

SOME KEYS ARE IN HEAVEN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Speak to Aharon and say to him, "When you light the lamps, the seven lamps should cast light upon the face of the menorah."

Be'er Yosef: According to Chazal, this section was meant to appease Aharon for his missing out on a central role in the inauguration of the mishkan. His role in kindling the menorah would be more important than the other contributions. While all the ordinary aspects of the mishkan and the batei mikdash that followed would cease with their destruction, the menorah, we are told, is eternal. What might that mean? When the Temples were destroyed, the mitzvah of lighting the menorah ceased as well!

The difference stems from the fact that the menorah alludes to the light of the Torah, and all the wisdom that derives from it. The daily lighting of the menorah triggered the Divine influence of Torah wisdom reaching human society. While this was operative only while the Temples functioned, we are still basking in the brilliance of the light that was transmitted then. The Torah absorbed by those generations was faithfully transmitted to their descendants. We today are its direct beneficiaries.

The gemara² describes a tragic episode in the story of the destruction of the first beis hamikdosh. Groups of young kohanim ascended to the roof of the heichal, with its keys in hand. "Ribbono Shel Olam! Since we did not merit serving as trusted custodians of this house, we entrust its keys to You!" They threw the keys towards Heaven, from which a hand-like form extended and received them. The kohanim then threw themselves into the flames below.

Why bother with the keys of a heichal that was already aflame? Why was this gesture by the kohanim important enough to elicit a miraculous response from Heaven in receiving the keys?

The key to understanding this passage lies in another gemara about keys! "Any person who possesses Torah but not yir'as Shomayim is like a custodian who holds the inner keys but was not given the outer ones." ³ From this we establish that Torah is linked to the inner area, and yir'ah to the outer.

Those two areas - and their "custodian" - allude to the beis hamikdosh and the people who utilized its gifts. The wisdom of Torah emanated from the heichal, where the menorah stood. The azarah/courtyard, on the other hand, was a central location for acquiring yir'ah. Tosafos⁴ amplify on

the gemara's report that teachers of young children were deliberately designed into the urban plan for Yerushalayim. They explain that observers of the avodah in the azarah were taken in by the great kedushah that they beheld. This inspired the observers to strive for greater yir'as Shomayim and more Torah learning. They were answered with a Divine influence of fear of Heaven. You wanted to educated children in an atmosphere of such refined spirituality.

In effect, then, the azarah served as the place from which a shefa of yir'ah penetrated the world, while Torah wisdom entered through the heichal. This channel to Divine illumination was removed with the destruction of the beis hamikdosh. Progress in Torah learning became that much more difficult. The Divine influence would descend only through the heartfelt prayer and entreaties of each petitioner.

This was the point of the young kohanim. While they had served up until that point as human custodians of a Heavenly shefa, the keys to Divine wisdom would now be returned to Heaven. Each person seeking such wisdom had better seek out the keys there. Everyone would have to couple long hours of study with tefillah to Hashem for success in learning. Heaven acquiesced, by accepting the keys and declaring its readiness to open doors for those who sought assistance through davening.

A different set of keys goes unmentioned in the gemara's story. There were keys to the azarah as well, but the kohanim did nothing with them. Because the azarah represents yir'ah, its keys were decidedly not returned to Heaven. Those keys remain with us, even after the destruction. They are available freely to all who are serious about them. As the gemara says, ⁵ "All is controlled by Heaven, other than the fear of Heaven." Acquiring yir'ah does not require Divine intervention. All we need is the will and the consistency to make it happen.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 8:2
 2. Taanis 29A
 3. Shabbos 31A
 4. Bava Basra 21A
 5. Berachos 33B
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