

ASCENDING THREE STEPS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 104, The Seven-Branched Menorah. Good Shabbos!

Ascending Three Steps Prior to Kindling the Menorah

This week's Parsha contains the Mitzvah of Lighting the Menorah. The Sifrei on the verse "... lit its candles..." (he-elah neiroseha) [Bamidbar 8:3] comments that from the use of the word 'he-elah' (which can be translated 'caused to go up'), we learn that Aharon built a stepping stool, which was placed in front of the Menorah, on which he stood to light the Menorah.

This stepping stool is in fact mentioned in a Mishneh in Tractate Tamid [3:9]. The Mishneh states that there was a rock in front of the Menorah that had three steps upon which Aharon would ascend to light the Menorah.

The fact that both the Sifrei and the Mishneh call our attention to the step stool indicates that there is something significant about this device, which transcends its practical functionality.

Rash"i, in the beginning of this week's parsha, cites the famous Medrash that the section of the lighting of the Menorah was juxtaposed to the section of the offerings of the Princes for the following reason:

Aharon became depressed after seeing the impressive gifts of the Princes of all the other tribes, because both he and his Tribe lacked representation in the entire ceremony of the Dedication of the House (Chanukas HaBayis). G-d promised him "Your (role) is far greater than theirs. They are merely bringing sacrifices that will terminate with the end of the Beis HaMikdash. But you will have something which is Eternal -- the lighting of the Menorah."

All the commentaries are bothered by this Rash"i. What does Rash"i mean that the lighting of the Menorah will be Eternal? The lighting of the Menorah was also a function of the presence of the Beis HaMikdash. Since the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, we no longer have a Menorah either. What does Rash"i mean?

The Ramba"n explains that the Sages are referring to the lighting of the Chanukah menorah, which continues even today.

Other commentaries, however, suggest a different interpretation: The Menorah symbolizes Torah ("For the candle represents a Mitzvah; and the Torah represents Light" [Mishlei 6:23]), which is the guiding force of the Jewish people. The Torah is what keeps the Jewish people going, even today. By lighting the Menorah, Aharon symbolized the spread of the Light of Torah.

If that is the case, we can understand why the Sages made a point of stating that Aharon had to step up on a three stepped rock in order to light the Menorah. The Sh'lah HaKodosh states that just as we find that there are four categories of damages [Bava Kamma 2a], and there are 39 categories of labor [Shabbos 73a], we find there are 3 categories of evil personality traits [Avot 4:21]: "...Jealousy, Lust, and (pursuit of) Honor drive a person out of this world."

The three steps in front of the Menorah symbolized these three categories of evil personality traits. Aharon was sending a message to all future generations: "If you want to come to spread Torah; if you want to ascend to the attribute of Torah; you must first fix your personality traits." Simply put, "Derech Eretz precedes Torah." Before we can begin to think about Torah, we must ensure that our personalities are in order.

Why Tell Over a Lesson That Everyone Already Knows?

Why am I emphasizing this lesson, even though I am sure that virtually everyone has already heard of the teaching "Derech Eretz precedes Torah?" I am emphasizing this lesson because from my perspective of dealing with students and of involvement with educational institutions, I think it is clear that we are not doing an adequate job of educating our children simple menschlichkeit.

Teachers complain they are frustrated in class because children are not acting properly. The response teachers receive when complaining to parents often indicates a total lack of cooperation.

For example, consider the following exchanges that transpire when teachers attempt to inform parents about various disciplinary problems.

Teacher: I caught David cheating on his English exam. David's parent: Who cares? He's not going to college anyway. I'm not concerned that he cheats.

In this case, David's parent blatantly failed in his responsibility to instill Derech Eretz in his child.

Another teacher phoned a woman to complain about her child's behavior in class. The parent responded, "I'm sorry, don't bother me -- I'm pregnant!"

A third teacher called up a parent and was told "Don't bother me, it's tax season."

Somehow, these parents neglect their responsibility to teach Derech Eretz to their children. How can we expect that our children will ascend to the attribute of Torah if they do not act like *menschen*? And how can parents who lack this trait instill it in their children.

If teachers are leaving the profession because they don't get cooperation from parents when disciplining the children, then what are we sending our children to Yeshivas for? What is the whole point of trying to glorify the greatness of Torah when children don't act like *menschen*?

I know that kids will be kids and boys will be boys and I was also young and I got into my share of trouble. But when I got into trouble my parents disciplined me. I like to think that when my kids get into trouble -- which they do -- I try to discipline my children, as well.

But this attitude on the part of parents of "Don't bother me, I'm tired..." is unacceptable!

This is why I repeat this lesson. Hopefully, when Shabbos comes and my listeners [or readers] will discuss a Torah thought at the meal, they will repeat over this lesson.

Let them say, "Derech Eretz preceded Torah." Let them say that Aharon the priest had to climb up three steps before he could light the Menorah. That lesson has become very lax to us.

I am not a sociologist. I am not a student of human behavior. I don't know what the cause is. Twenty years ago, parents emphasized manners, the importance of saying 'please' and 'thank-you,' and eating with knives and forks. I don't know why today many do not seem to do so.

But this is what I see and this is what I hear. Teachers' frustration that they do not get cooperation from parents on elementary matters is a serious and growing concern.

We have to repeat this thought over and over: Derech Eretz precedes Torah. We will not merit acquiring the Torah, if we are not, first and foremost, *menschen*.

Singular Men With "Dual Personalities"

Towards the end of the Parsha, G-d tells Moshe Rabbeinu to gather together a Sanhedrin -- the leadership of the next generation. "Gather for me 70 men (*shivim ish*)" [11:16]. The Sifrei asks why the Torah used the singular term "ish" (man) when it should have used the plural "anashim" (men). The Sifrei answers that "ish" means singular people "comparable to Me and to you."

"Like Me as it is written, "G-d is a Man of War (*Hashem Ish milchama*)" [Shemos 15:3] and like you as it is written, "And the Man Moshe (*halsh Moshe*) was the most modest of men on the face of the earth" [Bamidbar 12:3].

Thus the term "*shivim ish*" is a play on words. It alludes to the fact that the men of the Sanhedrin had

to be individually designated as Ish, like G-d and like Moshe.

Rav Shlomo Breuer, zt"l, points out that we see from here the requirements for a leader in Israel. A leader in Israel requires a very special and very difficult blend of personality traits. He has to be humble, not haughty -- a person who does not look condescendingly on the masses. But on the other hand, he cannot be a wimp. The Jewish leader can not be a person who is never able to assert himself. He must be both like Moshe the man of Modesty and like Hashem the Man of War.

When the prophet Shmuel stripped King Saul of his monarchy, Shmuel chastised Saul for not following his command to totally wipe out Amalek and all that belonged to them. Saul responded, "But the people wanted to keep the animals. I listened to the people." Shmuel answered, [Samuel I 15:17] "If you are small in your own eyes, but you are the head of the Tribes of Israel..." A King must lead with authority and with strength; he must be able to stand up to the people. He must be the 'Ish' of Hashem Ish Milchama.

The king must be all this, while at the same time, the king must emulate Moshe, the man of humility! I once heard a beautiful vort, which summarizes the preceding thought.

The verse at the end of the Torah, on the last day of Moshe Rabbeinu's life [Devarim 31:7], says that Moshe called over Yeshoshua and said to him, before the eyes of all Israel "Chazak v'Ematz" (be strong). In the first chapter of the book of Yehoshua, G-d tells Moshe's successor these same words four times [verses 6,7,9,18].

If we would take a superficial look at the words of the verse in Devarim, we would assume that the punctuation is "And Moshe said to Yehoshua before all of Israel (comma) -- "Chazak v'Ematz." However, if we look closely at the Trop we see that this is not how the verse is to be read. According to the Trop (zarka segol linking "l'einei chol Yisroel with Chazak v'Ematz") the punctuation reads "And Moshe said to Yehoshua (comma) 'Before all of Israel be strong.'"

In front of the people, one must be strong. He must be able to stand up to them. He must be able to give orders and not take orders from them. In front of the mirror however, one must realize he is a mere mortal and never think "By the strength of my own hand..." However, regarding his public persona clearly he must always keep in mind the words "Chazak v'Ematz."

Personalities & Sources:

Rash"i -- Rav Shlomo b. Yitzchak (1040-1105); Troyes, Worms in France

Ramba"n -- Rav Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270); Gerona, Spain; Israel

Sh'lah HaKodosh -- Rav Yeshayah Hurwitz (1560-1630); Poland, Frankfurt, Prague, and Jerusalem. Sh'lah is acronym for Shnei Luchot Habris (The Two Tablets of the Covenant) which he authored.

Sifrei -- Oldest Medrashic commentary on Bamidbar/Devorim. Written by Rav and often quoted in

the Talmud.

Rav Shlomo Breuer -- (1850-1926); Papa, Hungary; Frankfurt, Germany. Married youngest daughter of S.R. Hirsch.

Glossary

Derech Eretz -- literally 'the way of the land', manners, behavior.

menschen, menschlichkeit -- (Yiddish) human beings, humanity

trop -- cantillation notes accompanying the Biblical text

vort -- (Yiddish idiom) word; short insight.

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and is available through Project Genesis On-Line Bookstore: <http://books.torah.org/>
