

A LITTLE OIL GOES A LONG WAY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

There is an oft-quoted Midrash that connects last-week's parsha (Vayeishev) and Chanukah:

'The mandrakes have yielded fragrance, and upon our doorsteps are all precious fruits. Both new and old have I stored away for you, my Beloved.' (Shir Ha-shirim/Song of Songs 7:14) The mandrakes have yielded fragrance— this refers to Reuven, as it is written (Bereishis/Genesis 37:21), 'And Reuven heard, and he rescued him [Yosef] from their hand.' And upon our doorsteps are all precious fruits—this refers to the Chanukah lights."

The Midrash contrasts Reuven's saving Yosef and the Chanukah candles. What is the connection between these two seemingly unrelated themes?

There is another well-known Midrash relating to Reuven's seemingly courageous act:

R' Yitzchak said: When a person does a mitzvah, he should do it with all his heart... Had Reuven known that Hashem would record [in the Torah] that he had saved Yosef from his brothers, he would have carried Yosef back to his father on his shoulders! Had Aaron known that Hashem would record in the Torah, "And he will see you [Moshe], and he will be joyous in his heart [without jealousy over Moshe's appointment as leader of Israel], (Shemos/Exodus 4:14)" he would have come out to greet him with dancing and drums... Had Boaz known that Hashem would record in the Torah that he gave Ruth grain, he would have fed her fattened calves. [Rus Rabbah 5:6]

It is somewhat surprising that instead of expressing praise of these three noble acts, the Midrash seems to focus on the negative: what more these three great individuals could have done. While we acknowledge that as humans we often fall short of the ideal—and this is true, it seems, even with regard to the righteous—what lesson is to be learned by being hyper-critical of a courageous and noble act, instead of praising its importance? And why does the Midrash single out these specific acts; one could theoretically nitpick over almost any good deed recorded in the Torah or the Prophets?

Rav Naftali Tropp zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of the famed Radin Yeshiva, was gravely ill. In the Yeshiva, each of the bachurim (students) decided to commit themselves to a certain number of hours of uninterrupted Torah study, in whose merit he should receive, G-d willing, a complete recovery (refuah sheleimah). A delegation of students approached the holy Chafetz Chaim zt"l, whose love for R' Naftali was legendary, to ask him to participate in their 'drive' by donating some of his uninterrupted Torah study.

"Yes," he responded enthusiastically, "I will donate one minute of uninterrupted Torah study in his merit!" The delegation was caught off-guard. Students had dedicated many hours of Torah study to this worthy cause, and they had sincerely hoped the great sage would have been a little more generous in his contribution.

One of the students mustered the courage to interject. "We had hoped the Rebbe would give a little more than one minute."

"My dear bachurim," replied the Chafetz Chaim, "you interpret my donation of one minute as lacking recognition of the worthiness of your cause. I assure you this is not the case. My love and admiration of the Rosh Yeshiva is limitless. Perhaps you don't appreciate the inestimable value of just one minute of uninterrupted Torah study; if you would have, you would never have deemed my contribution as lacking."

Perhaps the 'common denominator' among the three noble acts the Midrash singles out is that while each of them in-and-of-themselves were noble deeds, their repercussions were so far-reaching that it was impossible for their perpetrators to comprehend at the time their true importance...

Reuven knew that saving his brother was a brave deed. What he did not yet know was that saving Yosef was setting the wheels in motion for Yaakov and family to descend to Egypt (under Yosef's sponsorship), commencing the requisite period of exile, after which his descendants would receive the Torah at Har Sinai. Saving Yosef was no less than planting the very seeds from which our fledgling nation would sprout.

Aaron knew that greeting Moshe, and accepting his leadership with joy, was a noble act. He did not know that in the merit of his "joyous heart," he and his descendants would be chosen as the Kohanim—the priests—who had the exclusive privilege of performing sacrificial services in the Holy Temple, blessing the nation (Birkas Kohanim) daily, receiving the gifts of terumos, ma'asros, and myriad other presents, etc. (See Rashi, Shemos/Exodus 4:16 that this was in recognition of Aaron's greeting Moshe).

Boaz's treatment of Ruth, giving her a large portion of grain and allowing her to gather as much as she wanted from his fields, was both kind and generous. But he had no way of knowing that this relationship would soon lead to marriage—and that she would bear him one child, Oved, father of Yishai, father of King David, from whose lineage Moshiach will come.

Perhaps this is the point the Midrash is trying to make by connecting these three instances: In life, we often do things and make decisions that, unbeknown to us, are destined to have a tremendous impact on our lives. Since we can never know when some seemingly minor episode will have major repercussions, we would be well advised to weigh all our actions, words, and decisions with the seriousness of something significant, even if at the time they appear trivial.

Even when we do the right thing, as did Reuven, Aaron, and Boaz, it may be that had we realized the

implications of our actions, mitzvos, and acts of kindness, we would have performed them with far more zest and enthusiasm. As the Midrash itself concludes, if we could see our deeds being recorded for eternity in Hashem's book of records, might we have put more into them?

There is an interesting anomaly about the mitzvah to light the Chanukah candles that is not raised by many commentators. We light eight candles to celebrate the fact that although there was only enough oil to last for one day, it burned for eight. I.e. we were able to perform the mitzvah of lighting the menorah in the Holy Temple for seven extra days. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, almost 2,000 years have passed. That's 700,000 nights that we have missed lighting the menorah—give or take. Not to diminish the miracle, but what's the point of celebrating 7 extra days, in the face of having missed 700,000 since then?

Perhaps therein lies the lesson. Despite so many missed opportunities (to our great sorrow), we continue to celebrate the seven extra days we gained as a result of finding the pure oil. If 7 out of 700,000 seems insignificant, it's because we haven't fully appreciated the value of one mitzvah.

In Yerushalayim many years ago, there was an old widow that the renowned sage R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin zt"l used to visit. She was very sick, and incontinent. Because she was attached to bags which would collect her waste, she was unable to recite blessings over her food, or to pray. Despite her difficulties, she would ask R' Diskin to pray for her. "Tell me something," he once asked, "why do you have such a burning desire to continue living? You can't even say your blessings."

"Rebbe," she said, "once a day the nurse comes to clean me up. Before the machines start working again, I quickly take a glass of water, and recite the blessing 'She-ha'kol ni-he'yeh bi-d'varo, That everything came into existence through His word!' Isn't that reason enough to keep living?!" R' Diskin would say that he never fully appreciated the significance of reciting one blessing until hearing this.

"For one Jew to say once Baruch Hu u-varuch Shemo/Blessed is He and blessed is His name," R' Elya Lopian would relate in the name of the Alter of Kelm, "it was worth it for the Almighty to created the entire universe in all its greatness for six thousand years. One Amen," he would continue, "is worth 1,000 times as much as Baruch Hu u-varuch Shemo! And one Amen ye-hei Sh'mei Rabbah is worth 1,000 amens!" Here's something to consider as we gaze into the small, flickering flame of the Chanukah lecht: Perhaps we haven't begun to appreciate the significance of a mitzvah, no matter how small.

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