

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS: HOGWARTS, HOLY TEMPLES, HUSHED HANDOUTS, AND HANUKKAH

Dvar Torah For Shabbat Hanukkah 5781

While everyone was going crazy over Harry Potter in the nineties, I never really got on that fandom train. I half-heartedly read the first two books, both of whose themes I barely recall. Thus, I surprised myself when I recently started obsessing about the title of the second book: *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*. I went as far as consulting one of my children, as well as Wikipedia, to recall the book's main theme. In their second year at Hogwart's, Harry and his friends investigate the opening of the chamber, which was created by Salazar Slytherin, a founder of the school and the founding namesake of Slytherin, the most racist and elitist of the school's four houses. The dark and forbidding chamber is occupied by the Basilisk, a fearsome serpent controlled by Slytherin's leaders who threaten to use it to murder students at the school whose family pedigrees are not pure-blood wizard.

Given my lukewarm interest in the series, what got me fixating belatedly on this title of JK Rowling's was its incidental precedent in ancient rabbinic literature. I'm being quite serious. Allow me to take you on my personal journey of seeming non-sequiturs, which I assure you will all make sense at the end of this essay.

The Mishnah (the ancient tradition of Jewish oral and common law) records the following about the *lishkat hashaim*, literally the Chamber of Secrets, that existed in the ancient Jerusalem temple:

There were two chambers in the Temple. The first was the Chamber of Secrets. The second was the Chamber of Vessels. Pious people would secretly make charitable donations to the Chamber of Secrets, while poor people of good background (who had lost their finances) would secretly sustain themselves from those donations in the chamber. (Mishnah Tractate Sheqalim 5:6)

Commenting on this passage, the sages of the less well-known Jerusalem Talmud provided an abundance of stories of rabbis who made regular charitable donations to others in secret. Writing well after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, they assiduously carried on this tradition of anonymous philanthropy for the poor. Almost a millenium later, Maimonides, the great scholar of Jewish law and philosophy, used this description of the Chamber of Secrets to describe one of the highest levels of *tzedakah*, the obligation of charitable giving:

The second highest level is one who gives tzedakah to the poor and does not know to whom he gives, and the poor person does not know from whom he receives. This is purely a mitzvah for its own sake, similar to the Chamber of Secrets in the Holy Temple. There the righteous would give in secret [and leave], and the poor, of good background, would sustain themselves from it in secret. (Mishneh Torah: Laws Of Gifts To The Poor 10:8. Translation taken from the Sefaria website: See sefaria.org.)

It seems that this Chamber of Secrets served three purposes: to ensure financial support for the poor of the community, to prevent the receiver, and the giver as well, from being embarrassed in the other's presence, and to mitigate the tendency of at least some donors to seek attention and accolades for their giving.

Certainly, *the spirit* of the Chamber of Secrets abounds today. Those of us who seek to help the poor often prefer to do it anonymously. Far from an exercise in callousness ("I'll help those poor people as long as I don't have to talk to them"), anonymous giving allows everyone to give and receive in a way that preserves people's privacy, and thus their dignity. The original Chamber of Secrets idea involved giving to the poor who were people of good families and backgrounds. As I alluded to above, this is a likely reference to people who had lost their resources and were reduced to poverty. Let me suggest that, especially in these days of pandemic induced hunger, everyone and anyone who comes for food assistance is considered a person of good family and background who has been reduced to poverty. All are unconditionally worthy of our help, and with no questions asked.

So, the spirit of the Chamber exists today, but can an actual Chambers of Secrets be found in our midst? In fact, yes. One of my favorite go-to charities –

the one that got me thinking about the original Chamber of Secrets – is located at the South End Children’s Café at 25 Warren Street, in Albany. In addition to providing meals and other support to the city’s poorest kids and their families, the café has built two outdoor cupboards right at its doorstep. Anyone anytime can drive or walk up to the door and anonymously drop off non-perishable food items; anyone anytime can drive or walk up to the cupboards and take items, no questions asked.

Imagine that those two outdoor cupboards are *our* Chamber of Secrets, just like the chamber in the ancient holy Temple. Every time we leave food there, we are, as it were, returning ourselves to that holy place: our simplest act of anonymous kindness at that moment is an opportunity to encounter the God of justice and mercy on a low-key, nondescript street in Albany.

Yet those humble cupboards are so much more, especially in light of our celebration of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. JK Rowling’s Chamber contains the darkest secret of lurking evil which threatens to swallow up innocent people in its darkness. Our Chamber of Secret allows us to give and receive food under the dark cover of blessed anonymity. This then allows all of us to do what the lights of Hanukkah remind us to do, especially at the darkest, coldest time of the

year: bring more and more light into the world by seeing to it that no one goes hungry and everyone has enough to eat. Shabbat shalom.