

Waste Not, Want Not

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It isn't often that you meet an actual, bona fide rocket scientist- especially not a *frum* one. I did last week, though- not surprisingly, in Houston. His name is Aaron Brown; aside from his work with NASA, he is a wonderful person- a sincere and committed Jew who is completely dedicated to his family and the UOS community, who studies Torah regularly and on a high level. Sharing a Shabbos table with him was a delight. If you had the opportunity to ask such a person any question about what they do, what would it be? Well, the others at the Shabbos table- who knew Aaron well socially but no doubt think he holds the coolest job ever- were most interested in the complicated question of biological waste removal in space. There is an entire division of NASA that designs these mechanisms, called ECLSS¹, the Environmental Control and Life Support System. The Orion spaceship has no mechanism to store urine, so it is expelled into space where it floats forever, frozen². The chute where this is expelled is right near the docking camera of the Orion, and there is someone who works a few desks away from

¹ https://www.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/g-281237_eclss_0.pdf

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<https://www.businessinsider.com/toilet-nasa-orion-spaceship-moon-mission-odor-control-problem-2020-9#:~:text=Astronauts'%20pee%20could%20float%20in%20space%20for%20ever&text=On%20Orion%2C%20their%20poop%20would,space%20for%20a%20filtrati%20system.>

Aaron whose job it is to predict, via mathematical models, the path of that cloud's dispersion so it won't obstruct the view from the camera. As he was explaining this, a good deal of titillation ensued, but Aaron was having none of it. "You know, people *do* need to carry out basic biological processes in space..."

As modest individuals, it appears quite unseemly and juvenile for us to discuss such matters, especially in a sermon. Yet Chazal didn't display any such reticence. Pages after pages of the Talmud discuss the importance of proper sanitation, the prohibition of praying near human waste and all sorts of other permutations. Indeed, this is the subject of a Midrash that I bet many of you know. It was later sanitized as the song "Pharaoh in Pajamas in the middle of the night."

In instructing Moshe on how to demonstrate his prowess to Pharaoh, Hashem makes it clear that Pharaoh is to be encountered at a specific location:

לך אל־פרעה בבוקר הנהל יצא המימה ונצבת לקראתו על־שפת היאר והמטה אשר־נהפך לנחש תקח בידך:

Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake.

What is so significant about this location? Why would Pharaoh be on the banks of the Nile at this time?

The commentators offer differing approaches. The Ibn Ezra, ever the *pashtan* who interprets the simple meaning of the text, explains that Pharaoh was there to measure the Nile's water levels.

לך אל פרעה בבקר. מנהג מלך מצרים עד היום לצאת בתמוז ואב כי אז יגדל היאור לראות כמה מעלות עלה. וצוה השם למשה שילך בבקר ויעמוד לפני היאור ויעש האות שהוא מכת היאור לפני פרעה. וצוהו לקחת המטה אשר נהפך לנחש על ידי משה לפני לכתו אל פרעה. ויתנהו אל אהרן לנטותו על מימי מצרים שיראה פרעה בעיניו כי מרגע שיכה אהרן במטה על היאור אז יהפך לדם:

GET THEE UNTO PHARAOH IN THE MORNING. It is the custom of the king of Egypt until this very day to go out in the months of Tamuz and Ab to see how high the water has risen. This is the time the river increases. God commanded Moses to go in the morning and stand before the river and perform the sign of the striking of the river in the presence of Pharaoh. He commanded Moses to take and then give to Aaron the rod which he had turned into a serpent before coming unto Pharaoh (Ex. 4:3) and to wave it over the waters of Egypt so that Pharaoh would see with his very eyes the river turn into blood at the moment that Aaron struck it.

Rav Chizkiyahu Ben Manoach, in his commentary *Chizkuni*, offers several approaches of his own and his final suggestion is that Pharaoh went to the water to engage in the sport of royals and the idle rich- hunting.

חזקוני שמות פרק ז פסוק טו

ד"א כדרך בני אדם המשכימים בבוקר על שפת הנהר ורוחצים ממימי הנהר להאיר עיניהם. ד"א הנה יוצא המימה לטייל ולצוד שם עופות על ידי גוונין שנושא על ידו כשאר מלכים, ושם תמצאנו פנוי לדבר עמו.

Still another interpretation: he went for a stroll along the banks of the river every morning. He would also go hunting birds by means of trapping them in mud. [Maybe the reference is to chasing geese and ducks into traps. Ed.] The point of G-d's instruction was for Moses to have a private talk with Pharaoh when he would not feel under pressure to show his ministers etc., that he could stand up to Moses.

But Rashi offers another approach, quoting the Midrash Tanchuma:

ויאמר ה' אל משה השכם בבקר והתניצב לפני פרעה הנה יוצא המימה (שמות ח, טז). למה הנה יוצא המימה? לפי שהנה אותו רשע משתבח ואומר שהוא אלוה ואינו יוצא לנקביו, לפיכך הנה יוצא המימה בהשכמה, שלא יראהו בני אדם שעומד בקלון. לכה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: עמד בהשכמה בשעה שהוא נצרה, תפוש אותו ואמר לו: כה אמר ה' כי בפעם הזאת אני שלח את כל מגפתי.

It was important to encounter Pharaoh by the Nile because Pharaoh had made himself into a deity; as such, he could not be seen engaging in basic biological processes in public, and had to do so away from the public eye.

Why did Rashi go the Midrashic route, especially when the Midrash is so puerile? What are Chazal trying to teach us? I think I can explain the utility of Rashi's approach through something that happened not long ago in Israel. As you may be aware, plenty of chareidi leaders have expressed moral and emotional support of IDF soldiers during the Israel/Hamas war. For example, Rav Asher Weiss *shlit"á* davens for soldiers, visits with them, gives them brachos and answers their halachic questions all the time. The Boyaner Rebbe has attended funerals of soldiers who fell, *lo aleinu*. Rav Shaul Alter, the Rosh Yeshiva and Rav of the Pnei Menachem community in Israel, a breakaway from the Gerrer Chassidim, has done the same. Others in the Chareidi world have expressed some muted reservations about the widespread support for IDF soldiers; if we are not more reserved when we praise them, it will shift people's faith from God to the IDF; if we spend too much time in *chessed* and support, it will take away time from Torah study, or it will entice people to enlist, thereby weakening the Yeshiva world. But there are elements in the chareidi world who are particularly vociferous in their condemnation. There is a Rosh Yeshiva named Rav Yisrael Bunim Schreiber, who is the Rav and Av Beis Din of a community in Ashdod, and the Rosh Yeshiva of a Yeshiva in

Yerushalaim. He is certainly on the more extreme end of the Israeli Yeshiva world, but is widely respected for his learning and the guidance he provides. At a Q & A session, someone asked him whether it is appropriate for Yeshiva students to express gratitude to the soldiers. Rav Bunim replied³:

“There’s no need to express gratitude to soldiers fighting in Gaza any more than to street cleaners...Why is there any need to have appreciation any more than with a plumber? ...If a doctor heals you for free, then you should certainly thank him. But if he charges money? Then very nice, that’s his job! And if he’s forced to heal you, you don’t thank him.”

Later on, when asked what kind of relationship Yeshiva boys should have to the injured, he replied

“‘Our relationship to the injured?’ Who says that there needs to be a relationship? What’s your connection to them? Why do you need to have a relationship with them?”

To quote a talmudic expression, עפרא לפומיה - dirt in his mouth for saying such horrid, callous things that speak to a deep corruption of *middos*. But when you think about it further, what is so egregious about what he said was not just the insult to IDF soldiers (or doctors, though I’m biased on that count). It’s that he insulted garbage men, who are absolutely worthy of our esteem and gratitude. There is a story told about Rav Mordechai Gifter zt”l, the great Rosh Yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. A young man studying in the *kollel* in Telz confided in Rav Gifter that he was experiencing

³ <https://www.rationalistjudaism.com/p/whats-it-got-to-do-with-us>

some marital discord, because his wife insisted on him taking out the trash, which he considered, as a Torah scholar, to be beneath his dignity. After listening to the couple, Rabbi Gifter concluded that while the husband should help his wife, he had no halachic *obligation* to take out the trash. The next morning, the couple heard a knock on the door. When they opened it up, they were shocked to see that Rav Gifter was standing there. After exchanging pleasantries, the man asked Rav Gifter to what he owed the privilege of a home visit. Rav Gifter replied, "I've come to take out your trash. It may be beneath your dignity to do so, but it isn't beneath mine." It is in the fact that we generate garbage, and that there are those of us prepared to clean it up, that our humanity is found. Anyone who wishes to pretend that part of the human experience away, is less of a human to me.

Indeed, it is *precisely* their humanity that makes IDF soldiers worthy of our esteem and gratitude. It's certainly not because they are invincible rambos; most of the stories we hear about soldiers are not about their valorous deeds in battle, like jumping on grenades. Instead, they are about authentic, decent people. This week, we learned of the death of two young men in the prime of their lives- Yakir Hexter and David Schwartz. Yakir's maternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Eddie and Yehudit Epstein, are friends of my parents. Mr. Epstein was my elementary school principal in Rochester when I was

growing up, and I remember Yakir's mother Chaya and her siblings well. Listen to what Yakir's aunt, Sara Krengel, wrote about him⁴.

Yakir was a hero, I used to joke with him that he blew up half of Gaza. But if there is one thing I can say about Yakir, although he was always so humble and never thought much of himself, is that he was not one thing or another, he was everything in perfect harmony and fusion. There was no contradiction, conflict or confusion as to who he was or where he was headed. He used every trait and talent, every facet and challenge to grow, improve, mature and contribute.

Yakir Hexter and David Schwartz were special separately and together. Yakir volunteered with developmentally disabled youth not far from his home in Yerushalaim; David was a loving husband to Meital Gitler, and Yakir was an *eid* at their wedding. They were *chavrusos*, study partners, and a photo of them learning Mishnah Berurah together in the Gush Beit Midrash went viral after their death. It is their humanity that we mourn, not that they were some kind of Godlike pharaonic symbol. We are so proud of our young men and women from Shaare who serve or have served in the IDF, of course- but they serve out of a sense of deep purpose and don't ask for the adulation of others. If our kids treated them like people- wonderful people, but people nonetheless, rather than heroes, I, and they, would be fine with that. But I'd be deeply saddened if I heard any child from our community, and certainly from my family, say

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<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/my-beloved-nephew-yakir-ztkl-hyd/?fbclid=IwAR24i6ch2FIerycOfWi0LnX4YmGjdBPgWZA-eZBUV3K3HNNHk8fXhwR8zGgc>

“he’s just a garbage man” or “she’s just the help”, as if their humanity was somehow “less than.” Chazal wanted us to know this Midrash in its unsanitized form precisely for that reason. At the beginning of his leadership tenure, Moshe needed to know what it means to be a leader- someone who does not keep up appearances, who is not too proud or too important to get their hands literally dirty, to do what needs to be done, to clean up the mess. Being a hero is not about pretending to be a God, like Pharaoh did. Anyone can pretend to be divine- but the truly great always strive to be more human.