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מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן
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By the Grace of G-d
2nd of Adar II, 5719
Brooklyn, N.Y.

To the Annual Convention of the
Committee for Furtherance of Jewish Education

Sholom uBrocho:

I was pleased to be informed of the forthcoming Annual Convention. I send my prayerful wishes to all participants that they make the Convention a complete success by helping materialize all its hopes and objectives in the greatest possible measure.

As you know, we are in the year of Shemittah which, among other things, is designed to "firmly impress on our hearts and minds the recognition that the earth which produces for man its annual harvest, does not do so of its own power and specific nature, but that there is a Master over its masters.... There is an additional benefit accruing therefrom, namely, to strengthen man's trust in G-d.... (Sefer ha-Chinuch, Mitzvah 84).

To reflect more deeply on the subject of Shemittah:

The soil and the toil connected with it are the most materialistic aspects of human endeavor, since there is nothing lower in the scale of nature than inorganic matter, and no grosser toil than tilling, sowing and reaping. Yet, by the fact that the landowner refrains from all agricultural pursuits for a whole year, because the Creator and Master of the world commanded him so to do - he brings holiness into his most materialistic aspects of life, and purifies and spiritualizes even gross matter, to the extent that the earth itself is credited with celebrating "a Sabbath unto G-d."

Furthermore, agricultural pursuit is an area wherein dependence on human toil and on the laws of nature is most conspicuous. There seems, apparently, no rhyme or reason to expect that the absence of toil would be beneficial. Yet, in response to the Divine commandment, the farmer ignores his own reasoning, defies the laws of nature and puts his absolute trust in G-d. And it is precisely by thus surrendering himself to the Creator of all things, and uniting his will to the Will of G-d, that he not only reaps great spiritual benefits, but also an abundance of material goods, since G-d had promised such reward -

"For I will command My blessing unto you!" - sending His generous blessings in a most wonderful and completely supernatural way.

To be sure, the actual fulfilment of the laws of Shemittah is confined to our Holy Land. But as in the case of all the Torah and its Mitzvoh, the physical fulfilment may be limited in time and space, but in their inner aspects they are universal, timeless and unlimited.

The general message of Shemittah is the abrogation of the notion of dualism of Matter and spirit. The Torah teaches us, on the contrary, that there must be no separation between the spiritual and the material; that there is no area in either nature or in human life from which G-d can be excluded;

This is the deeper significance of the Divine Unity which we Jews proclaim daily (in the Shema) and which we are enjoined to teach to our children. The basis of true Jewish education is to instill into the children this faith, conviction and feeling in G-d's Unity.

And a more specific point:

The "Shemittah" aspect in human life applies especially to the earliest period of man's development, i.e. to his infancy and youth, where the laws of nature apparently play a most conspicuous part. From birth the infant is catered for primarily physically, and some parents, unfortunately, get the idea that that is all that matters. And when the child reaches the age of education, some misguided parents think that a minimum-Torah - education is the maximum that can be expected of them. Yet, they forget that we Jews are not subject to the laws of nature in the same way as others, for by attaching ourselves to G-d we can defy the laws of nature.

Applying the message of Shemittah - the Torah teaches us that even in this period of infancy we must bring holiness into his life, by taking great care regarding the Kashrus of his feeding, and by giving the infant and child a truly kosher Jewish education, he will not only prosper spiritually, but also physically.

You, instructors and leaders of the Release Hour and other child educational activities, who come in contact with children of such misguided parents, must be surely filled with great compassion for them. It is your great privilege and duty to be those who are to instill into them true Yiddishkeit in such a way as not only to provide a temporary remedy, but to fulfil the ultimate objective of your organization - to lead them to their true and full happiness by bringing them under the wings of a complete and Torah-true education. When this is done sincerely and resolutely, the success goes even further, as it is written (end of Malachi) "And he shall bring back the hearts of parents 'toward' children" - which Rashi explains - "through the children", "by telling the children to go to their parents and urge them to abide by the ways of G-d".

May G-d grant that through such dedicated work, the other part of the prophecy mentioned there will be fulfilled, namely: "Behold, I send unto you Elijah the prophet," to herald the True and Complete Redemption, speedily in our time.

With blessing

M. Schurman