

Portion of Beha'alotcha

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

A number of years ago, I received a story from the front lines in Jenin. Some stories are a mitzvah to tell and retell...

During the fierce fighting in Jenin, Israel's Commander in Chief, General Shaul Mofaz came to inspect the fighting forces in the area. While briefing the commanders and officers, he noticed that one of his Major Generals, Avraham Gutman, had a long rip on his army shirt. When asked about the tear, Gutman told him that his mother had passed away the day before and that he had just come from the funeral. A traditional Jew committed to halachah, Gutman was fulfilling the ancient Jewish obligation of tearing of one's garment at the loss of a loved one.

General Mofaz immediately ordered him to leave the command post and return home to sit Shiva for his mother. Avraham refused his Commander in Chief and told the following story:

Upon hearing that his old unit had been called up for "Operation Defensive Shield", he had volunteered, and within days found himself in the thick of the fighting in Jenin.

In the midst of the second day of the battle, whilst in conference with his Regional Commander, Eyal Shlein, his cell phone rang. He saw that the caller was his 92-year-old mother. He wondered what could possibly be so urgent, as his family knew not to call him while he was in the army.

His mother said, "I have two things to tell you. The first is that as a commander in the field you have a responsibility to bring your soldiers back home, safe and sound."

Then she said: "Remember Avraham, you are my revenge against the Nazis."

With that she hung up.

Several hours later she had passed away and Avraham arrived at the funeral. The family had gathered to bring to rest this strong-willed woman who had survived the Holocaust and had built a family of proud, faithful Jews. Everyone was relieved to see Avraham back safe and sound, noticing a quiet determination about him, which they assumed must be due to a mixture of grief and battle fatigue. They could not anticipate the decision that Avraham was about to make.

"I am returning to battle. I have no choice. This was my mother's last request!" he said as soon as the burial was complete, and promptly left to return to the field.

Major General Avraham Gutman is 44 years old and really did not have to participate in the battles of this war. But there are moments in this world when we are given the opportunity to become partners in destiny. In that moment, Avraham Gutman tapped into four thousand years of Jewish history, and like hundreds of generations before him, answered the call.

*This week's portion, **Beha'alotcha**, begins with a brief discussion of the lighting of the menorah in the sanctuary.*

*“Vayedaber Hashem El Moshe Lemor: Daber El Aharon Ve’Amarta Elav, **Beha’alotcha Et HaNerot, El Mul Penei HaMenorah, Yairu Shivat HaNerot.**”*

And G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to Aaron and tell him: When you light the candles (of the menorah, in the sanctuary), the seven candles should give light opposite the menorah.” (Numbers 8:1-2)

One wonders what the menorah is doing here, immediately following the sacrifices of the Tribal princes marking the dedication of the tabernacle (Mishkan)?

The great medieval commentator, **Rashi**, bothered by this juxtaposition, offers a fascinating response:

“Why was the section describing the lighting of the menorah placed adjacent to the section of the tribal princes? Because when Aaron saw the dedication ceremony of the tribal princes, “chalshah az da’ato”, he became weakened (or felt faint) because he was not included amongst them in the dedication ceremony, neither he nor his tribe. So, G-d said to him: ‘your life is greater than theirs, for you light and prepare the candles (of the menorah).” (Numbers 8:2)

This is a strange response, to say the least. There are any number of possible reasons one could suggest for the menorah’s placement at this point. Most obvious, is the idea that immediately after the Mishkan is dedicated, the first mitzvah which Aaron, the new high priest (and through him the Jewish people) will begin to fulfill is the lighting of the menorah. Because the entire point of having a Mishkan (tabernacle), not to mention the mission of the Jewish people, is to spread light, and indeed to be a light.

So why does Rashi offer this complicated and difficult response?

Further, a closer examination of Rashi’s text is even more challenging. What was Aaron struggling with? The implication is that he saw all the other princes involved in the dedication of the Mishkan, and was deeply upset, perhaps even jealous, at the fact that neither he nor any representative of his tribe, Levi, was invited to participate. But why would Aaron be upset over missing one opportunity to sacrifice, when the very ceremony being celebrated also represented his initiation as the first High Priest in Jewish history? Indeed, to Aaron and his descendants was given the privilege of all the sacrifices in the Temple, forever!

Could Aaron have possibly been so shortsighted as to be upset over his exclusion?

And if Aaron was really so upset as to require a response from G-d himself, isn’t there a much better example of why Aaron need not feel left out?

On the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, in the holiest place in the Temple (the holy of holies), it is the high priest who offers the sacrifice that is meant to bring atonement for the entire Jewish people. Why isn’t this answer given to Aaron to appease him at the fact that he was not part of the dedication ceremony?

Even more challenging is how Aaron, held up as a role model for human behavior, could actually be jealous because he wasn’t included in the dedication ceremony? One would have expected Aaron to

feel joy over his fellow Jews' experience in dedicating the Tabernacle he would now serve in; how could Aaron actually be upset to the point that he actually became 'weak'?

Indeed, the character of Aaron is described in the Mishnah, in *Ethics of the Fathers* which exhorts us to: "*Be of the students of Aaron, who loves peace, pursues peace, loves all living (created) things, and brings them close to Torah.*" (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

And it is worth noting the response G-d gives to Aaron in this Rashi: "*Your life is greater than theirs, for you light and prepare the candles (of the menorah).*"

What does this mean, that your life is greater? How can one person's life be greater than another's? And why is this great service described as "*lighting and preparing the menorah*"? In the first place, the order is backwards. It should have said preparing and lighting the menorah. After all, first one prepares the wicks, and only after the menorah is prepared and ready to be lit, does the actual lighting take place. So, what is really going on here?

Perhaps the key to all this is in understanding the nature of Aaron's character, in the context of the mitzvah to light the menorah.

Aaron is the lover of peace and all living things. *Shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace is also one of the names for G-d. (In fact, this is why technically one does not say Shalom to someone in the bathroom, as that is one of the traditional names of G-d.) It comes from the root *Shalem*, which means complete, or whole.

The path to true peace is the realization that in the end, we are all really one. If we were all really able to tap into the idea that we are all bound up with one another, all a part of one another, then how could we ever be at war with each other? It would be as absurd as an argument between my right and left legs concerning in which direction we should all walk. If a person's two legs are headed in different directions, he will only end up in a wheelchair. Only when both legs work together can a person get anywhere. And this is the reality we so often miss in the world. The idea of war is absurd, because everything we want and are sadly willing to fight for, we can only really achieve when we work together. This is the true meaning of shalom.

The Midrash (rabbinic legend) relates that whenever Aaron would see two people fighting, he would take it upon himself to whisper in each fellow's ear: 'you know he (the other person you are arguing with...) really wants to make peace with you, but he told me he is too embarrassed....' And inevitably, each one, believing it was really the other who had initiated the rapprochement', would initiate a dialogue that led to peace and harmony.

What would possess Aaron to go out of his way to achieve conciliation amongst his fellow man? Only the realization that as long as any one is at war, we are all at war.

Perhaps Aaron, seeing the separate sacrifices of each of the princes, struggled, because as long as one of the tribes was not included, the picture was not complete; was not *shalem*.

How could a Mishkan (Tabernacle), meant to represent the entire Jewish people, be ready, when one of the tribes, even the tribe of Levi, who were meant to serve as the representatives of the entire Jewish people, was not included?

Indeed, the language **Rashi** chooses is fascinating: “*chalshah az da'ato*”, “*he became weakened*”. If Aaron believed his entire purpose in life was to be a vehicle for harmony in all of creation, perhaps this dedication, with each of the tribes offering separate sacrifices was in his mind, a challenge to his very purpose. One wonders if Aaron at this point was asking himself what his entire life has been about.

Recall that it was Aaron who was the vehicle for the sin of the golden calf, when the divisiveness amongst the Jewish people caused our greatest tragedy. So if the resulting life mission, to attempt to heal that rift, was really a mistake, Aaron must be left struggling with what the point of it all really is.

Ever wonder why some people can churn out seemingly incredible amounts of energy with nearly no sleep and little food, while others come home from the simplest 9 to 5 jobs completely exhausted? What gives us energy in this world is not really what we eat, but rather *why* we eat.

Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor who developed an entire system of therapy called logotherapy, in his *Man's Search for Meaning*, describes how men could lose the will to live in the camps and simply wilt away in front of you. His conclusion from all of his experiences was that what ultimately gives us strength in life is our sense of purpose, and mission. Conversely, when we feel we have no purpose, no real reason for being, we become exhausted. A person who believes in what he is doing, can work for hours on end to achieve his goals. But if you're stuck in a 9 to 5 job you neither believe in nor care about, you are exhausted from the moment you get to work...

Perhaps this is what Rashi's words are alluding to in describing Aaron as weakened.

Maybe Aaron was struggling with his sense of purpose. If the goal is for all of us to be together and become one, then why are we offering up all these separate sacrifices? Indeed, the Torah at the end of last week's portion, *Naso*, makes a point of repeating each Prince's sacrifice, even though they were identical, as if to stress that each tribe is somehow separate... All of which leaves Aaron wondering whether his entire reason for being has really been a lie?

And this is such a crucial point. Each one of us has a mission, a purpose on this earth. And our ability to recognize that fact in every human being, and indeed in all of creation, is the secret to the peace or wholeness we are all longing for.

One wonders then, why in fact Aaron was not included in that dedication?

Perhaps there are really two ideas at play here. Perhaps the tribes (as we shall see in the portion of *Matot*, please G-d...) were meant to represent the idea that in order to create a harmony of the many as one, we first need to respect the gifts every one brings as an individual.

The tribal sacrifices represent the idea that G-d gives us all different gifts. And we need to respect and see beauty in the fact that we are all so different. So often, people make the mistake of assuming that in order to achieve unity we all need to conform to the same perspective. Judaism, in allowing for the existence of different tribes, makes the statement that it is only by respecting each other's differences and *otherness*, that we can create true unity or *togetherness*.

And this is the secret of the menorah. The Torah actually makes the point of saying that all the flames of the menorah face the center. *El Mul Penei HaMenorah, Yairu Shivat HaNerot.*” “*When*

you light the candles , the seven candles should give light opposite the menorah.” Tradition (quoted by Rashi) explains this as a miracle, that the flames all leaned towards the center wick, in order to demonstrate that the menorah was not burning because G-d needed light, but rather we as a people are here only in order to give light.

The message of the menorah is all about purpose; our purpose as a people: to be a light unto the nations, and to be a shining example (not by creed, but rather by deed) of what a nation can be. And the fact that there are seven flames, as opposed to one fire, and yet that these flames all faced the one central flame, may well represent the idea that we need to achieve one-ness through appreciating otherness.

One wonders as well, whether Aaron, a prophet, had a sense of what was coming from these Princes (the *Nesi'im*). If ever there was an instance of individuals who had an incredible opportunity to rise to their purpose here on this earth, and through so doing change the course of destiny, it was these *Nesi'im*. For these are the same tribal princes who, in a few weeks, will be sent as spies into the land on that infamous mission resulting in disaster for the Jewish people. If ever there was an instance of not achieving and rising to the purpose for which they were here, it was these princes and their sin of the ten spies.

We, each of us, have a light that burns deep within us. Our challenge is in whether we succeed in uncovering that light and sharing it with the world around us. Maybe this is why G-d makes a point of elevating the task of preparing the candles, because this really is why we are here. If every person is really his or her own candle, perhaps the greatest thing I can do in this world, is to be a vehicle for *preparing* someone else to light his or her own candle. But the decision to actually light them is up to each one of us, from ourselves, and for ourselves. (In fact, it is interesting to note that **Maimonides** rules in his *Laws of the Beit HaMikdash* (chap. 9, based on the Talmud in Yoma 24b), that even a non-priest could light the menorah, but only a priest was allowed to *prepare* the menorah....)

Ultimately, every human being has the potential to be a living menorah in the world around him.

Just a few years ago, Major General Avraham Gutman demonstrated what a living menorah a person can be. But even more important, in so doing, he prepared us all for the possibility of achieving the same thing, each in our own way.

May Hashem bless us all to bring forth light into a world struggling with much darkness. And may we truly be worthy to be students of Aaron in every sense of the word: Lovers of peace and all of creation, and vehicles for spreading that light, the light of four thousand years of heritage, to all who wish to enjoy it.

Shabbat Shalom, Binny Freedman