

PARASHAS BEHA'ALOSCHA

Perpetual Illumination

Every parent and teacher knows that children must be praised for special efforts and accomplishments, not for what is expected of them as a matter of course. Praise loses its value if it is too easily given. And yet, in this week's portion, after Aaron and his descendants are given the honor of lighting the Menorah, the Torah praises Aaron for performing this ritual "as Hashem had commanded him to do."

The question immediately arises: Why does a great and righteous man such as Aaron deserve praise for obeying Hashem's instructions? On the contrary, we would be shocked if he had done anything else!

Rashi quotes the explanation of the Sages that Aaron was being praised for not altering the performance of this *mitzvah*. But the question still remains: What was so remarkable about his abiding by the rules in a fairly straightforward matter such as lighting the Menorah? What motive would he have had to do otherwise?

The commentators elucidate the words of Rashi as follows: Certainly, there was never any question that Aaron might decide to modify the process of lighting the Menorah. Why in the world would he want to do such a thing? Rather, Aaron was being praised for maintaining the same high level of excitement and enthusiasm day after day, month after month, year after year. Every day for forty years, as he stood before the gleaming Menorah, he felt the same tingle in his spine and flutter in his heart as he had felt on the very first day.

Questions, however, refuse to go away: If Aaron retained the old thrill in the lighting of the Menorah he probably did so as well in all his daily duties and activities. Why then does the Torah single out the lighting of the Menorah for which to praise Aaron?

Let us reflect for a moment on this remarkable facet of Aaron's character. How indeed was he able to maintain such an extremely high level of enthusiasm day in and day out for decades? Why indeed didn't the relentless grind of familiarity and regularity wear him down?

The answer lies in basic human psychology. People tend to lose enthusiasm because they lose sight of the emotions and ideals which inspired them in the first place. Eventually, they go through the motions driven by an increasingly dim memory of the inspiration they once had. But if they could recapture that inspiration every single day, their enthusiasm would never flag.

Aaron was able to transcend this common human failing, because he saw the presence of the Creator with crystal clarity in every corner of the world around him. Amid the spiritual darkness of the physical world, he continually beheld the magnificence and goodness of the Creator with the same awe and wonder. He saw the divine light in every blade of grass, in every breath of life. And therefore, as he went about his priestly duties in the Mishkan in the very presence of the Creator, he was as inspired and electrified every day as he had been on the very first.

The Menorah was the symbol of the divine light in the mundane world. Every day, when Aaron stood before this golden beacon, he saw beyond the glittering arms and glowing flames. He saw the splendid spiritual radiance it represented, and he was struck anew by a sense of indescribable awe. Therefore, in the context of his performance of this *mitzvah*, the Torah praises Aaron for the superb level of inspiration that infused all his priestly duties and activities.

A couple came to a wise rabbi and asked him to arrange a divorce. Each one poured out a long litany of complaints, bitterness and misery.

"Tell me," the rabbi finally said, "what did you see in each other when you got married? I want you to write down every detail."

Coaxed on by the rabbi, husband and wife reached into their memories, and slowly but surely, a long list materialized for each of them. Simultaneously, the tension in the room eased.

"Listen to yourselves," said the rabbi. "I want both of you to read this list every morning when you wake up. Remind yourselves every day of the fine qualities you saw in each other. The rest will work itself out."

In our own lives, we often find ourselves stuck in a rut of mechanical performance of *mitzvos* and other good deeds. The old fire is gone, and everything becomes a heavy burden. In our minds, of course, we still understand the importance of what we are doing, but we seem to have lost the soaring thrill, the exhilarating wings of fulfillment. Sometimes, it even reaches the point where we experience "burnout." But we can reverse the situation by following Aaron's example. If we focus on the eternal truths of the universe, if we open our eyes and allow ourselves to recognize the limitless miracles of creation, we can infuse every moment of our lives with inspiration and infinite meaning.