



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### Keeping the Flame Alive

Aliza Joel

With Chanukah quickly approaching, images of *chanukiyot*, candles, and latkes dance through my mind. It also reminds me of one of my favorite *divrei Torah* on Parshat Beha'alotcha.

Bamidbar 8:1-3 describes how HaShem tells Moshe to direct Aharon, the Kohen Gadol, in the lighting of the menorah in the Mishkan. The *pasuk* then says "ויועש בן אהרן" - "And Aharon did so." Why does it state that Aharon completed the command of G-d? Isn't it obvious that a man of Aharon's stature and commitment to HaShem would follow His directive?

Rashi posits that the Torah's point is להגיד שבחו של אהרן שלא שינה, to tell the praise of Aharon, that he did not deviate. But why is this such a wonderful thing? What was it that Aharon didn't change?

Some commentators highlight different aspects of Aharon's precision in doing what was commanded, such as that he did it himself without relegating the job to his sons, or that he maintained the order he was instructed rather than thinking he had a better way. Maybe we would have assumed he would do so, but the Torah reminds us that it is a point of righteousness worthy of praise (Siftei Chachamim).

However, the answer I like best is an idea presented by the Sefas Emes. He explains that Aharon's praise wasn't about his compliance in that moment, but in the future: that he continued to light the Menorah each and every day for the rest of his life with the same excitement and zeal as he had on the first day of performing this *mitzvah*. Aharon was able to maintain the same enthusiasm and positive attitude each time he performed the act of *hadlakat hamenorah*.

It is natural that when we begin a new task, there is an excitement attached to it. We are very motivated to carry out the job. However, as time goes on, that enthusiasm wanes. We continue to go through the actions, but without any fervor or real emotion behind them.

It is heartwarming and truly inspirational to see the way a young child reacts when they receive their first *siddur*. The child treasures the *siddur*, points his finger at every word of *tefilah*, and sings in his loudest, most impassioned voice as he joins in praising HaShem. The young child recognizes the gift he has been given in being allowed to communicate with our Creator. Unfortunately, all too often, as we get older and daily life pressures settle in, our enthusiasm wears off. We might daven in shul regularly, but sometimes we lack that fervor and passion. If we could only hold on to that same realization that the young child has, that we are so fortunate to build a relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, how different would our *tefilot* be?

The praise of Aharon was that he *continued* "to do so" – to light the menorah every single day for the rest of his life with the same exhilaration and pleasure he had on the very first day that he had the opportunity to light the menorah. Aharon never became complacent nor stale in his observance of this *mitzvah*.

Enthusiasm is a real challenge to maintain. Yet Aharon approached his service of God with love, recognizing the great opportunity he had in serving HaShem and appreciating that opportunity every day. The job never became boring, never just an act of obligation.

Each day is a gift and a new opportunity to serve Hashem. No two days are ever the same. We must view each day as a unique opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the service of God.

We would do well to remember that it is we who choose how we view the world and how we approach *shmirat hamitzvot*. Do we view the opportunity to do *mitzvot* as a gift, as Aharon HaKohen did, or as a burden? Do we approach our relationship with HaShem with boredom, or with love and excitement? Looking towards Aharon HaKohen as our role model can help us recognize that every single opportunity we have to do a *mitzvah* is a treasure to be cherished.

### The Name of Evil

Rabbi Elie Farkas

Americans call them ISIS. President Obama called them ISIL. Muslims call them Da-Esh. What's in a name? Why does it matter what something is called?

Once we know a name, we can often learn important aspects of who someone is and what he represents.

As Yaakov prepares to encounter Esav for the first time since usurping his blessing 34 years prior, he is terrified. Yet before this remarkable showdown between the brothers, Yaakov is confronted by someone or something potentially more dangerous and more evil – a "man"

who, according to Rashi (quoting Bereishit Rabbah and Midrash Tanchuma), was actually the guardian angel of Esav. Perhaps this individual can be regarded as a representation of evil in the world. Caught off guard while separated from his family, Yaakov engages in battle with this "man." They fight till the break of dawn, when Yaakov finally overcomes his attacker. The "man" demands to be released so he can leave. Yaakov refuses, and instead does something mindboggling. Yaakov is injured, and his attacker may still pose a threat. But Yaakov holds on and demands his attacker bless him, and

that he identify himself. "Tell me your name," Yaakov shouts. The response is equally bizarre. "Why are you asking my name? And he blessed Yaakov there" (32:30).

Why does Yaakov want to be blessed by this attacker, and why is his name so important? Why does the angel refuse to share his name with Yaakov, though he gives in to the *bracha*?

Let's take the approach that the attacker is an angel of evil, representing the wickedness of the world. Yaakov wants to understand evil. He wants to understand its source, how it works. The angel responds with what seems to be a question – "Why do you ask my name?" – but perhaps it's more profound, a la Abbott and Costello. In their famous routine, "Who's on first," "Who" is the man's name, not a question. Similarly, the angel is answering Yaakov – "My name is Why Do You Seek My Name." He did answer Yaakov's question. The source of evil is the refusal to ask or listen to challenging questions.

Then the angel blesses Yaakov. What's the blessing? He calls him Yisrael, "because you have battled with G-d and with man and you have prevailed."

Yaakov struggled with a heavenly being; how else might a person "battle with G-d"? When Hashem decides to destroy Sodom, Avraham intercedes and tries to convince G-d to be lenient if any righteous people can be found. When Hashem decides to wipe out the Jews after the episode of the Golden Calf, Moshe battles with G-d and convinces him to relent.

This angel of evil offered a blessing that encourages such challenges to G-d Himself!

How far can we take this type of challenge? The Talmud (Bava Metzia 59) tells of a debate regarding the purity of a specific kind of stove. Rabbi Eliezer asked all the right questions, but the other sages countered them all. He proceeded to seek G-dly intervention, having a tree fly out of the ground, a river flow backward, and walls shake. He even went so far as to invoke the name of G-d; Hashem Himself declared Rabbi Eliezer's correctness. Yet the sages thwarted his every argument, rejecting even the ruling of G-d! The story concludes with Hashem expressing pride in his children for following correct Torah protocol.

Rabbi Eliezer was right. His questions were fantastic. His arguments made sense. G-d Himself agreed. But he could not single-handedly change communal practice without the consensus of Rabbinic leadership.

Every generation raises numerous questions that have not yet been adequately addressed. Religiously, we need to keep asking questions. We need to challenge our leaders to provide a Judaism that is spiritual, appealing, and meaningful to the masses. And we need a Judaism that is true to our texts and honest to our traditions.

This is how we can do battle with G-d.

What about battling with man, the other half of the blessing?

The result of failing to battle with man, by failing to challenge or ask the right questions, can be seen throughout history.

Hitler, *yimach shemo vezichro*, succeeded in attaining power because people refused to speak up. They refused to ask. He came up with the plan, but instead of locking him up, people accepted what he had to say. His evil was made possible due to the evil of Why Do You Ask. Failure to speak up or challenge enabled his rise to power.

Israel is often misrepresented by news agencies, world leaders, and the United Nations as an apartheid state engaging in crimes against humanity. This false narrative is what much of the world sees, and it allows terrorism to prosper. The evil in refusing to ask questions and just accepting what one is told brings terrible evil to the world. If we fail to ask and challenge the narrative – if we elect leaders, grant ratings to TV stations, and read newspapers that insist on this falsehood as reality – then we are helping evil flourish as well.

Yaakov sought out the root of evil and was told: You want to know what evil is? Don't ask questions; just accept what you're told. That's evil.

So where does this leave us? We know the truth. Our mission as *Am Yisrael* is to battle with G-d and with man, and to prevail. *Netzach Yisrael lo yeshaker*. The victory of the people of Israel is a foregone conclusion. For if we keep asking questions and dream the impossible dream, one day, it might not seem so impossible anymore.

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