

Then what should we do? – Parshat Beha'alotkha

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If, in the end, everything is from above, and without the Creator's help nothing we do has really has any significance, then what does it matter what we do? This is the topic of this week's discussion.

This week's Torah portion is called parshat *Beha'alotkha* and it covers a wide range of topics. The parsha begins with the mitzvah of the lighting of the candles of the Menorah in the Temple.

First, we will begin with an exciting Hasidic story. The Holy Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch) requested to spend Shabbat with the Holy Rebbe, Reb Baruch of Mezhibuz. (This is where the Baal Shem Tov had

lived. The Rebbe Reb Baruch was Rebbe Nachman's uncle, his mother's brother.) When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev expressed his wish to the Rebbe Reb Baruch, he agreed but only on the condition that he behaved in a restrained manner during all the meals and not make any overt gestures of enthusiasm. Due to his great desire to be allowed to stay, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak agreed on the spot.

In order to understand this seemingly bizarre condition, we must explain that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's path of serving G-d was like a blazing flame of fire. His body could hardly contain the intensity of his yearning and enthusiasm for serving G-d. When he prayed, he would start off facing in one direction and by the time he had finished his prayers he was facing another. When he would make the Shabbat evening *kiddush*, he would spill at least half if not more of the wine in his great fervor, without even realizing it. One year on the first day of Sukkot, the Rabbi stayed up all night in keen anticipation of being able to fulfill the mitzvah of waving the lulav and etrog. The moment the first rays of the sun pierced the horizon, he enthusiastically reached out his hand toward the glass cabinet and took out the lulav and etrog, blessing with much excitement at fulfilling the commandment of shaking the lulav, without even noticing that he had broken through the glass and shattered it, injuring his hand.

Now we will return to our story. With exhilaration, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak agreed to the harsh conditions that the Rebbe Reb Baruch imposed on him. The main thing was to merit to bask in the shadow of the holy Rebbe.

On a Friday night, the Rebbe Reb Baruch was sitting at the head of the table singing the Shabbat songs, and he seemed to be saying the words without any apparent special enthusiasm. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's soul was raging, but he remembered the conditions he agreed to, and he held himself back with all his might.

A hush passed through the hall. The Rebbe Reb Baruch made *kiddush* over the wine. The Rebbe said the words calmly and with a lot of concentration but again, with serenity and with no outward signs of anything special going on.

Those present washed their hands for the meal. They made the "*hamotzi*" blessing, and the Rebbe Reb Baruch served the fish and turned to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and asked him, "What kind of fish would you desire?" That was it! It was too much for Rabbi Levi Yitzchak! And in a mighty voice, he replied, "What kind of *fish* do I desire? What I desire is the Master of the Universe!" And in one moment, all the enthusiasm he was holding in gushed out, and half the table was flipped upside-down with everything on it. The soul of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak burst out with all his yearning for the Creator, and he could not stop himself.

The Rebbe Reb Baruch sat at the table calmly, and when Rabbi Levi Yitzchak caught hold of himself, the Rebbe Reb Baruch turned to him and told him: "It really was for nothing that I placed such conditions on you. I knew that this is how it would be. I will show you proof from the Torah that my way is the correct way regarding serving G-d." And he quoted him from our weekly Torah portion:

"And G-d spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you light the lamps, seven lamps should shine towards the face of the Menorah."' Aaron did so. He lit its lamps towards the face of the Menorah, as G-d had commanded Moses" (Numbers 8:1-3). Rashi comments on the words "And Aaron did so" and explains: "[This is stated] in order to relate the praise of Aaron, that he followed his instructions exactly."

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The Rebbe Reb Baruch continued: "Would we even consider that maybe Aaron would not carry out what the Creator commanded him? Rather," the Rebbe Reb Baruch explained, "it teaches us, in praise of Aaron, that he merited to such an important mitzvah of lighting the candles in the Temple, and in his great excitement, he could have light them in a way that half of the oil would have spilled on the floor, but he did not act this way and did what was required of him without any outward display of his excitement."

Of course, it is not fitting that we should take sides on this issue—if only we had even a tiny part of the holy enthusiasm Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had, but what we see here is two different ways of behaving in holiness. (The story as told by Rabbi Nachman Burstein, may he rest in peace).

This week we will deal with topic of the lighting of the candles in the Temple.

Our sages asked, "And did they really need this light?" For what reason do we light the candles in the Temple? Is the Creator not the source of light, that we would need to provide light for him? "Behold, during the 40 years that Israel passed through the desert were they not illuminated by His light?!" Our sages respond: "Rather, it is a testimony for all mankind that the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) rests on Israel." What exactly is the testimony? Rava said: The testimony is provided by the westernmost lamp of the Menorah, in which they place a quantity of oil equivalent to that placed in the other lamps, and nevertheless, it continues to burn longer than any of the other lamps. It burned so long that every evening, the priest would kindle the Menorah from it, and with it he would conclude the preparation of the lamps for the following evening's lighting (*Menuchot* 86b).

To explain what was happening here: every day the Kohen would

enter the Temple after the sun had set and would put oil uniformly in each of cups on the branches of the Menorah. The first one to be lit was the eastern light and he continued on with the light on the western side. When the Kohen arrived in the morning to prepare the candles for lighting on the next day, all the other candles had burnt out, yet the western candle remained burning. According to one opinion, the light remained burning until the evening and it was from this light that the next day's candles were lit. Then this light was extinguished and rekindled. Thus, the western light would keep burning even though according to the laws of nature it should have burnt out with the other candles. This was the testimony that G-d desired the *Shechinah's* presence in the Temple.

Rabbi Natan explains that this hints to the Divine service of a person which is comparable to the kindling and illumination of the light of the soul.

According to what we have seen, the light of the candles in the Temple was a testimony that the *Shechinah* dwelled with Israel because the western candle with which the lighting started, was the same candle which completed the lighting. This demonstrates for us how everything is from the Creator. The *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) would extinguish the candle and then rekindle it on his own even though it had remained lit in a supernatural manner, a sign that it the Creator's doing. So, if everything is from the Creator, why would the Kohen need to get involved and do anything at all?

The answer is that the Holy One, blessed be He, wants that we should do the best we can. Just as Rabbeinu once said, "I can turn all of you into wonderful complete *tzaddikim*, but what would that accomplish? It would be as if G-d were worshiping Himself" (*Chayei Moharan* 330). This is not the goal. The goal is for us to serve the Holy One, blessed be He. On the one hand, if it were not for the Creator's help, we would not be able to succeed in serving G-d, and on the other hand, although everything is from Him, we are obliged from our side

to make the effort and do our part.



"Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you light the lamps, seven lamps should shine towards the face of the Menorah."

This principle is clearly expressed in the lighting of the candles. G-d does not "need" us to light them, for it is He Who at the end of the day is the cause of everything that happens. Everything connected to the Kohen's most minimal actions: the lighting, the oil, the wicks, the candle, the fire—everything was created by G-d, and really, if He wanted to, He could simply provide the light himself. The proof of this is that "western candle which he used to light with is the one he would finish with." It was as if it lit itself. But still, the Creator wants us to do our part. The lighting of the Menorah should at least awaken us to serve G-d.

This all connects exactly with that which is written in the Midrash, that Moses had difficulty making the Menorah because there were so many details involved: the flowers, ornamental

buds, stems for the cups, etc. and all this had to be made from a single piece of gold. After Moses saw that he was uncertain about how to construct the Menorah, it formed itself on its own (Rashi, Numbers 8:4).

That is, in the same way that Moses had difficulty in succeeding with what he was instructed to do, G-d was teaching him that our job is to do whatever we can, and the success and the actual doing of the action is in the hands of the Creator to carry out.

Sounds simple? Absolutely not. The secret of the act of forming the Menorah is one of the most sublime things in creation. It is the secret of the Fiftieth Gate, which is known as the highest gate of holiness. Why?

The forty-nine gates of holiness are also the forty-nine gates of repentance. Anyone can enter them. But even if a person enters into the forty-nine gates, the Fiftieth Gate will remain closed for him. So how is it possible to enter it?

In *Likutei Moharan*, Rebbe Nachman teaches: "Whoever wants to truly repent should become accustomed to reciting the Psalms, because saying the Psalms helps a person to repent. There are fifty gates of repentance. Forty-nine of the gates can be attained and entered by any person, but the fiftieth gate is the aspect of the "repentance" of G-d Himself, because even by G-d Himself we find there is an aspect of repentance as it is written, "Return to me and I will return to you."

In this lesson, it is explained that these forty-nine gates correspond to the forty-nine letters in the names of the tribes (and as is known, every Jew has a part in the names of the twelve tribes of G-d). And parallel to these forty-nine gates, are the forty-nine days of the Counting of the Omer. Rabbi Nachman explains: "Thus, after we were purified in Egypt, we merited to go out from there. We counted the forty-nine days of the Counting of the Omer which are parallel to

the forty-nine Gates of Repentance, and this is also the aspect of the forty-nine letters in the names of the tribes. On the fiftieth day: 'G-d came down on Mount Sinai.' This is the aspect of 'I will return to you,' which is the aspect of the repentance of G-d Himself, the aspect of the Fiftieth Gate" (Likutei Moharan II:73).

Similarly, Rabbi Natan explains that the Menorah also reflects this aspect of the demonstrating a parallel to the forty-nine gates of holiness that anyone can enter. When the prophet mentions the Menorah (Zechariah 4:2) he describes seven lamps with seven ducts for each of the lamps. This means that each lamp had seven small channels that the oil would trickle through via the ducts (Rashi). Thus, we have forty-nine ducts that paralleled the forty-nine gates of repentance.

When a person does everything he can, despite the fact that he will be unable to enter the Fiftieth Gate, then The Holy One, blessed be He, completes His part and descends on Mount Sinai in the aspect of "I will return to you." So too, when we make our own efforts doing whatever we are able to do, the Creator will complete his part and let us in to the Fiftieth Gate!

(Taken from *Likutei Halachot, Kri'at Shema* 5:19)