

The Rabbinic Ideal of the Peacemaker: David Hartman Reads Maimonides' Laws of Hanukkah

By Noam Zion

On A Personal Note – A Dedication to my Worldview-shaping Teacher

David Hartman has always transformed the way his students look at their Jewish worldview by his power to ask hard and personal questions. He always called himself the Socratic philosopher, the gadfly whose mission is to force us to reexamine the apparently banal Jewish aphorisms and the most mundane halachic minutiae. In the earliest informal classes he offered in his home on Friday mornings in the 1970s we used to read Pirkei Avot and listen to him ask questions such as whether the Rabbinic sayings reflected a Freudian or an existentialist approach to life. He never tried to compel us to accept a systematic view, but piecemeal he invited us to rethink the classic text in a new frame of reference. I remember in particular his exposition of the school of Hillel as the peaceseekers whose pluralist notion of truth set the tone for the whole innovation of rabbinic culture over Biblical-prophetic culture – the value of disagreement preserved and enhanced and negotiated. In halachic contexts, even seemingly trivial ones like whether to use one's oil for the Shabbat or the Hanukkah lamp, his most insistent question was Maimonidean – what kind of religious personality is to be fostered by ruling one way or the other on ritual matters.

I would like to recapitulate and to develop one of David Hartman's classic arguments about Maimonides' integration of halacha and aggadah – the preference for Shabbat over Hanukkah candles as well as to reflect on his view of the heroic personality as the compromiser, not the fanatic.

Hanukkah not only commemorates past events, it celebrates the human virtues that shaped those events as well. Those are the martial traits of the priestly Hasmoneans led by Mattathias, the zealot, and by Judah Maccabeus, the warrior. Those values have their place in any society that seeks to defend its religious freedom, its national autonomy and its sacred places.

However, these uncompromising, combative virtues can be problematic in everyday life. Therefore the Rabbis - though ambivalent - sought to temper this heroic stance appropriate for extreme situations, by constructing an alternative model more suitable to normal conflict resolution. On one hand, they still honored the memory of the impassioned priestly Mattathias (166 BCE), who like his ancestor Pinchas, the priestly zealot, stabbed to death a Jew collaborating with a non-Jew in a public desecration of holy values. On the other hand, the majority of Rabbis (from the school of Hillel) actively cultivated and emulated the model of Pinchas' peace-seeking grandfather, the High Priest Aaron, and his descendants who are idealized as the quintessential pursuers of peace within society. Opposite the "jealous/zealous God" of Mount Sinai who brooks no adulterous flirtation of his spouse Israel with idols like the golden calf, the Rabbis promoted an image of God as compromising the honor of his name in order to bring

peace between earthly spouses. Most of the Rabbis preferred the Aaron model to the Pinchas / Mattathias model of Jewish priestly leadership.

Oddly enough the confrontation of the combative, national values of the Hasmonean heroes and the pacific values of family conflict-resolution is discussed in the Jewish legal discussion of what seems a purely ritual question: When on Friday evening of Hanukkah one does not have enough oil (or money to buy sufficient oil) to light both the Shabbat candles and the Hanukkah candles, then what takes precedence? Using insights I have learned from my teacher Rabbi David Hartman, let me explain how this shortage of oil becomes, in Maimonides' great work of Jewish law, the Mishne Torah, an occasion for praising the Maccabees for their uncompromising defense of Jewish sovereignty and self-respect, yet ultimately Maimonides gives priority to family values of compromise.

Maimonides: In Praise of Jewish Sovereignty

Maimonides summarizes the laws of Hanukkah in a unique way in Rabbinic tradition. He alone – unlike the Talmud or the Shulchan Aruch – opens his laws of “how” to light Hanukkah candles by reviewing the military struggle that led to national independence. Yet paradoxically Maimonides alone concludes these laws with a panegyric of peace – “Great is Shalom, for the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world.” David Hartman has always emphasized that the place of a statement within Maimonides' architectonic Mishne Torah. In particular, the final halacha in a thematic section of laws is often markedly aggadic in contrast with the legal material and serves to place the detailed subject matter in a larger context. Maimonides himself holds that aggada, that is philosophy, is an essential component of halacha and David Hartman has always sought to deconstruct the artificial dichotomy of the so-called esoteric philosophic *Guide to the Perplexed* with the purportedly merely legal public nature of the Mishne Torah. In the Laws of Hanukkah the first halacha is also strategically located and its uniqueness is its historical orientation. Having no Torah-based command with which to begin the collection of laws, it begins with a highly ideologized history rather than a citation of the rabbinic origins of the law of candle lighting. While the Shulchan Aruch opens with and focuses on the miracle of the cruse of oil that burnt for eight days in the Temple rededication, Maimonides begins with the national emergency:

In the Second Temple period [167 BCE] the Greek kings decreed evil decrees on Israel: they abolished their religion, prevented them from studying Torah and doing mitzvot, stretched out their hands to take their money and their daughters, entered the inner sanctum of the Temple, violated its restrictions and defiled its purities. Israel was terribly distressed because of them and the Greeks oppressed them very greatly. Then the God of our ancestors felt mercy for all Israel, saved them from their hands and rescued them. The Hasmonean priests, killed the Greeks and saved Israel from their hands and then established a monarchy led by their priestly descendants – [not by King David's tribe of Judah] – and restored sovereignty to Israel for over 200 years until the destruction of the Second Temple [70 CE].

And when Israel overcame its enemies and wiped them out – it was the 25th of the month of Kislev [164 BCE], - then they entered the inner sanctum of the Temple. They were unable to find pure oil in the Temple except for one cruse of oil that could last one day only. They lit from it the Temple candles for eight days while in the meantime they were pressing olives and extracting pure oil.
(Mishne Torah, Book of Festivals, Laws of Hanukkah Chapter 3: 1-2)

Although Maimonides mentions secondarily the cruse of oil that burned for eight days, he speaks with pathos of the Greek kingdom's evil decrees against Israel – its religious laws, its Temple, its financial resources and its daughters. Then God has mercy on his people and “saves” them by allowing the Hasmonean priests to “save” them and by reestablishing Jewish autonomy in the form of a priestly royal dynasty.

Several points need to be highlighted in Maimonides' historical reconstruction:

(1) The “saving act” is God's intervention via human military and political action, thus both God and the Hasmoneans are “saviors.”

(2) The persecution was aimed at Israel. Therefore God's and the Maccabees' battle was to save Israel from the Greeks, not to save God's Temple and God's honor from desecration. Unlike the First Book of Maccabees that portrays Mattathias as a zealot in the tradition of Pinchas who is defending God's jealously guarded dignity, Maimonides speaks in national religious terms about Israel's desire to protect its own religious laws as well as to achieve political autonomy. The loss of Torah is the first aspect of Jewish persecution, but “the Greeks' putting their hands on our money and our daughters” is equally grievous. The parallel of money and daughters, so strange to our ears, may refer to the indignity of adults who cannot prevent the invasion of their homes, their pockets, and their carefully protected daughters. It is similar to the “invasion of the inner sanctum of the Temple, the violation of its limits and the desecration of its purity.” The Greeks threatened not only our religious freedom or God's sacred space, but our self-respect and autonomy as individuals, as families and as a nation. Therefore Maimonides – unlike any earlier or later rabbi – completes the narrative of redemption, not merely with the purification of the Temple, but with the return to national sovereignty “for two hundred years.” If the last subject of the Mishne Torah's 14 volumes is the laws of the king and the messianic state, the last subject of the Book of Festival Times is Hanukkah whose history is constructed as a return to national sovereignty.

Hanukkah Candles: Going Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Maimonides' introduction with its nationalist strains can be used as an interpretative key to understand the rationale of the ritual laws of how to light Hanukkah candles that he summarizes from the Talmud. The nationalist values are volunteerism, public display of one's collective symbols and self-sacrifice for the community. Perhaps some of the ritual requirements of candle lighting echo those values symbolically.

For example, while one candle is legally sufficient for each night of Hanukkah, (not one per night but one candle alone along with the *shamash*), one who wishes to “expand and beautify the mitzvah” (*hiddur mitzvah*) is commended for lighting multiple candles each night – one for each night that has passed – and for multiplying the number of family members lighting their own set of candles (Laws of Hanukkah 4: 1-2). Perhaps the volunteerism of the Hasmonean children is repeated in the voluntary act of every family member lighting multiple candles.

The candle must be placed at the doorway or the window closest to the “public space” in order to be seen by passersby who are still outside returning from the market place. They should burn for up to a half hour after sunset (Laws of Hanukkah 4:7). Only in times of danger may the Hanukkah candle be placed inside the house on the table (4:8). Perhaps the concern to propagate knowledge of the miracle of Hanukkah, from the family space to the public space, reflects the reversal of the process of persecution described above. The Greeks, who dominated the public space, sought to invade the private spaces of our homes, our pocketbooks, our Temple and our daughters. The Hasmoneans regained control of the public space in reestablishing the “kingdom of Israel.” In the contemporary experience every North American Jew who leaves the Christian public space of the Christmas season and comes to Jerusalem for Hanukkah feels the national significance of a Jewish public space.

(c) The Hanukkah candle lighting – even though legally speaking it has no roots in the Torah – is still very important and enormously popular. Maimonides says people should be willing to compromise their personal dignity to promote this symbol of God’s redemption of our national dignity.

The mitzvah of lighting a Hanukkah candle/lamp is a very well-loved mitzvah and so one needs to be very careful to do it in order to proclaim the miracle and to add praise to God and gratitude for the miracles he did for us. Even if one has nothing to eat except from tzedakah (handouts). One should borrow money or sell one’s coat in order to purchase oil and lamps to light. (Laws of Hanukkah 4:12).

In Jewish tradition a poor person’s coat is the last thing to part with. The Torah requires someone who took a poor person’s only coat as collateral against a loan to return it every evening so the poor person has a garment to sleep in (Exodus 22:25-26). Yet to purchase oil in order to light a symbolic lamp in the window on Hanukkah is worth the indignity of selling your last coat or even going into debt. That level of self-sacrifice may be related to the Maccabean virtue of sacrificing their family’s comfort to defend the nation’s religious way of life.

Maimonides’ praise for the Divine-human military rescue celebrated by the Hanukkah lights is expressed in the priority Hanukkah oil takes over Shabbat wine for kiddush. The rabbis required a Jew to sanctify Shabbat on Friday evening by saying kiddush (the sanctification of the day concluding God’s creation) and by joining this

dedication ceremony of holy time to a toast over wine, a symbol of high culture. (Note that kiddush sanctifies the day, not the wine, and may be pronounced even without wine when necessary.)

If someone has only one coin and one is confronted with the [simultaneous mitzvot] to say kiddush over wine [on Shabbat] and to light the Hanukkah lamp, then one should give priority to buying oil for the Hanukkah lamp over wine for kiddush. Since both mitzvot derive from the Rabbis' legislation [and have equal status legally], it is better to prefer the Hanukkah lamp that contains the memory of the miracle.
(Laws of Hanukkah 4:13)

God's historic redemption of Israel from Greek persecution is in some sense more important than the kiddush over wine which commemorates God's involvement in the creation of nature.

Giving Priority to Shabbat over Hanukkah

Maimonides, more than any other Jewish legal scholar, tried to promote the miraculous Divine-human military rescue of Israel celebrated on Hanukkah. Yet he concludes the Laws of Hanukkah and with it the whole Book of Festivals, with the "victory" of Shabbat candles over Hanukkah miracles.

If one is confronted with the [simultaneous mitzvah] to light one's household lamp [for Shabbat] and to light the Hanukkah lamp... then the [Shabbat] household lamp takes precedence because it contributes to *shalom bayit* (domestic peace and tranquility). After all, the Divine name is also to be erased [in the Biblical ritual of the wife suspected of adultery - *sotah*] in order to facilitate the making of peace between man and woman. Great is shalom (peace)! For the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world as it says in the Bible: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).

(Laws of Hanukkah 4:14)

The legal problem raised by Maimonides is as follows: On the one hand, Shabbat candles must be placed on the table for their light to accompany the whole Shabbat meal (approximately 4 hours) in the family space. Though there is no Biblical commandment to light Shabbat candles, the Rabbis enacted this mitzvah giving it three rationales:

- 1- The candles are a way "to honor Shabbat (*Kibbud Shabbat*) because no important dinner is held without light" (Rashi, on T.B. Shabbat 25a);
- 2- Candles add to the enjoyment of Shabbat (*Oneg Shabbat*) since "one who sees the food enjoys it much more than one who eats it in the dark" (T.B. Yoma 74b);
- 3 - "A candle contributes to family tranquility (*Shalom Bayit*) for in a place without a

lamp there is no peace since in the dark people trip and fall” (ibid.). At a Shabbat table without the light to see each other’s faces there is no social intercourse, no family integration.

On the other hand, Hanukkah candles may not be used for personal benefit, therefore making them the polar opposite of Shabbat candles, which must be used for the family’s benefit. Given that the same candle may not serve for both Shabbat and Hanukkah, when there is a shortage of oil (or of money for oil), then halachic priorities must be determined. The issue, of course, is not merely in those rare cases of poverty, but the establishing of a value preference between what Hanukkah and Shabbat candles represent.

Maimonides chooses to conclude the Book of Festivals by declaring that Shabbat candles, which stand for domestic peace, take priority over Hanukkah candles that proclaim a Divine-human military victory. The private realm of the home takes precedence over the public realm of politics and religion. The virtues of peace-seeking compromise must be preferred over the uncompromising idealism of the zealot. The God of compromise who would forego his honor to encourage a husband to forego his jealous suspicions of his wife is prior to “the zealous/jealous God” who inspires zealous priests to execute idolatrous traitors. Just as the conclusion of the Laws of Kings at the end of the Mishne Torah transcends the political realm and emphasizes the opportunity for individual study of Torah as the key to personal redemption, so the Laws of Hanukkah and the holidays in general conclude with a defense of the family values of peace.

In David’s reading of Maimonides the goal of the *Guide to the Perplexed* – both intellectual perfection and a life of ethical *imitatio dei* – is also the goal of the Mishne Torah for a larger part of the population. In both cases the private realm – home life and individual Torah study – help to heal the dangers of the heroic political life of fanatic nationalists and triumphant messianists by placing them in their instrumental perspective as means to higher ends.

Constructing a Counter-hero: The Compromiser versus the Zealot

David Hartman has often located the site of the contemporary religious struggle not on the cognitive belief level but on the level of the heroic anthropological figure. In the competition of modern secularity with religion he has emphasized the image of the passive self-sacrificing Jewish martyr as the greatest barrier to contemporary Jews who wish to take their own destiny into their hands. Much of his book *A Living Covenant* may be understood as offering a heroic Rabbinic image of human beings which is assertive rather than self-sacrificial. “I sought to delineate a possible religious anthropology of Judaism by drawing upon features of the Judaic tradition that encourage observant Jews to manifest a sense of adequacy, dignity and initiative in their covenantal relationship with God.” (*A Living Covenant*, p. 42). This healthy self-assertion of the human being is very different than either two other kinds of assertive activists. One is the insecure individual or people whose sense of being delegitimated, as in the case of Galut Jews who have absorbed anti-semitic stereotypes of themselves as the victim. Living out their

trauma of remembered insults they are unable to compromise lest it repeat the trauma. Compromise is defeat, impotence and demasculation. That is one reason that David has been opposed to developing a national ego shaped primarily by nursing memories of the dehumanization of the Holocaust. A second form of assertive activism which is dangerous is the Zealot who totally denies his/her own interests and needs and identifies wholly with God's purported needs and honor. Thus in the guise of total self-sacrifice the zealot feels obligated to defend Divine honor without compromise. Sometimes the zealot seeks out opportunities to sacrifice one's life for God even where the halacha commends compromising one's principles to preserve life. Maimonides, as David points out, forbids would-be martyrs from self-sacrifice where the law gives priority to life over the violation of the law – whether in the case of Shabbat observance or religious persecution.

The Maccabees may be presented as heroes under either of those problematic rubrics for Maimonides describes them as reacting to the desecration of their daughters and their private space, on one hand, and God's Temple on the other. David has argued that the crisis of modern hero worship in Israel has been that the compromiser is understood per se as a pragmatist at best and a self-interested career politician at worst but never as a hero of bridge-building coalition politics. Only the fanatic defending one's principles or at least personal dignity to the bitter end is worthy of emulation in the eyes of many contemporary Israelis. However there is a different kind of heroism which is activist yet compromise-seeking, passionate yet pluralist.

David has sought to present Bet Hillel and the rabbinic culture of pluralism and compromise as this alternative heroic model. The Hillelite view that one should present Bet Shammai's views ahead of their own is well-known as well as Hillel's amazing patience in the face of insulting questions by students who wagered unsuccessfully that they could make Hillel angry. Bet Hillel has taken the realm of Divine sanctity – the Temple – and the traditional zealot – the Levite and High Priest – and remade them in their own image as the great peace seekers especially in the family realm..

Mishnah: Hillel says, "Be among the followers of Aaron; for Aaron loved shalom and pursued shalom. He loved humanity and brought people close to Torah."

Midrash: What does "love shalom" mean?

It means that we should bring harmony between each and every person in Israel, just as Aaron himself tried to bring harmony between each and every person. As it says, "The Torah of truth was in his mouth and unkindness was not on his lips. In peace and righteousness he walked with Me; and he prevented many from doing wrong" (Malachi 2:6).

Rabbi Meir asked, What does "He prevented many from doing wrong" mean? We could illustrate it as follows: Whenever Aaron encountered even someone of questionable reputation, he would stop and say "shalom." On the next day, that same person might want to do something wrong, but would stop and think to himself: "What would happen if I run into Aaron? How could I look him in the

face? When he says “shalom” to me, I would be ashamed. Consequently, that man would restrain himself from wrong.

Another example: If two people were feuding, Aaron would walk up to one, sit down next to him and say, “My child, don’t you see how much your friend is tearing his heart out and rending his clothes.” The person would then say to him/herself: “How can I lift up my head and look my friend in the face? I would be ashamed to see him; I really have been rotten.” Aaron would remain at his/her side until s/he had overcome resentment (*kinnah*, etymologically identical with the word for zealot, *kanai*).

Afterwards, Aaron would walk over to the other person, sit down next to him/her and say: “Don’t you see how much your friend is eating his/her heart out and tearing his/her clothes.” And so this person too would think to her/himself: “O, my God! How can I lift up my head and look my friend in the eye. I am too ashamed to see him/her.” Aaron would sit with this person too until s/he had overcome resentment. And finally when these two friends met, they embraced and kissed each other. Therefore, it is said of Aaron's funeral, “And they wept for Aaron thirty days, the entire house of Israel” (Numbers 20:20).

(Avot d’ Rabbi Natan “A” Chapter 12)

How do we know that Aaron never made a man or a woman feel bad about him or herself? Because it is written, “and all the house of Israel wept for Aaron.” Moses, however, rebuked the people with harsh words. Therefore, of him it is written, “and the children of Israel wept for Moses.” Not all of Israel. Moreover, just think of how many thousands in Israel are named after Aaron. Were it not for Aaron’s domestic peacemaking, they would not have been brought into the world!

Moses was a judge and it is impossible for a judge to vindicate both litigants for he must exonerate the innocent and convict the guilty. Aaron, however, was not a judge but one who brought peace between human beings [and between God and Israel].

(Avot d’ Rabbi Natan”B,” Chapter 25)

Aaron’s heroism is his willingness to sacrifice truth and justice as understood by Bet Shammai, for the sake of peace. He takes those values as instrumental to a higher value of reconciliation. In the language of Carol Friedman Gilligan in *A Different Voice*, Aaron embodies what is generally identified in Western society with the virtues of the good woman – enabler, networker, forgoer of ego and honor for the relationships among ongoing members of the community, process- person and peace-maker who sees the private realm as the one of primary value. The great transformation of this rabbinic heroic figure is to make “him” so womanish. (This theme is dealt with in great depth by Daniel Boyarin in his treatment of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish)..

While David does not often use such gender arguments, he is very aware of the way the hero (*gibor*, a term tied etymologically to masculinity) has been transvalued by the

Rabbis from the conqueror of cities to the conqueror of one's inner urges and how God's image as the one who withholds his anger toward idol worshippers is the primary paradigm of this shift to self-control. In Lamentations Rabbah Petichta 24 – it is a Biblical woman – Rachel – who succeeds in teaching God to forego his ego-driven jealousy at Israel's adulterous affair with idolatry which had led to the destruction of the first Temple and the exile of his spouse and children. The Midrashic Rachel and her God – unlike the more one dimensional Aaron and Gilligan's good woman – achieve their heroism by hard-work and real sacrifice. They feel their honor desecrated, they feel the jealousy of the jilted husband and the upstaged sister, but they rise above it to embrace the sister and spouse. That is their heroism – the true *gibor's* "masculinity" is to have an ego and feel the pain of its self-contraction and yet choose a life-giving, relationship-building forgiveness and apparent self-denigration over a death-dealing last stand for principle.

Let me conclude with the midrashic story which is the narrative human counterpart of Maimonides praise for God's allowing his name to be erased for the sake of reconciliation with the jealous husband.

Trial by Ordeal: The Jealous Husband and the Rabbinic Peace-maker

In the Torah a "jealous/zealous husband" who suspects his wife of adulterous relations yet lacks conclusive proof may break off relations with her. She can establish her innocence by a trial by ordeal in which she goes to the sanctuary, takes an oath and drinks the bitter waters into which a parchment with God's name has been dissolved. Should she survive, then she has proven her innocence. The husband then must abandon his suspicions and be reunited with her. They are both granted a Divine promise that they will have children (Numbers 5).

In the Talmud, the Rabbis worked hard to minimize this trial by ordeal driven by male jealousies. For example, they insisted that there be prior warnings and then proof of the woman's repeated secret meetings with the suspected adulterer and that the husband not be suspected of his own extra-marital affairs. The ordeal was understood to be voluntary: only a woman who wanted to be reunited with her jealous husband would agree to this torturous way to reassure him that his suspicions were false. However the Rabbis did derive one positive value from this strange ancient rite: God was willing to command that his Divine name be erased just to ease the irrational fears of a jealous, easily-threatened husband, and thereby to help his wife who wants to be reconciled with him. Though God is zealous in defending his name against traitorous idol worshipping Jews, God volunteers to have his name dissolved into the bitter waters, which will clear a woman's name and restore marital, domestic peace. This, we saw, was Maimonides' rationale for preferring "domestic peace" over the national values of Hanukkah.

The Rabbinic preference for the value of compromise in family life is exemplified in the Talmudic story of Rabbi Meir whose popular lectures on Shabbat was frequented by, among others, a woman with a fiercely jealous husband.

"Spit in My Eye": Rabbi Meir's Marital Counseling

R. Meir used to give regular talks in the synagogue of Hamath [the hot springs in the

Golan Heights] every Shabbat eve. A certain woman of that town made it a habit to listen to his weekly sermons. On one occasion when he extended his talk to a late hour, she waited and did not leave until he finished.

But when she came to her home, she found that the lamp was out. Her husband asked her, “Where have you been until now?” She told him, “I have been listening to a rabbi’s talk.” Now, the husband said to her, “I swear by such-and-such that you are not to enter my house again until you spit in your teacher’s face.”

She left her house and stayed away one week, a second, and a third. Finally the neighbors asked her, “Are you still angry with each other? Let us go with you to the Rabbi.

When R. Meir saw them, he perceived the reason for their coming by means of the holy spirit. And so, pretending to be suffering from pain in the eyes, he asked, “Is there among you a woman skilled in whispering a charm for eye pain?”

Her neighbors said to her, “Go, whisper in his ear and spit lightly in his eyes, and you will be able to live with your husband again.” So she came forward. However, when she sat down before R. Meir, she was so overawed by his presence that she confessed, “My master, I do not know how to whisper a charm for eye pain.”

But he said to her, “Nevertheless, spit in my face seven times, and I will be healed.” She did so, whereupon he said, “Go and tell your husband, ‘You asked me to do it only once but I spat seven times!’”

His disciples said to him, “Master! Is the Torah to be treated with such contempt? If you had only told us we would have brought that husband and flogged him at the post until he consented to be reconciled with his wife.”

R. Meir replied, “The dignity of Meir ought not to be greater than that of his Maker. If the Torah enjoins that God’s holy Name may be obliterated in water in order to bring about peace between a man and his wife [in the case of the suspected adulteress (Numbers 5: 23-24)], all the more so may Meir’s dignity be disregarded.”*¹

¹ “The tale of the husband who told his wife: I vow that you may not have intercourse with me until you make Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Shimon taste your [awful] cooking!¹ Rabbi Yehuda tasted it [when asked by the wife as a condition for her reconciliation with her husband]. He explained: [I agreed to this demeaning activity that negatively reflects on my honor as a Torah scholar dragged into an ugly marital dispute] for it is only logical that if the Torah says that God’s name that is written in sanctity [as part of the tabernacle ritual of the purification of the suspected by her husband of adultery (*sotah*)] and yet is to be erased in the accursed waters on the suspicion [that the *sotah* is pure]. So too mustn’t I logically be willing [to diminish my honor] to bring peace between a man and a woman?”

But Rabbi Shimon refused to taste her cooking. He declared: Let it take until [this wife’s husband dies and she becomes widow and] all this widow’s children die before I will be moved from my place [to agree to eat this woman’s cooking and to let Torah scholars be so denigrated].

In the exemplary story of Rabbi Meir (whose name means to “give light”) a great rabbi forgoes his personal honor and the honor of the Torah in order to relight the lamp of domestic life that has gone out between a pious woman and her difficult husband. The husband, in some sense, views the rabbi as his “adulterous competitor,” a source of jealousy, and he seeks to keep his wife at home tending to his lamp and his needs especially on Friday night. The public study of Torah in the synagogue has become a threat to domestic tranquility on Shabbat evening, a prime time for conjugal intimacy.

While Rabbi Meir could have had the husband flogged until he recanted his jealous oath, he knew that legal and physical force would not lead to emotional reconciliation. Therefore he chose the pretext of spitting into his “eye” as a medicinal charm, to rekindle the lamp between husband and wife. He saves both the dignity of the wife and the husband and still fulfills the literal meaning of the husband’s punitive oath. The woman is not forced to choose between public Torah and domestic Shabbat.

As Rabbi Meir explains to his students, the ordeal of *sotah* (the suspected adulteress) with its erasure of God’s name is understood as a paradigm of ethical behavior placing the family peacemaker above the zealot. God’s own honor, as well as the Torah’s, is voluntarily compromised in order to promote *shalom bayit*. Here is David’s new hero and perhaps Maimonides’. A scholar devoted to elitist Torah study absorbs ethical virtues by *imitatio dei* that lead him to place the maintenance of traditional very flawed social relationships over a revolutionary and uncompromising priority of Torah. The push to public Torah education reins in its own tendency to destroy family structures at least when it comes to threatening husband-wife relations, though father-son relationships are disrupted by the rabbis with impunity. As David has often argued, Torah is not about the spiritual virtuosity of scholars or zealots but about the attempt to live as a broad-based community of sacredness and study embodied somehow with many compromises in the structures of the unredeemed world of families and politics and an unchanged human nature.

The heroic compromiser is the hero of a Judaism devoted to what Charles Taylor calls the contemporary valuation of the “everyday.” David would agree that Rabbinic Judaism is built on the everyday not on the messianic dream or on kabbalist theurgic dramas or even on the historic moments of near destruction and national redemption. Therefore the ideal virtues must be consistent with that focus on Shabbat tranquility not only on the more dramatic virtues epitomized by Hanukkah’s priestly warriors.

An additional reasoning was that husband should not become accustomed to make such vows so lightly [thinking they can always be released so easily].” (TB Nedarim 66b)