

Who Goes First?

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Have you ever heard someone say, “Nobody goes to that restaurant; it’s too crowded.” Or, “Don’t go near the water till you’ve learned how to swim.” While these may be cute sound bites, what would you say after comparing the following two verses?

God says, “Return to me, and I will return to you” (Malachi 3:7). We say back, “Return to us, and we will return to you” (Lamentations 5:21). There seems to be a misunderstanding about who goes first. This may even be problematic, considering that we want to be reunited with our Creator.

This is not just a theological problem. It’s actually our constant experience, and something that if we can’t make peace with it, it will forever stunt our spiritual growth. Similarly, our *parashah* describes the creation and lighting of the Menorah. God tells Moses that the Menorah should be “hammered work of gold, from its base to its flower” (Numbers 8:4). This meant that the form of the Menorah had to be carved out of a single piece of gold. This whole process was very

perplexing to Moses, so he turned to God. God said, "Throw the gold into the fire and the Menorah will emerge" (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:4).

When it came time to light the Menorah in the Holy Temple, the western light would still be miraculously aflame since the previous night. The Kohanim would use the western light to kindle the other lamps, and only then would they extinguish and rekindle the western light (*Menachot* 86b).

The entire episode of the Menorah is very difficult to understand. God asks that it be constructed in a superhuman way and Moses is basically forced to ask God to create it. Next, the Menorah is kindled in a miraculous way. So why was God involving us in the first place? Why didn't He just create and light the Menorah miraculously?

We have the same question about life itself. We want to serve God, we want to create a strong relationship with Him, but we have issues and are stuck in many ways. We want to scream out, "If everything is from You anyhow, then please take me out of here!" But God answers back, "Return to me, and I will return to you." Yet we are stuck. We need His help. We can't do it without Him, so what does He expect of us?

He expects us to grab the western light that He lit, and use it to light the other lamps. He wants us to throw the gold into a fire and watch a Menorah emerge. True, He is standing behind creation and our every experience, but He endowed us with the mission of grabbing the flame and spreading the light, of grabbing our innermost desires and expressing the words to convey that every aspect of our life is a manifestation of His desire.

There is no contradiction between these verses. Much like the western light, it is always God who begins and God who ends. We lack the inner strength and power to do anything on our own or to truly get out of our troubles, but that is not what God

expects. His sole desire is for us to realize our shortcomings, problems and issues, and connect those to Him. To live with the consciousness that everything we experience is an opportunity to turn to Him and share our deepest yearning for Him. And as we return to Him, we become conscious of Him, so that He simultaneously returns to us. We have returned in unity to our Creator. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhhot Kriyat Shema 5