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The Menorah and Holistic Enlightenment

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Steinman was the last living Lithuanian Talmudic scholar and rosh yeshiva whose education primarily took place in pre-War Europe. At the time of his death last winter, he was recognized as perhaps the most influential “*gadol*” - great rabbinic figure and religious authority for the Lithuanian - Litvak - branch of *Haredi* Judaism. He was frequently consulted on matters concerning ritual halakhic practice as well as communal policy, and even politics.

I recently heard about an occasion in which he was consulted by the leadership of a yeshiva who wished to expel one of their students who had been caught selling drugs to other students in the yeshiva. The yeshiva administrators did not want to take such a grave and serious move without consulting with Rav Shteinman, but they were confident that they would accede to their request to expel this student. Rav Shteinman heard their presentation of the case. There was a student in their yeshiva they wished to expel because he had been exposed as a drug dealer and that was a risk to the yeshiva that they could not tolerate.

Rav Steinmann asked the yeshiva administrators for the full Hebrew name of the student's mother. They didn't know. Rav Shteinman was incredulous. How could they contemplate expelling a student for a serious violation without having first *davened* for the student. They hadn't said a *MiSheberakh* for the student and they were going to expel him from their school? Where is the humanity? Where is the *kavod ha-Torah*, the respect for Torah study among school administrators who could deprive a Jewish child from the benefits of a Torah education without caring enough about that student to pray.

And if they had prayed and seen the student, perhaps as a victim of addiction, but in any case as somebody's child, would they be so quick to expel him from the school and wash their hands of responsibility for his further development. I wish I always had this awareness.

That sort of awareness should be present at every moment of education and at every moment of influence. I was reminded of this story by the curious details at the very beginning of *Parashat Ba'alotcha* concerning the lighting of the Menorah.

First let's have a Hebrew language lesson. What do you call it when someone is called up to read from the Torah? Having an “*aLiyah*.” And what is it called when someone moves to Israel? Going on “*aliYAH*.” My favorite scholar of American Jewish English pointed this out to me and I think it's so fascinating. There is only one Hebrew word: Ayin, Lamed, Yod, Heh. It means to ascend or go up. We go up to Eretz Yisrael and we go up to the Torah. But in Jewish English we pronounce them differently. Mileil, and Milrah, with the stress on the ultimate or the penultimate syllable.

None of that has anything to do with what I want to say, but that word, Ayin, Lamed, Yod, Heh, however you want to pronounce it is found at the beginning of our parashah:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מֹול פְּנֵי הַמִּנְוֹה יֵאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:

Speak to Aaron and say to him, “When you **בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת**, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand.” What exactly does the phrase **בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת** mean? It seems like it means “when you light” the lamps except it doesn't say “when you light” it says **בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת**.

The new JPS translation renders the English: when you mount the lamps. This is a good translation of **בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת** and also draws upon the midrash quoted by Rashi that says:

שָׁמַעְלָה הָיְתָה לְפָנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה, שֶׁעָלְיָהּ הִכְהוּ עוֹמֵד וּמַטִּיב

There was a ramp adjacent to the menorah and the kohen would stand on this elevation and be able to see clearly that the wicks were in the right place and that the menorah was burning properly as it was being lit.

Rashi says something else about the meaning of the phrase **בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת**. He writes, quoting the Talmud in Massechet Shabbat:

בַּהֲעֹלְתָּךְ. עַל שֵׁם שֶׁהַלֶּהַב עוֹלָה, כְּתוּב בְּהַדְלָקְתּוֹ לְשׁוֹן עָלְיָהּ, שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לְהַדְלִיק עַד שֶׁתֵּהָא שְׁלֵהֶבֶת עוֹלָה מֵאֲלִיָּהּ

The phrase “ba’alotcha” is a reference to the way that the flame lifts upward. The Torah is referring to the lighting of each flame as an act of rising up because the one lighting needs to know that the flame has indeed ignited the wick and is burning strong and steady and lifted upwards.

Thus **בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת** means that the act of lighting is an act of rising up, ensuring that the flame rises straight and steady from the wick and **בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת** means that the kohen himself serving in the *beit hamikdash* climbs a platform to light the candles from an elevated vantage point where he can see the big picture and make sure that his act of lighting is effective.

Rabbi Daniel Lifshitz, a neighbor of one of my cousins, and a college friend of many of my college friends, is the author of a delightful collection of very short divrei Torah. He has suggested that these details of the way in which to light the menorah are applicable as a metaphor. The menorah provided light. The light of the menorah spread out from the *beit hamikdash* as a symbol of the way that enlightenment, illumination, and inspiration from the *beit hamikdash*

All of us are in the business of lighting the menorah. I have many times shared my opinion that the false dichotomy between those who are “leaders” and those who are lead is a pernicious way to speak and a harmful way to see the world. All of us exercise leadership in some capacity in some sphere where we can take responsibility for our surroundings and try to help others and improve our circumstances. This means that all of us are spreading ideas, sharing inspiration, and shaping others through the spread of enlightenment.

How does one go about lighting the menorah? How does one go about spreading enlightenment and inspiration?

Make sure to see the big picture. Get up on the balcony and look down on the menorah you are trying to light and upon the wicks you are trying to ignite. And make sure that the flames actually catch. Sometimes it can take a bit of finessing with the wick and the flame before the flame catches, gathers strength, and then endures in strength.

Develop a holistic view of education and influence. Stand back and see the big picture. Who are you trying to shape and what else is happening in their life that might prevent them from hearing your message? Do they have unmet basic needs that prevent them from focusing on intellectual or spiritual growth? Are they threatened or distracted? Have they been traumatized by events in their past?

And one’s role as a teacher, as someone exercising leadership, cannot be fully frontal while expecting passive reception of all of one’s ideas. You cannot just say something and consider oneself *yotzei* - except from any further efforts on their behalf. Sometimes it takes effort and time and repeated attempts before the idea takes hold and the flame catches.

This was a lesson for Aharon and the kohanim who lit the menorah but this was a lesson that Moshe had to learn in this week's parashah a well.

Moshe's response to the Israelite's request for meat is a shocking and unexpected moment of crisis. The request for meat was a relatively minor rebellion in the context of forty years of complaints and backsliding and yet Moshe expresses despair and resentment beyond anything that had occurred before then during moments of seemingly greater crisis.

יֹאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' לָמָּה הִרְעַלְתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מָצַיְתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׁוּם אֶת־מִשָּׂא כָּל־הָעַם הַזֶּה עָלַי:

And Moses said to the LORD, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?”

הֲאֶנְכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעַם הַזֶּה אִם־אֶנְכִי יִלְדַתִּיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יֵשֵׂא הָאִמּוֹן אֶת־הַיֶּנֶק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאֲבוֹתָיו:

Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?

The complaint for meat occurred at a time when Moshe had thought he was on the cusp of bringing the Israelites into Eretz Yisrael and completing his mission. When he hears the pettiness of their request for meat, he understood that their spiritual development and maturation as freed people was far less developed than he had hoped. He now understands what will be required of him. He has to become a nursing parent to the Israelites and he is reluctant to take on that role.

Nursing, for some mothers is challenging and exhausting, but hopefully at least has the benefit of knowing that the infant is getting the nutrition that he or she needs. When feeding a baby solid foods, one sometimes discovers that half of the meal you thought the child had eaten is in reality stuck into hidden corners of their high chair or in the folds of their neck.

As a provider of guidance and nourishment, Moshe had to take on that parental role. The people complained about food because they were insecure and had trouble being so reliant upon manna from Heaven. They were immature and had to be taught to rise up from an exclusive focus on their next meal. They had to be taught to place their desire for culinary variety into some context. And there would surely, Moshe understood, be even bigger challenges to come. And he was write.

He could no longer simply deliver lectures and assume that his audience would understand and accept and assimilate his message. He had to set up systems and procedures so that every child and every adult could learn Torah. He had to devote the extra time to make sure that his lessons were well-received and accepted. He had to become a menorah-lighter.

And that is our role too. With our children. With our friends. With our colleagues. Within our communities. We are obligated to assist and inspire and shape and educate others to the best of our ability. But that task must be undertaken in the tradition of the lighting of the menorah. With care and concern for the big picture, and with sensitivity and patience for the message to be received.