

To be a Lamplighter

By Menachem Mendel Schneerson

The Hasid once asked: "Rebbe, what is a Jew's task in this world?"

The Rebbe answered: "A Jew is a lamp-lighter on the streets of the world. In olden days, there was a person in every town who would light the gas street-lamps with a light he carried at the end of a long pole. On the street corners, the lamps were there in readiness, waiting to be lit; a lamp-lighter has a pole with a flame supplied by the town. He knows that the fire is not his own, and he goes around lighting all the lamps on his route."

The Hasid asked: "But what if the lamp is in a desolate wilderness?"

The Rebbe answered: "Then, too, one must light it. Let it be noted that there is a wilderness, and let the wilderness feel ashamed before the light."

"But what if the lamp is in the midst of a sea?"

"Then one must take off one's clothes, jump into the water and light it there!"

"And that is a Jew's mission?"

The Rebbe thought for a long moment and then said: "Yes, that is a Jew's calling."

The Hasid continued: "Rebbe, I see no lamps!"

The Rebbe answered: "That is because you are not yet a lamp-lighter."

The Hasid asked: "How does one become a lamplighter?"

The Rebbe replied: "One must begin with oneself, cleansing oneself, becoming more refined, and then one sees the other as a source of light, waiting to be ignited. When, Heaven forbid, one is crude, then one sees but crudeness; but when one is noble, one sees nobility."

Today, the lamps are there, but they need to be lit. It is written, "The soul of the human is a lamp of God,"¹ and it is also written, "A mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light."² A Jew is one who puts personal affairs aside and goes around lighting up the souls of others with the light of Torah and mitzvot. Jewish souls are in readiness to be lit. Sometimes they are around the corner. Sometimes they are in a wilderness or at sea. But there must be someone who disregards personal comforts and conveniences and goes out to put a light to these lamps, to ignite these souls. That is the true calling of a Jew – to be a lamplighter, an igniter of souls.

(From *A Different Light*, edited by Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre)

¹ Proverbs 20:27

² Proverbs 6:23