

GREAT STRENGTH

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

While the entire population of Kohanim (Priests) is obligated to safeguard their ritual purity to insure that it does not become compromised through contact with death, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) was mandated that he not make any exceptions. Unlike his brethren, he could not even compromise his pure state for the sake of honoring a deceased parent. The Torah refers to this exalted personage as "the Kohen who is exalted above his brethren." (Vayikra/Leviticus 21:10) The Medrash Rabba explains his exalted status is attributed five areas of superlative greatness, one of which was strength. This is borne out by the initiation of the Levi'im (Levites), when Aaron, Moshe's brother, the first Kohen Gadol, lifted each one of the 22,000 Levi'im and physically waved them in four different directions. What is the significance of the strength of the Kohen Gadol? Why did he need to display such superhuman capabilities? Furthermore, the Talmud (Tractate Nedarim 38a) declares G-d only provides prophecy to one who is strong. Again, why is strength germane to these spiritual achievements?

"I passed by the field of a lazy man and by the vineyard of a man lacking an understanding heart; and, behold, it was all overgrown with thorns...When I saw this, I set my heart to understand; I saw and accepted discipline." (Mishlei/Proverbs 24:30-32) Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of the Mir Yeshiva, who led his students from the ashes of the European Holocaust to the glory of Jerusalem) expounds that Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) offers a three faceted lesson in our fight against laziness. First, we must not allow laziness to breed complacency with a lack of accurate information, relying on the hearsay of others; we must "go to the field" ourselves. Further, we cannot be satisfied by our observations, but must completely understand the message within what we witness. Finally, this understanding cannot simply remain as knowledge; knowledge does not change people. The understanding must be internalized and inculcated into the heart where it will spawn discipline and a resolve for positive action. This, explains Rabbi Shmulevitz, is the essential first step, because the greatest obstacle facing a lazy person is realizing the truth that he can indeed summon the strength to confront his challenge. But is this resolve sufficient to bring success?

Ben Zoma taught us (Pirkei Avos/Ethics of Our Fathers 4:1) "Who is the one who is strong? He who subdues his yetzer hara (internal desire to act contrary to G-d's will; in many experiences, it is the side of the internal tug-of-war that pulls us to do what we know we should not)" But our Sages teach us that if not for Divine assistance we could not overcome the evil inclination (see Mesilas Yescharim/Path of the Just, chapter 2), so where does human "strength" come into winning this

spiritual battle? When a person fights with all of his strength, then he merits G-d's help to succeed. Thus, the strength that was alluded to above is not an issue of muscle mass, rather it is the person who commits one hundred percent of his spiritual fortitude to the accomplishment of these goals.

Aaron's feat of lift and waving 22,000 men over the course of one day was nothing less than miraculous. So how does this warrant being called a display of superior strength? Aaron's strength is that he summoned all of his energies to the service of G-d, to understanding what G-d asked of him and fulfilling it. In this vein he was the greatest of the Kohanim. And this is the trait the Talmud says G-d demands of one who is to serve as a prophet.

Our Western society is a very "results" oriented society. Employees are rewarded for finishing a job better or faster, while good intentions, the popular saying tells us, pave a path to a very undesirable place. The world of the spirit is the converse. G-d decides the success of our efforts. Our responsibility is to toil, and our reward is based on our striving, our sincere investment of effort into connecting with G-d's will, NOT on what we actually accomplish. With this truth internalized, the call to action is one to which we will find great ease responding.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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