

Learning on “Nittel Nacht” Aryeh Lebowitz

- I. **Introduction.** Many Jews have a custom not to learn torah on the night preceding December twenty-fifth. While this custom has been prevalent in certain circles for centuries, there are few records of its origin or details. The dearth of sources on this topic can probably be attributed to the Christian censors who would not allow anything that can be construed as anti Christian to be published. The records of this custom that have made it through the censors are sparse. This essay attempts to collect the various opinions of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* as to the origins of this custom and their attitudes toward continuing the custom. [Most of the material mentioned here is taken from *Sefer Moadim L'Simcha* (Rabbi Tuviah Freund) *Kisleiv Tevet* chapter 13, and *Nitei Gavriel* (Rabbi Gavriel Ciner) *Minhagei Nittel*.]
- II. **The etymology of the word “Nittel”.** Before discussing the source of the custom not to learn, we will first focus on the etymology of the word “nittel”. This word was used by many *rishonim* (see *Rabeinu Yonah Avodah Zara 2a*, *Tosafot Rabeinu Elchonon* *ibid.*, *Sefer Haterumah* 134, and many other places) with alternate spellings. Some *rishonim* spelled it with a *tav*, while others spelled it with a *tet*. Apparently, the etymology was already ambiguous during the times of the *rishonim*. The following is a list of possible explanations of where this word originated:
 - A. The author of *Bnei Yisaschar*, in his *Sefer Regel Yesharah* (10) writes that because Jesus was taken (*natul*) from this world in this day it is called “nittel”.
 - B. *Moadim L'simcha* suggests that because Jesus was hung, and we do not want to refer to him by name, we call him the “nitleh” (one who was hung).
 - C. *Moadim L'simcha* quotes from *Sefer Nitzachon* that “nittel” is based on the Latin word for birthday, an obvious reference to Jesus' birth.
- III. **The source of this custom.** The basis of the custom not to learn torah on the night of the Christian holiday is subject to considerable debate amongst the leading authorities. Many of the explanations offered are *kabbalistic* in nature and therefore beyond the ability of this author to understand (see *Shem Mishmuel Derush Chanukah* 5677, and *Sefer Regel Yeshara* 10, both cited by *Nitei Gavriel*). The following is a list of some of the more prominent explanations offered for this practice:
 - A. *Ta'amei Haminhagim* (page 500) cites the *Sefer Likutei Hapardes* who explains that in earlier generations any Jews who were found in the streets on this night would be beaten, and any Jewish home with a candle lit inside of it would be the cause of a pogrom. Because Jews could not leave their homes, nor could they light a candle in their homes, they practically had no way to learn torah.
 - B. The *Korban Netanel* (manuscript cited in *Nitei Gavriel* page 388 note 4) explains the custom not to learn on this night as a form of mourning. The birth that is celebrated by the Christians on this day has been the source of

countless troubles for the Jewish people over the centuries, and is therefore comparable to the day that the *beit hamikdash* was destroyed. The *Chatam Sofer* cites this reason in the name of his esteemed teacher, Rav Natan Adler *zt"l*.

- C. The *Chatam Sofer* (*Kovetz Teshuvot* 31) himself rejects the previous explanation for multiple reasons. First, if this were truly a day of mourning, the custom should not differentiate between the first and second halves of the night. However, the custom is to refrain from torah study only during the first half of the night (until midnight). Furthermore, if the refrain from torah study were a true sign of *aveilut*, one should be able to learn *hilchot aveilut* and other similarly depressing areas of torah, just as we may do so on *Tisha B'av*. Instead, the *Chatam Sofer* suggests that it is well known that the Christians would arise at midnight to attend religious services. The rabbis were faced with the following dilemma. If all of the Jews were sleeping at the time that the non-Jews were running with fervor toward their religious service, it would look bad for the Jews. On the other hand, the rabbis did not want to institute a rule that people should wake up at midnight to engage in torah study, because that would appear as if we were mimicking the non-Jewish practice. The solution to this problem was to enact a decree against torah study during the first half of the night. The desired result was that those who normally learned torah during the first half of the evening, would sleep then, and wake up at midnight in order to learn their normal portion of torah for the evening. This way when the non-Jews were running toward their religious service, many Jews were engrossed in torah study.
- D. *Sefer Kedushat Tziyon* (page 129) points out that the *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 107b) states that the founder of Christianity was a student of Rabi Yehoshua ben Perachya. In spite of his considerable accomplishments in torah study, he managed to become a blasphemer. As such, this person is the greatest example of what the mishnah in *Avot* teaches us “the learning is not the primary goal, but the action is”. On the birthday of this man we illustrate that torah learning alone will not serve to make us good Jews. Instead we focus this evening on the actions, not on the learning.

IV. Objections to the custom. In *Eretz Yisrael* the custom was never accepted to observe *Nittel Nacht*. Similarly, Sephardic countries never accepted this custom. The obvious reason that Jews in Sephardic countries did not accept this custom is that there was almost no Christian presence in those countries. In Muslim environments there was no need to pay special attention to the origins of Christianity. Similarly, the Jews who inhabited *Eretz Yisrael* were mostly Sephardic or students of the Vilna Gaon. Neither of these groups was concerned with *Nittel Nacht*. For that reason, even those of Chasidic and Ashkenazic background who arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* accepted the prevalent custom in *Eretz Yisrael* not to observe *Nittel Nacht*.

In *Sefer Shemirat Haguf V'hanefesh* Rav Chaim Kanievsky reports that the *Chazon Ish* would learn on *Nittel Nacht*, and criticized those who did not learn

on that night. He explained that the custom not to learn is based on fear of the Christians, which, thankfully, is not a major concern nowadays.

Sefer Orchot Rabeinu 1:193 reports that the Steipler Gaon would learn on Nittel Nacht, but did so by heart so as not to upset those who have the custom not to learn. *Orchot Rabeinu* reports further that the Steipler once asked not to be informed when Nittel Nacht is so that he would not have to waste time from his learning.

- V. **Conclusion.** Many Jews have observed Nittel Nacht by refraining from Torah study on the evening of Nittel for centuries. The exact night on which people observe Nittel varies based on custom. A full understanding of the various customs requires a strong background in the workings and history of the solar calendar. Such an understanding, while certainly an interesting topic, is well beyond the scope of this essay. (For a clear explanation of the calendar and how it relates to Nittel, the reader is referred to *Sefer Moadim L'simcha Kisleiv-Tevet* pages 411-416.)

The custom of Nittel is one of the more perplexing customs the Jewish people have developed, and provides an interesting area of religious, sociological, and historical study. We have merely touched the surface with brief explanations for the custom, and a record of communities that have not accepted the custom. The reader is encouraged to study this matter further and gain insight into this most fascinating and counterintuitive custom.