

By the Grace of G-d
26th of Teves, 5742
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Greeting and Blessing:

This is my first opportunity to acknowledge receipt of your letter of Dec. 15, 1981. In it, after kindly paying tribute to the work of the Lubavitch movement, you express your reservations about the "Tzivos HaShem" Campaign, on the ground that it is based "on the glorification of the military and an aggrandizement of arms, wars and battlefields."

A letter is hardly the proper medium to explain fully the reasons that impelled us to introduce the establishment of the Tzivos HaShem organization, the purpose of which is to bring young Jewish children closer to Torah and Mitzvot, as I am glad to note you fully recognize. Needless to say, it was done only after due deliberation, which I can only briefly outline in this letter.

To begin with, "Tzivos HaShem" - as you surely know - is not a "foreign" idea. It is first mentioned in the Torah in reference to "G-d's Hosts" who were liberated from Egyptian bondage. The term is clearly not used in the strict military sense. Rather it indicates that the Hosts who had been enslaved to Pharaoh to serve him, were now G-d's Hosts, free to serve G-d, and G-d alone.

Of course, the Torah does not glorify militarism, war, and the like. On the contrary, "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." And, as our Sages declare, "the Torah was given to bring peace into the world," and "there is no greater Divine blessing than peace," and much more in this vein.

Parenthetically, with all the emphasis on pacificism, the Torah (from the root Hora'ah) also provides guidance in situations where military action is necessary, and prescribes the laws of warfare, as you are, of course, aware. To be sure, Rabbi Akiva's fame rests on his spiritual contribution, but there was a time when he found it necessary to be Bar Kochba's "arms-bearer," as the Rambam notes in his Code (Hil. M'lochim 11:2).

When the "Tzivos HaShem" was instituted recently, careful consideration was given to using a minimum of military trappings, and only such as would be consistent with the spirit of the Torah. For example, "spying missions", which you mention in your letter as one of your objections, was categorically excluded. Furthermore, the whole Campaign is limited to children of pre-Bar Mitzvah and pre-Bat Mitzvah age. The idea is that reaching that age they become fullfledged Jews, and by then they will have had the benefit of the experience, and will realize that it had served its purpose for them.

The question is: Since the term "Izivos HaShem" would seem to some people to smack of "militarism," what were the overriding reasons that outweighed such reservations as you expressed in your letter? Could not the same results be achieved through other means or other methods?

This brings us to the core of the problem.

As an educator, you know that children need motivation, but that is only one aspect of the problem. The most important aspect, in my opinion, in this day and age, is the lack of Kabolas Ol, not only of all Malchus Shomayim, but also general insubmission to authority, including the authority of parents at home and of teachers in school, and the authority of law and order in the street. There remains only the fear of punishment as a deterrent, but that fear has been reduced to a minimum because there has in recent years been what amounts to a breakdown of law enforcement, for reasons which need not be discussed here.

On the other hand, American children have been brought up on the spirit of independence and freedom, and on the glorification of personal prowess and smartness. It has cultivated a sense of cockiness and self-assurance to the extent that one who is bent on mischief or anti-social activity, feels that one can outsmart a cop on the beat, and even a judge on the bench; and, in any event, there is little to fear in the way of punishment.

As with every health problem, physical, mental or spiritual, the cure lies not in treating the symptoms, but in attacking the cause, although the former may sometimes be necessary for relief in acute cases.

Since, as mentioned, the root of the problem is the lack of Kabolas Ol, I thought long and hard about finding a way of inducing an American boy to get used to the idea of subordination to a higher authority, despite all the influence to the contrary - in the school, in the street, and even at home, where parents - not wishing to be bothered by their children - have all too often abdicated their authority, and left it to others to deal with truancy, juvenile delinquency, etc.

I came to the conclusion that there was no other way than trying to effect a basic change in the boy's nature, through a system of discipline and obedience to rules which he can be induced to get accustomed to. Moreover, for this method to be effective, it would be necessary that it should be freely and readily accepted, without coercion.

The idea itself is, of course, not a novel one. It has already been emphasized by the Rambam in the Introduction to his Commentary on Mishnayot, where he points out that although ideally good things should be done for their own sake (lishmoh), it is necessary to use inducements with young children until they are old enough to know better.

Thus, a "pilot" Tzivos HaShem was instituted. It immediately proved a great success in getting the children to do good things in keeping with the motto V'Ohavto L'Reacho Komocho, coupled with love and obedience to the "Commander-in Chief" of Tzivos HaShem, namely HaShem Elokei Tzivo'os.

The Tzivos HaShem Campaign has a further reward, though not widely applicable to Jewish children attending Hebrew schools. This, too, has already been alluded to by our Sages, in their customary succinct way, by saying that a person born with a violent nature should become a (blood-letting) physician, or a Shochet, or a Mohel - in order to give a positive outlet to their strong natural poppensity (T.B. Shabbos 15 6a). Thus, children that might be inclined to aggressiveness, and hence easy candidates for street gangs, and the like, would have a positive outlet by diverting their energy in the right direction.

This brings us to the point that although the ideal of peace is so prominent in the Torah, as mentioned, the fact is that G-d designed and created the world in a way that leaves man subject to an almost constant inner strife, having to wage relentless battle with the Yetzer Hora. Indeed, the Zohar points out that the Hebrew term for bread - lechem - is derived from the same root that base and sublime natures in man, whether he eats his bread as a glutton, in a way an animal eats its food, or on a higher level - to keep the body healthy in order to be able to do what is good and right in accordance with the Will of the Creator.

This is the only kind of "battle" the Tzivos HaShem are called upon to wage. By the same token, the only "secret weapon" they are encourage to use is strict Shabbos observance and other Mitzvoth which have been the secrets of Jewish strength throughout the ages.

Our experience with Tzivos HaShem - wherever the idea has been implemented, in the U.S.A. and Canada, Eretz Yisroel, and in many parts of the world - has completely convinced us of its most successful positive results, with no negative side-effects whatever. I can only hope that it would be adopted in other sectors, outside of Lubavitch, in growing numbers.

I trust that the above lines will not only put to rest all your apprehensions concerning Tzivos HaShem, but will also place you in the company of the many prominent educators and spiritual leaders who have enthusiastically acclaimed the Tzivos HaShem operation as uniquely successful in attaining its desirable goal.

With esteem and blessing