

B'ha'alotekha June 14, 1941

“And Aaron did so; he lighted its lamps over against the face of the menorah, as God had commanded Moses.” (Numbers 8:3)

Rashi (ibid.) explains that the Torah considered it necessary to state that “Aaron did so...as he was commanded,” in order to tell us the virtue of Aaron—that he did not deviate from God’s instructions. A well-known question asks: What is so extraordinary and remarkable about Aaron the High Priest conscientiously obeying his instructions? Another matter requiring clarification is the phrase “over against the face of the menorah.” In specifying that “He lighted its lamps over against the menorah,” the text would seem to be suggesting that Aaron’s noteworthy obedience to God’s commands was confined to this matter. Why does the text ignore Aaron’s conscientiousness in all his other endeavors regarding the menorah lighting?

The explanation requires a better understanding of the Hebrew word *haggadah*, “telling.” The Talmud (*Shabbath 87a*) discusses the verse (Exodus 19:9) “And Moses *higgid* (told) the words of the people to God.” “Of what significance is the choice of *haggadah* (telling) in this context? But when Moses ‘told’ the Jewish people of the punishments for disobedience to the Torah, his words were as unpalatable to them as *gidin*.” Rashi, on the Talmud (ibid.), translates *gidin* as “a bitter herb, wormwood.”

[Translator’s note: there are three types of address. The first, “saying” (*amirah*), is the gentlest form, and the most easily heard. The second, “speaking” (*dibbur*), is provoking and can be difficult to hear. The third, “telling” (*haggadah*), is disturbing and can be very painful to hear.]

Rashi says that “And Aaron did so” is stated in order to tell (*l’hagid*) us the virtue of Aaron, that he did not deviate from God’s instructions. Rashi is implying that even when Aaron’s life was bitter as *gidin*—wormwood—he continued to do his holy work without deviating in the slightest from God’s command. This is what made it possible for Aaron to “light its lamps over against the face of the menorah.” The Jewish people are “the face of the menorah”—firstly because they illuminate all the worlds, and secondly, as the Talmud (*Shabbath 22b*) notes: “Does God require the light, that He needs the menorah lit every evening, when surely the Jewish people travel by God’s light? The menorah, however, is witness and testimony to mankind that the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) dwells among Israel.”

This means that the purpose of the menorah was, in fact, the Jewish people. In kabbalistic terminology “purpose” is synonymous with “face,” as opposed to “back,” as is well known.

Aaron’s lighting of the menorah was so successful that the flame did not just rise to illuminate the Heavens above—it was not just in Heaven that he created light—but over against the face of the menorah he produced light for all the Jewish people.

Shlah
June 22, 1940

“We must go forth and occupy the land,” [Caleb] said. ‘We can do it!’ (Numbers 13:30)

Let us attempt an understanding of this episode. If the spies spoke with reason, saying, “the people living in the land are aggressive, and the cities are large and well fortified,” (Numbers 13:28) why did Caleb not enter into a debate with them, trying to demolish their argument and their reasoning? Why did he limit himself to the simple statement “We must go forth...”?

This is how the faith of a Jew must always be. Not only when he sees reasonable openings and paths for his salvation to take within the laws of nature must he have faith that God will save him, and take heart—but also, God forbid, when he sees no way for salvation to come through natural means, must he still believe that God will save him, and strengthen himself in his faith and his believe. In fact, at just such times it is better not to look for natural paths for salvation to take, for if such a way is not apparent and, God forbid, a person’s faith should become damaged, a blemish in the person’s faith and in his belief in God may actually prevent the salvation from happening, God forbid.

A person needs to say: “Yes, all the logic and facts may indeed be true. The people who inhabit the land may be very strong, and their cities well fortified, and so forth, but still I believe in God, who is beyond any boundaries, and above all nature. I believe that He will save us. We must go forth and occupy the land. We can do it!” He must say this without rationalizing or theorizing, for it is this kind of faith and belief in God that brings our salvation close.

Hukat **July 5, 1941**

“The Egyptians mistreated both our fathers and us. When we cried out to God, He heard our voices...” (Numbers 20:15)

We learn in the Mishnah (*Avoth* 1:3): “Do not be like servants who serve their master in the expectation of receiving a reward; but be like servants who serve their master without the expectation of a reward, and let the fear of heaven be upon you.”

At first glance, this would seem to address only the saintliest people who are willing to forgo all expectation of reward, whether in this world or the next. Their worship of God is unconditional, and solely for God’s sake. But what ordinary person can say that he never craves a reward, either in this world or in the next? It is also most unlikely that an ordinary person will not from time to time think about punishment, and in fear of retribution abstain from sinning or from contemplating sin, or that he will never feel a desire or a longing within him to learn more Torah and observe more commandments in the anticipation of a promised share in the world to come.

Rashi, commenting on the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 19a), “Like servants who serve their master without the expectation of a reward,” explains it as follows: “Let your heart be with God, as though to say, ‘Even though in the end I may not receive a reward, I still love my Creator and desire His commandments.’”

According to this explanation then, every God-worshipping Jew worships without expectation of a reward. For although a person may want God to be good to him, he does not make this a condition of his worship, God forbid. Any person, even knowing that he will not be receiving a reward, would still be a God worshipper. This includes even people whose worship is a mixture of emotions, i.e., fear of being punished and longing for reward. Their worship is driven by fear of punishment and longing for only because they are self-centered, and while they fear punishment and long for reward, the reality is that even if they were not promised a reward, they would still worship God.

A person who yearns for a more highly evolved worship, for a greater connect to God, must overcome this self-centeredness. He must accustom himself to worshipping God not for himself, but for God alone. He must reach for a level where the fear of failure is not a fear of being punished and the joy of success is not the satisfaction of being rewarded, but where all emotion is for God. The ability to achieve this depends on how prepared to minimize his ego a person is. Everyone can achieve some level of proficiency at living less self-centeredly. Even if this goal cannot be achieved always, a person can accustom himself to the level of this purest worship for a number of days or hours. The main components of this kind of worship are the study and physical practice of Torah. Through practice of the Torah and its study, which is also a physical activity—as the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 65b) says, “Movement of his lips is also action”—the entire body becomes Torah. A person learns to feel the needs of Torah and of worship no less than he feels his own needs and desires. He no longer feels only his self, and so his learning and worship are no longer perform for himself.

With this, we can understand the connection made in the Mishnah quoted above, “Do not be like servants who serve their master in the expectation of receiving a reward; but be like servants who serve their master without the expectation of a reward, and let the fear of heaven be upon you.” Why does the Mishnah juxtapose the unconditional worship of God and the fear of heaven?

The Talmud (*Shabbath* 88a) asks: “What is the meaning of the verse in Psalm 76:9, ‘You caused judgment to be heard from heaven; Earth took fright, and was still’? If the Earth was frightened, why was it still; and if it was still, what was it afraid of?” The Talmud answers: “First it was afraid and then it grew still, in accordance with the teaching of Resh Lakish. For it was Resh Lakish who said: ‘God made a condition with Creation, saying, “If Israel accepts the Torah, you will have permanence. But if they refuse, I will turn you back to void and chaos.”’”

We need to understand why it was that only Earth took fright. Why did Heaven not take similar fright? Heaven is also part of Creation, and was therefore included in God’s condition. If Israel chose not to accept the Torah, was not Heaven also doomed to void and chaos?

The fright that Earth took was self-centered; it was frightened at the prospect of its own destruction. But only Earth experienced this self-centered fear. The Word of God has passed through the Heavens, purifying them, as in “You caused judgment to be heard from Heaven.” Therefore Heaven was not afraid for its own existence, but only that Israel might not accept the Torah. Heaven’s fear was for God’s sake. This is the fear of a servant serving its master without thought of reward or punishment.

The truth is that all Jews worship God without expectation of a reward, as Rashi explained in the passage quoted above. It is just that they tend to feel their needs and their fears on their own behalf first and foremost. This is why the Mishnah ends with the words “let the fear of Heaven be upon you,” emphasizing the phrase “fear of Heaven.” It is admonishing us to practice Heavenly fear—fear purified by the word of God passing through it; Godly fear, and not Earthly fear, which is nothing but fearful self-centeredness. The difference between these two is a result of the Word of God having passed through Heaven. We can learn a lesson from this: If we occupy ourselves by learning Torah and practicing it, we too will be purified because we will have become the medium through which the word of God passes. Then, like Heaven, we will become servants who serve their master without the expectation of a reward.

Although in times filled with trouble for Jewish people our suffering atones for our sins, it is unfortunately also true that we become more self-centered. We become obsessed with the daily litany of our hurts and needs. This is understandable: Is it possible for a person to be hit and not feel physical pain? The response of any person forced to spend every tormented, agonized day anxious for the life hanging by a thread before his eyes is to become obsessed with self. His worship of God also falls to the lowest level of worship, that which is centered upon himself.

With this we can understand the words of the Talmud (*Nedarim* 10a); “R. Eliezer HaKapar says that Nazirites, who take an oath to forgo wine, are sinners because they cause themselves pain when forswearing wine.”

Taken at face value, this makes no sense. If taking the oath of a *Nazir* is a sin, why does the Torah give us the Nazirite laws? If the Torah had not given us these laws, there would be no *Nazirim* denying themselves wine and sinning thereby. The truth is, however, that there is always something good that comes out of pain, because experiencing pain can be cleansing, and it can help a person to distance himself from his evil inclination. This is elucidated in the story told by a *Nazir* to Simeon the Just (Talmud, *Nedarim* 4b): “Simeon the Just said, ‘Only once in my life have I eaten of the trespass offering brought by a defiled *Nazir* (see Numbers 6:18). On one occasion a *Nazir* came from the south country, and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and was of handsome appearance, with thick, dangling, pendulous locks of hair. Said I to him, ‘My son, what possessed you to destroy your beautiful hair?’ He replied, ‘I was shepherding for my father in my town. Once I went to draw water from a well, and I was caught by the sight of my reflection in the water, whereupon my evil desires rushed upon me and sought to drive me from the world, through sin. I said to my evil inclination, ‘Wretch! Why do you vaunt yourself in a world that is not yours, with one who is destined to become worms and dust? I swear that I will shave off my beautiful hair for the sake of Heaven.’” R. Simeon said, ‘I immediately rose and kissed his head, saying, “My son, may there be many *Nazirim* like you in Israel. Of you it is written: ‘When either a man or a woman shall separate themselves to vow an oath of a *Nazir*, to separate themselves for God.’” (Numbers 6:2)”

Even though pain atones and helps to distance from sin, nevertheless when the atonement comes about through the pain of Jewish people, there is in that transaction itself a blemish and a sin, because pain causes a person to become self-absorbed, as explained above (see Talmud, *Baba Kama* 91b, *Tosaphot*, cit. *Ellah*).

In order to awaken mercy in heaven for Israel and to sweeten all the judgments, we must arouse within ourselves compassion for our fellows Jews. Not only must we give them everything we can; we also need to arouse our compassion for them, because when we arouse mercy within ourselves, mercy is aroused in heaven. We must resist becoming accustomed to the fact that Jews are suffering. The sheer volume of Jewish suffering must not be allowed to blur or dull the compassion we feel for each individual Jew. On the contrary, our heart must all but dissolve, God forbid, from the bitter pain. When we awaken within ourselves compassion for Jews, we can accomplish two things: First, our own prayers will issue with more soul and more heart. Second, as is well known from the sacred literature, there are occasions when salvation has already been decreed from heaven on Israel’s behalf, but tarries because it is abstract and cannot come down to this world and clothe itself in physical, practical reality. So, when a Jew not only knows intellectually but also feels with the very core of his body that he must support and help his fellows, then mercy becomes a part of his body. When next he prays on behalf of his fellows Jews, he prays with a body full of compassion. Then the salvation that was stopped for want of a channel through which to flow finds in this person a perfect conduit and broadens to meet physical needs as well.

This is exactly what is meant in the Talmud (*Megillah* 14b): When King Josiah was in trouble, he sent for Chulda the prophetess (II Chronicles 34:22) even though the leading prophet of that era was Jeremiah. “But how could Josiah himself pass over

Jeremiah and send to her?” the Talmud asks. The members of the school of R. Shila replied, “Because women are more compassionate.”

Women have more compassion than men because their physical bodies are more compassionate, and so women can more swiftly bring salvation down into this world. So great is the power and merit of pious women, that we learn in the Midrash (Ruth Rabba, cap. 7:14): “The women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed is the Lord who helped Naomi and gave her salvation.’ R. Hama said, ‘Because those women blessed Naomi, the seed of David was not exterminated in the days of Athaliah.’”

How mighty is the kingdom of King David, and yet it survived only because of the blessings of those pious women. There are two reasons for this: First, as we learn in the holy Zohar, all pious women are at the level of *Malkhut*, Sovereignty (the tenth and final *sephirah*), which is also known as Kabbalah as *K’nesseth Israel-Esheth Chayil Atereth Ba’alah*, Congregation of Israel—The Warrior Bride—Crown of Her Husband. Thus the House of David, which is also *Malkhut*, is given permanence by the blessings of pious women, who are *Malkhut*.

Second, the Talmud quoted above says, “Women are more compassionate.” The Hebrew word *rachmaniyoth*, “compassionate,” has the root *rechem*, “compassion” or “womb.” It is written with the three Hebrew letters *resh*, *cheth*, and *mem*. The letter *resh* represents *Rachamim*, which is *Tifferet*, the *sephirah* of Divine Compassion. The letter *cheth* represents *Chesed*, the *sephirah* of Divine Loving-Kindness. The *mem* represents *Malkhut*, the *sephirah* of Divine Sovereignty.

As is well known, when the *sephirah* of *Gevurah*, Divine Withholding, influences *Malkhut*, then judgments come into the world. When the *sephirah* of *Chesed*, Divine Loving-Kindness, influences *Malkhut*, then loving-kindness is revealed to the world. Since those pious women were at the level of *Malkhut* and were deeply compassionate, they opened up *rechem*, compassion-womb, as we said above, and compassion was revealed in the world of *Malkhut*.

“The Children of Israel, the entire congregation, came to the Tzin Desert in the First Month. The people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there...” (Numbers 20:1) Rashi (ibid.), interpreting the repetition of the word “there,” comments: “It is as though it was written that Miriam died ‘at the Mouth of God.’”

In a description of the mystical, primal, human body, the holy Zohar, in Elijah’s introductory speech (*Tikunim*: 1), correlates the seven lower *sephirot* with various limbs and parts of the torso. The right arm is *Chesed*, Loving-Kindness, while the left arm is *Gevurah*, Withholding, etc. The *sephirah* of *Malkhut* is the Mouth, and as we said above pious women are *Malkhut*-Mouth. It was unnecessary to state explicitly that Miriam died at the Mouth of God.

Similarly, Rashi (ibid.) explains: “Why is the story of the death of Miriam adjacent to the chapter concerning the Red Heifer? Just as animal sacrifices atone for sin, so the death of the pious is an atonement.”

But why is the death of Miriam associated particularly with the law of the Red Heifer and not some other animal sacrifice mentioned in Leviticus, such as sin offerings or guilt offerings, etc.?

Rashi (Numbers 19:2) explains the law of the Red Heifer thus: “Let the mother come and clean up the mess made by her child.’ The Red Heifer is the symbolic mother, atoning for our sin of worshipping the Golden Calf.”

In what possible symbolic respect was the Red Heifer mother to the Golden Calf, especially in light of the fact that there were many more Red Heifers in the course of history than just the one they made in the desert? (See Mishnah *Parah*.)

In light of what we have said above, we can explain as follows: The death of Miriam directly follows the law of the Red Heifer because women are compassionate, and Miriam was like a mother even to Jews who were not her children. She is an archetypal mother, and this role did not end with her death. In heaven she is still our mother, continually arousing mercy on behalf of all Israel, even for those who are not directly her descendants—just like the Red Heifer cleaning up after the Golden Calf, atoning for it, even though the calf is not actually her child.

To return to the original quote: “The Egyptians mistreated both our fathers and us. When we cried out to God, He heard our voices...” (Numbers 20:15) Rashi (ibid.) explains that our ancestors experience pain in their graves over the suffering of Israel. This is why it says, “He heard our voices...” He heard not only the voices of the Jewish people, but also the cries of our fathers and mothers, because they also feel our pain. If a person does not feel compassion for Jews, it is very difficult for him to pray for them and it is very unlikely that his prayer will have any effect. “The Egyptians mistreated both our fathers and us,” and so our fathers also suffered and also cried out with us—and in addition to our voices, God also heard the voices of our fathers in heaven, and He saved us.