

# PARSHAS TETZAVEH - MOSHE'S OIL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Moshe's Oil<sup>1</sup>

*Now you shall command the Bnei Yisrael that they should take for you pure, pressed olive oil for illumination...*

This section comes at us out of nowhere. Just what is it doing here, interrupting the description of the chief permanent components of the Mishkan? The oil was a consumable commodity - something that needed to be replenished all the time, unlike all the other items in Terumah and Tetzaveh. (If for some reason the oil had to be linked to these parshios, it should have been described together with the Menorah, which is where it was used.) Why are the Bnei Yisrael taking the oil for Moshe, rather than for Hashem, or for the mitzvah?

Furthermore, Chazal see problems where we don't! A midrash[2] depicts Hashem telling Moshe, "See here. I've made you into a king. Kings don't labor on their own; they command others to labor for them." This is the reason, says the midrash, that our pasuk instructs Moshe to command the Bnei Yisrael to produce the oil: as a king, Moshe could not do the work himself. This might appeal to us, were it not for the fact that the Torah is long stream of commands issued by Moshe. Why does the midrash make note of the "command" verb only here?

A different midrashic passage will point us in the right direction. Just a few pesukim from here, Moshe is told, "Bring near to yourself Aharon your brother[3]." A midrash[4] reports that Moshe was disturbed by this instruction, correctly understanding it to mean that he, Moshe, would not serve as a kohen any longer. Hashem responded to him, "I had a Torah - so important that without it, I would have destroyed the world. I gave it to you!" The entire exchange is troubling. Where is there any hint of displeasure on the part of Moshe in the text? If Moshe was left unhappy for being bypassed in the kehunah, how did Hashem appease him by pointing to Moshe's role as the recipient of the Torah? The Torah immediately became the proud possession of any person who studied it. Moshe's descendants would have no greater share in it than anyone else, very different from the kehunah which would remain the province of Aharon's offspring.

Know this. The ultimate purpose of the Mishkan - the genuine manifestation of the Divine Presence there - was to provide enhanced Torah illumination. This Divine influence of Torah knowledge was

mediated by the Aron and the Menorah. Each conveyed a different kind of Torah influence from above. The Aron, which housed the luchos, served the mission of the fixed Written Law, as well as the similar component of the Oral Law, i.e., halachos that were transmitted as a fixed tradition. Both of these are passed along to Klal Yisrael in a static, non-dynamic manner, relative to the other component of Torah She-B'al Peh. We are licensed by HKBH to creatively determine new halachic conclusions that were never part of a fixed tradition. We do this as active participants in the process of pilpul, ferreting out newly-discovered principles through deep examination of Torah texts. This process is called "Talmud;" it is mediated by the Menorah. (The bowls, flowers and cups of the Menorah convey the understanding that the seeming embellishments and enhancements of the Law produced by Talmud are all genuine organic outgrowths of the Oral Law, not extraneous to it.) It is no coincidence that it was in the time of the second beis ha-mikdash, in which the process of Talmud flourished and thrived, that the light of the Menorah intensified through the miracle of Chanukah.

Know this as well. Moshe and Aharon must be seen as colleagues, rather than teacher and student. (Avos de-Rabi Nasan demonstrates that one should honor his friend as if he were his teacher by pointing to the honor Aharon showed to his brother. Clearly, it held that Moshe was not really Aharon's rebbi. Aharon nonetheless treated him as if he were.) Even though Aharon certainly needed Moshe to convey to him what Moshe heard directly from Hashem, once Aharon heard the Divine instruction he was no longer dependant upon Moshe. Aharon did not need Moshe to explain or amplify upon the Torah teaching. In his analytic and comprehension skills, he was Moshe's equal.

The difference between Aharon and Moshe was not in ability or comprehension, but in mastering two different styles of learning. Moshe's strength was in his ability to creatively generate new Torah understanding that he had not received directly from Hashem. In other words, he was able to discern Torah truths through pilpul, i.e. by building upon principles he could derive through plumbing the depths of a Torah topic. The gemara[5] explicitly states that "pilpula shel Torah" was given only to Moshe and to his descendants - although he generously and freely shared the ability with others.

Aharon, on the other hand, also applied his great mind to the Torah he possessed, and addressed questions and issues that came up. Unlike Moshe, though, he reached his conclusions by comparing similar cases to each other, and by deductive reasoning. (Aharon's role is described later[6] as ruling upon halachic issues for the Bnei Yisrael: "And to instruct the Bnei Yisrael in all the decrees that Hashem had spoken to them through Moshe." Halachic rulings often must be given on the spot, on demand. A moreh hora'ah generally will not be able to respond in short order through pilpul and creative depth learning. He must answer by finding close comparable models and precedents. Aharon was the clear master of this process. In one instance[7], he even bested Moshe in arriving at the true halachah.)

Were we to link Moshe and Aharon to two kelim of the Mishkan, we would connect Aharon to the

Aron - the symbol of fixed, traditional halachah - and Moshe to the Menorah. The former found a way to accommodate new questions that arose by finding the proper model within fixed, accepted halachic precedent; the latter to a dynamic process of creating new halachic conclusions. The Aron represents the fixity of Divine Revelation, as symbolized by the luchos; the Menorah symbolically displays the illumination available to human beings who step up to it, tend to it, and draw new light from it.

We see now why the Torah speaks of taking the olive oil for the Menorah as taking "for you," - that is, for Moshe. Moshe, more than anyone in his generation, was dependent upon the Menorah in his study. It would have been appropriate for him to have made his own oil, but the Torah thought otherwise. Like a king who does not labor himself for what he needs, the task was assigned to others.

Chazal derived their other observations from the strange positioning of the section about the olive oil about which we opened this piece. Why deal with the oil here, rather than connect it to the Menorah? Because Moshe was about to be told how to award the kehunah to his brother Aharon, he was disappointed in being passed over for the honor. For this reason, Hashem consoled Moshe by pointing out his special relationship to the light emanating from the Menorah. Aharon might very well take the kehunah for himself and his children, but Moshe would have the gift of excellence in creative Torah study.

The difference in learning styles practiced by Moshe and Aharon helps us understand a passage in the gemara about Shaul and Dovid. Shaul, says the gemara<sup>[8]</sup>, did not "bring the tractate to light," while Dovid did. This does not mean that Dovid's learning was accurate and dispositive while Shaul's was not. Rather, Shaul's rulings were based on comparisons to preexisting law. Shaul did not uncover new principles that became enshrined as Mishnah, as permanent contributions to the corpus of law. Dovid did.

Hashem's consoling words to Moshe worked well. While Aharon also took a major distinction in assuming the role of general halachic decisor, his conclusions were always tentative. Someone else might very well come along and challenge comparing a case at hand to some preexisting category. Decisions arrived at through careful and penetrating analysis of many sources in a sugya - such as those of Moshe - are long-lasting and persuasive.

Persuasive as well was Hashem's reassurance to a Moshe hesitant to give up his role of kohen. The oil described in the opening pesukim of our parshah would illuminate the world till the end of time.

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Shemos 27:20
  2. Vayikra Rabbah 31:4
  3. Shemos 28:1

4. Shemos Rabbah 37:4

5. Nedarim 38A

6. Vayikra 10:11

7. Vayikra 10:16

8. Eruvin 53A

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