

“Our Cup Runneth Over: Ambassador Ron Dermer’s Speaks in Houston”

On Monday evening, Ambassador Ron Dermer, ambassador from Israel to the United States, spoke eloquently and passionately in our sanctuary before a crowd of more than 800 people. When he talked about the future for Israel, he spoke with extraordinary optimism. Ironically, he said that such optimism isn’t familiar to us, because Jewish memories are full of reasons to be pessimistic. To illustrate his point, he said that even if our proverbial cup were full, just because we’re Jewish we’d see it as 1/16 empty.

It’s like the story of the Jewish husband who comes home from synagogue and tells his wife, “They say the Messiah is coming any day, and will take us all to Israel.” The wife becomes hysterical, “Oh no! It would be terrible. It took years till we could finally move into this neighborhood, and buy the house we wanted. Now we’ve spent a fortune fixing it up. I don’t want the Messiah to take us away.” “Okay, okay, don’t worry,” the husband says, “We survived Pharaoh, we survived Haman. With God’s help, we’ll survive the Messiah, too!”

There’s another cup in Jewish life. It’s the Kiddush cup, and we fill it with wine. In Judaism, wine is a symbol of joy. In Psalm 104, we learn, “Yayin yisamach l’vav enosh,” wine cheers the hearts of men. When we recite the blessing over the wine, we’re not blessing the wine. The wine isn’t holy. God is holy. We’re praising God who created the “fruit of the vine” from which we make the wine. To make the blessing complete, we delight all the senses. We recite the blessing. We behold a beautiful silver cup. We fill the cup with sweet wine, and, we place a saucer under the cup and over pour it. It’s the best symbol of our joy and that our “cup runneth over.”

It’s no wonder that Manischewitz and Magen David are so sweet! Did your relatives put a cube of sugar in a glass of wine that wasn’t “Jewish” wine? They made it sweet like good Jewish wine should be. Unlike the cup of water that is perpetually 1/16 empty, the overflowing Kiddush cup represents the Jewish outlook and hope, perfectly.

There is wine at every life-cycle event. At a baby naming there is wine. It’s the epitome of untainted joy; a new life filled with unbridled potential. In Judaism, there is no “original sin” from which one must overcome; there is just great potential found in God’s gifts to us. Salvation, that is triumph of over evil, is achievable through mitzvot, a lifetime of deeds. God and Torah are our sources of salvation, which we bear as a personal responsibility. Therefore, the blessing for the child includes the hope that God, Who blessed our ancestors, will bless the child with knowledge, understanding, wisdom, righteousness and peace. The source of it all is Torah and its teachings.

At a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, we raise the Kiddush cup, again. We do so, not so much for the bar or bat mitzvah, but because it occurs on Shabbat. However, just as will happen this evening, Yair, who will be called to Torah, tomorrow morning, will accept his role as a Jewish adult and lead us in public prayer. And, he's such a fine young man; you should also come tomorrow just to hear him lead the service and chant from Torah.

We raise the Kiddush cup on Shabbat to mark the day's holiness. God created the Sabbath and made it holy; so, we acknowledge it. If you grew up in a traditional shul, you might know for yourself or from stories from your relatives that Shabbat Oneg, or Sabbath joy, was experienced after Shabbat morning services when the luncheon was held. There men often gathered to raise a cup of wine; but, if there wasn't any wine or even if there was, they'd also pour a little Schnapps or whiskey. It's true. They did it because it was special for Shabbat. And, Talmud says that if there isn't wine, the blessing can be recited over spirits; just not water, because water is ordinary. When I served a conservative shul, no one left without sanctifying Shabbat at least once if not more than a few times.

Likewise, a wedding ceremony requires a Kiddush cup. We use the wine cup twice; once to acknowledge the engagement and once to celebrate the marriage. Both times, the familiar blessing is recited and the bride and groom each take a sip of wine. It's like the Psalmist also said, "Zeh hayom asah Adonai, nagilah v'nismecha vo," this is the day that God has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.

The only life-cycle that doesn't require wine is death. The reason should be obvious; it's not a time of joy. We grieve; and, Talmud teaches that God mourns with us. We mourn because it's a normal human emotion, but also because we can no longer do a mitzvah; we can no longer perform the deeds that reflect our covenant with God.

Our desire is life. Torah tells us, "Choose life!" It's the reason we sometimes say "L'Chayyim!" to life, after we make a toast with a drink. But, we don't say "L'Chayyim" after we make Kiddush on Shabbat. The blessing is not a toast! The blessing is a sacred awareness of God's creating the fruit of the vine. It doesn't call for a high-five.

And, every time we raise the Kiddush cup, we express our overflowing optimism. Despite centuries of history that would suggest a different kind of future, the mitzvah to sanctify creates holy moments where God's presence is acknowledged and God's hope becomes part of our destiny.

That's why Ambassador Dermer, though he knows Jewish history, concluded with Jewish optimism. As long as there are Jewish births, there will be bar and bat mitzvahs and weddings and a Jewish people. As long as there is a Jewish people there will be a State of Israel. As long as there's a State of Israel, there is hope for a Jewish future. Unlike more than 70 years ago, today, Israel is our greatest hope that Jews will always have a place to call home if ever the world turned us out, again.

Six-and-one-half million Jews call Israel home, today. There are about 14 million Jews in a world population of some 7.6 billion people. That puts the Jewish population at .2% of the world's population. And, yet, on a list of the most influential countries in the world after the U.S., Russia, U.K., China, Germany, France, and Japan, it's Israel that ranks next at #8. Israel is only 70 years-old, but its purpose and its passion have been stoked for 2000 years.

Ambassador Dermer is a superior diplomat. He deftly handled points of view that were contrary to his own. But, what he didn't have to handle deftly was our shared view of Israel, as our people's ancestral home and modern hope. When he referenced the cup we often see as only 1/16th full, he submitted a dose of reality for the sake of history; but, he ended with a poignant reference to the cup that overflows for us.

The Middle East is fraught with challenges, and Israel sits in the worst neighborhood in the region. Despite it all, we work and hope for Israel and its neighbors. One day, the prophet Micah's words might be true and "everybody shall sit under their grapevine or under their fig tree with no one to disturb them, for it was the Eternal who spoke" (Micah 4:4). Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will.