flask of oil, is hidden in the Sanctuary, just as the letter Yud is “hidden” in the word “Heichal.”

When you speak, the Yud, the letter of holiness is hidden. In the time of Ptolemy, the Torah was translated into Greek. This translation is called The Septuagint. At that time, three days of darkness went out to the world because “the lion that had formerly roamed free, was put into a cage.” The Jewish People and their Torah had been feared and respected in the ancient world, but this translation of the Greeks had managed to “capture the Torah” and put it in a cage, to put it on the shelves of their universities next to Plato and Socrates. They were saying “Your Torah is a wonderfully wise book, but it’s essentially no better than our wonderfully wise books. It’s human.”

The Greeks captured the Written Torah, but the Spoken Torah — the Mishna and the Talmud — stayed the exclusive domain of the Jewish People.

The Greeks were able to dominate the Heichal. The Written Torah is like the word Heichal when it’s written out — all its letters are visible. It can be taken captive. But the Spoken Torah is like the word Heichal when it is spoken: The Yud — the letter of holiness — stays hidden from the prying eyes of a hostile world.

You can’t see it.
It stays hidden like that little flask of oil giving an eternal light which shines on in the heart of every Jew.

Sources: Maharal in Chidushei Aggados, Shabbos 21b