Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR AX HANDLE COMES FROM? HOW'S YOUR TACHLIS?

There is a very wonderful instructive Medrash which tells how, at the time of creation, all the trees of the forest were up in arms when they heard that the Holy One, Blessed be He, had created iron, that deadly substance which could cleave through them all quickly and which could fell them all with just several successive blows. They quickly assembled and made their way before the Supreme Creator to register their protest. "Why have You created this substance?" they roared. "It will mean the destruction of all of us. How could You have done such a thing?" G-d quietly listened to their complaints and then retorted, "You have nothing to fear. If none of you will supply the wood for an ax handle the iron will be powerless against you."

I have often thought of this Medrash since I have been in Israel. Of course, its obvious meaning is that if Jews work together and don't, because of jealousy or other reasons, lend a hand to their enemies their enemies will be powerless against them , but it has another meaning as well: the importance of knowing the basic relationship between thing. The trees didn't know their own relationship to the iron and, as a result, their fears were exaggerated. Unfortuntaely, I am afraid that we, too, in modern day America have failed to recognize the basic relationship between things. We have stressed way out of proportion esthetics, the sense of smell, shiny surfaces, and have, by so doing, seriously undermined such basic human needs as a feeling of community and family and a feeling of rootedness to the earth and nature. After all, the meat we eat comes from a smelly animal and the vegetables we consume come from the dirty ground. But what's worse, we have failed to provide some basic human services because we felt we just couldn't erect facilities which were not esthetically pleasing or which would not conform to certain external standards. We have forgotten the Jewish concept of Tachlis, that you should judge something by what it does or what it can do but never by just what it looks like.

In Israel, up to now at least, there is a healthy appreciation of Tachlis. The basic relationship between things is still known. Many facilities don't look like much,

but they do the job. Israel's hospitals can't compare in externals to the ones in the United States, but in what counts, infant mortality, life expectancy, etc., they, in many instances, have a better record than the United States. How's your Tachlis? Do you know where your ax handle comes from?