

THE CROWNS, by Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, Zichrono Libracha

- Zer Zahav can be read Zar. Zer or Zar which is it? That applies to the three furnishing of the Mishkan that were supposed to have a Zer Zahav: The Aron HaKodesh symbolizing our attitude to Torah, the Mizbeach symbolizing our attitude to devotion to Hashem and the community and sacrificing for it, and the Shulchan symbolizing our attitude to our homes and families. Which will it be? Zer or Zar? That depends on the fire we light within our hearts.

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A golden moulding, shaped like a crown, was fastened to three outstanding objects in the Tabernacle. These were the Ark where the tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept, the Altar upon which the sacrifices were offered, and the Table upon which the showbreads were displayed. Our sages say these are highly significant symbols. The Ark reminded us always to live according to the Torah's commandments and instructions. The Altar taught the lesson of sacrifice for the welfare of the community. And the Table symbolized the royal character of the Jewish home.

Now the Hebrew word ZER, which means a crown, is spelled with a ZAYIN and a RESH. When the vowel under the ZAYIN is a TZERE, it is pronounced ZER, a crown. But if the vowel under the ZAYIN is a KAMATZ, it is pronounced ZAR, which means a stranger. And so the Talmud comments as follows: "If a man is worthy it is a crown unto him, but if he is unworthy it is like a stranger to him (Yoma 72b). If a man is deserving, the Torah he studies, the commandments he observes, the services he renders, and the home in which he lives are like crowns of glory, making his life happy and beautiful. But if he does not conduct himself in a worthy manner, if there is a defect in his character or personal habits, then his life becomes cold, devoid of purpose and meaning.

We all know Jews who find no enjoyment in Jewish observance. They get no charge out of a Sabbath or a holiday, and they complain about it. Once, a Jew complained to me in this fashion, and I told him the story of the man who came to the Louvre, and after inspecting the fabulous art galleries, turned to the guide and said, "I don't see why everyone is so excited about these paintings! I can't see what they rave about!" "Monsieur!" the guide replied with deep resentment, "these paintings are no longer on trial. The greatest critics have already given their approval. It is you who are on trial - whether you are big enough to appreciate what you see." "So, my friend", I said to the man, "The Torah is no longer on trial. It has already gained the approval of the greatest masters of the ages. It has withstood the test of time longer than any other book and system of life in the world. It is you and I who are on trial, whether we are sufficiently wise to understand its teachings and receptive enough to be inspired by its festivals and symbols." In fact, will the Torah be a crown, or will we be strangers to it?

The same is true about public service as symbolized by the Altar. There are people who are happiest when they can be of service to the community and their fellow human beings. They love their communal activities, even though sometimes it takes a great deal of their private time away.

But despite these sacrifices, they enjoy their dedicated work, respond willingly and cheerfully to the call of service, and wear their service like a golden crown.

And you know many others who refuse to be involved in service to community, to Israel, to fellow men. They are strangers to serving others. And still others to whom serving is a chore, doing it unwillingly and with complaints, till they make life miserable for others. To them, service is not a ZER, but ZAR, a misery.

What is true with respect to the religious and social life of a person is equally true in his home life, for the life of a Jewish family can be a Zer, a crown, and unfortunately, there are homes where a person feels himself to be a ZAR, a total stranger in his or her own home, and that is a calamity indeed.

The table around which Jewish home life was always centred, created the aura of royalty. It made palaces of our homes. At that table there was a designated place for father and other, he the king, she the queen. There was no need for special family reunions. In some homes every day, in others only on Sabbaths and holidays, the table was a table of kings. Thank God that there are such tables and such homes, and in some quarters their numbers are increasing. But they are still too few. In many homes, rarely do more than two members of the same family eat at the same time.

If I were asked by a person who feels strange and out of place in the home, or with the ideas represented by the ark and the altar, I would say to him, "Don't look for faults outside of yourself. Look into your own heart and conscience. These crowns are created from within.

There is a story about a man who found frost on his windows and tried to scrape it off. "What are you trying to do?" His neighbour asked. "I'm trying to get rid of the frost because I can't see out. But as fast as I get it off one window, it comes on another." The friend shook his head and said, "Leave your windows alone. Light a fire inside. You will see that the frost will disappear by itself."

What good advice! When we feel our lives are chilled by a cold atmosphere, we must then pray that God help us light a fire of love with which to fill the home, with which to shine on the community, with which to embrace Torah, and there will be light and warmth in our hearts, and our homes. And we will be crowned with the crown of Torah, the crown of the altar, the crown of the table and home, ZER ZAHAV MISAVIV, embraced by these crowns, and warmed by them.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)