The mission of **Torah Is Geshmack** is to bring out the richness and enjoyment of Torah for everyone, and in doing so bring them closer to Hashem.

תשפ״ז

The Weight of What Came Before

Dovid Kopel

Our מנהגים (*customs*) are not peripheral to כלל ישראל (*the Jewish people*). They are part of the way תורה has been lived and transmitted from generation to generation.

There are well-known accounts from the early history of the Reform movement in which changes to long-established תפילה and communal practice began with things that appeared relatively small. Whatever the precise historical details of a particular example, the underlying lesson is worth considering. Changes that appear insignificant can represent something much larger. A מנהג (*custom*) may look small from the outside, but it carries generations within it.

Recently, I encountered someone publicly deviating from a well-established מנהג of בני אשכנז (*Jews of Ashkenazic descent*). It was done in a very visible way, to the point that it became something of a spectacle.

There is a tremendous difference between privately accepting a חומרא (*stringency*) because of a well-established מחלוקת (*dispute*) and publicly departing from an accepted מנהג. Someone who keeps רבינו תם for זמנים (*the halachic times of the day*), is careful about ישן (*grain from before the new crop*), or is stringent regarding פת ישראל (*bread baked by a Jew*) is not making a statement about everyone around him. He is following a recognized שיטה (*approach*) or accepting a particular חומרא upon himself.

However, publicly changing a well-established מנהג within the אשכנז community can carry a very different message.

Perhaps the person means nothing by it. Perhaps he is simply "doing his own thing." But once something is done publicly, it no longer exists only between that person and himself. Whether intended or not, it can become a statement about the מנהג everyone else is following. It can suggest that generations of Jews who carefully preserved that practice somehow missed something that we have now discovered.

For that reason, I am deliberately not describing what happened. I have no interest in embarrassing anyone, and the particular incident is not the point.

The point is simpler.

Before adopting your own "custom," speak to a Rav. Speak to someone who knows the סוגיא (*topic*), understands the מנהג, and appreciates the difference between a private חומרא and a public departure from communal practice.

This does not mean that everyone must become a cookie-cutter version of everyone else. כלל ישראל has always contained different דרכים (*paths*), different מנהגים, and different legitimate

expressions of עבודת ה׳ (*service of Hashem*). But there is a difference between finding your own דרך within the מסורה (*tradition*) and casually rewriting the מסורה itself.

Sometimes what appears to be individuality can simply reflect a failure to appreciate the weight of what came before us. There is a certain presumption in assuming that an established מנהג may be discarded simply because we personally prefer something else.

In the end, preserving מנהג requires humility.

May we each find our own דרך in עבודת ה׳ while remaining firmly connected to the מסורה handed to us. May our תורה and our מצוות (*commandments*), together with the מנהגים we preserve, bring greater גילוי (*revelation*) of הקב״ה into this world.

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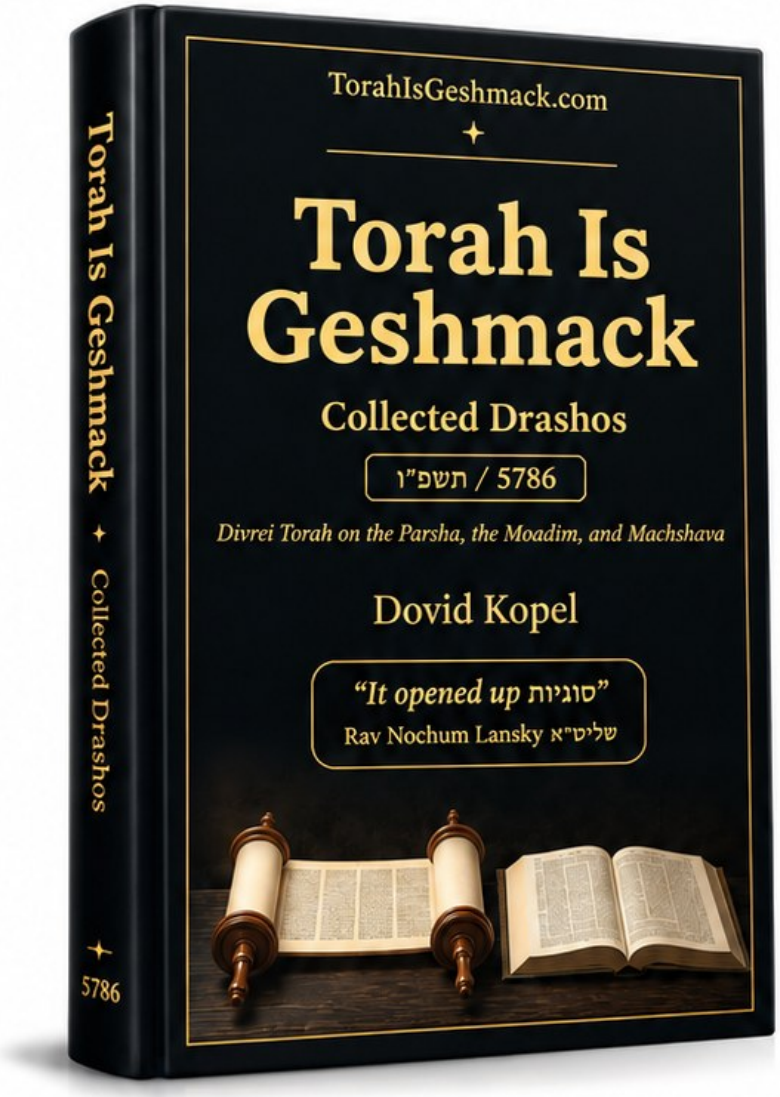
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