



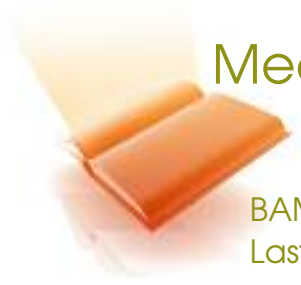
*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Behaalotecha

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May 25, 2013
Behaalotecha

**The Secret to Creating
Lasting Impact**



Meaningful Sermons

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What is the secret to creating lasting impact? How do you teach your children/students so that the lessons you seek to impart don't just inspire but become integrated in their very being? What is the formula of a proper values education? How do you ignite a soul so that it goes on to illuminate the world?

It is far easier to inspire and get inspired than to sustain that inspiration and integrate its lessons into our lives. We can get excited, but what do we do after the honeymoon is over, when the energy dissipates?

The Torah answers all these questions, in this week's portion, with one unusual word choice – *b'haalotecha*.

A moving story about the sensitivity of a child, the mystery of a butterfly's wings, the nature of human behavior and the power of a single word in Torah – all combine to teach us the secret of true education and of creating permanent change.

THE SECRET TO CREATING LASTING IMPACT: TO KINDLE OR TO ELEVATE, TO LIGHT OR TO IGNITE

1. The Tip (Story)

I recently heard a very touching story:

A 10 year-old boy entered a hotel coffee shop and sat at a table. A waitress put a glass of water in front of him.

“How much is an ice cream sundae?” the little boy asked.

“Fifty cents,” replied the waitress. [The story happened back in the days when an ice cream sundae cost much less than today].

The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied the coins he had. “Well, how much is a plain dish of ice cream?” he inquired.

By now, more people were waiting for a table and the waitress was growing very impatient. “Thirty-five cents,” she brusquely replied.

The little boy again counted his coins. “I’ll have the plain ice cream,” he said.

The waitress brought the ice cream, put the bill on the table and walked away. The boy finished the ice cream, paid the cashier and left. When the waitress came back, she began to cry. As she wiped down the table, there placed neatly beside the empty dish were two nickels and five pennies. You see, he couldn’t have the sundae because he had to have enough money to leave her a tip.

The story made me wonder: What type of education shaped a child with such sensitivity and kindness? Wouldn’t it be wonderful – indeed, revolutionary – if we could understand the formula that produced this beautiful child and replicate it in our homes and schools? Imagine a world where all children – and for that matter, all adults – behaved in this way! And if children could be taught to be so caring, wouldn’t that change the landscape of our adult world (because adults, after all, are defined by their childhoods)?

Obviously, good role modeling helped mold the character of this child. But is that enough? Does that alone have the power to produce a child that will sustain and perpetuate these values, even when he or she is on his own (not under the influence of educators and parents); even as she grows into an adult? We see that even when we are taught etiquette and we have good role models, even when we receive a stellar education – that does not necessarily guarantee that these influences will transform the person, in a way that he will forever live by these values.

What else is necessary to assure that our children and students become like that child in the restaurant?

The proven answer and formula for this is contained in one word of today's Torah portion.

2. Raising the Flames

This week's Torah reading begins with instructions from God to Aaron the High Priest on the lighting of the Menorah at the entrance to the Holy of Holies.¹

And immediately we see that there is something special about how the Menorah should be lit. God does not tell Aaron to "light" the lamps of the Menorah – He tells him to "raise" them.

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains that this instruction was meant to teach the High Priest to wait until the wick caught and the flame rose on its own.²

But why was that so important? What would it matter if the High Priest did not wait? The worst scenario would be that the lamp did not stay lit, and he had to return to light it again.

¹Numbers 8:1.

²Rashi on the above verse; see also Shabbos 21a.

But, as we well know, whenever the Torah uses an unusual word, it has a purpose in mind – it is trying to draw our attention to the matter. In this case, the expected verb would have been *l'hadlik* meaning “to light/kindle” rather than *l'ha'alot* meaning to “to raise/elevate.” So there is special meaning to this unusual word choice.

3. Special Symbolism

The lighting of the Menorah symbolizes our entire purpose on earth – which is to light, warm and illuminate everything, everyone and every moment ... to take a material and inanimate wick and turn it into a passionate, soulful flame.

The physical body is the wick; the soul is the flame. (As the Book of Proverbs puts it: “The flame of God is the soul of man.”³) And our mission is to light that wick, to become a walking menorah and to turn everyone around us into a walking menorah, by igniting their spark.

As an aside, this also provides us with a powerful lesson in humility.

When the High Priest entered the chamber where the Menorah stood to kindle its lamps, he found them fully prepared for lighting. Earlier in the day, the lamps had been cleaned and filled with oil, and fresh wicks had been inserted. All he had to do was bring near the flame he carried and wait. By its mere proximity to the waiting lamp, the flame it would ignite the latent energy and luminary potential which the lamp already possessed.

Therein lies an important lesson to today’s “lamplighters.” Do not think that you are giving the one you seek to ignite something he or she does not already possess. Every soul you encounter is a ready lamp, filled with the purest oil and equipped with all that is required to convert its fuel into a blazing flame. It only lacks the proximity of another lamp to set it aflame.

³ Proverbs 20:27.

If your own soul is alight, its contact with another's soul will awaken its luminous potential, so that it may illuminate its surroundings and ignite other souls, in turn.

4. Basis of Education

And this is what education is all about – whether the education of adults or the education of children.

Indeed, this is the basis of true education and true parenting – to educate our students and children so that they become burning flames, so that they become agents of light, illuminating their environment with their unique light.

But here is the big question: How? How are we to do this?

We all agree that education is important and that it should teach and inspire the students to be forces of good and light in the world. But achieving this goal is no small matter.

We all know – from personal experience – that it is relatively easy to inspire and get inspired, but sustaining that inspiration and integrating the inspiring lessons into our lives is far harder. We can get excited, but what do we do after the honeymoon is over, when the energy dissipates?

Comes the Torah and with this one word that reveals the secret: Don't just light, but raise.

Don't merely kindle the spark, but make your children or your students rise on their own. You can do this not by teaching facts and information, not by answering all the students' questions, but by providing tools for them to grow and solve problems on their own.

5. The Butterfly (Inspirational Anecdote)

A man once found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to squeeze its body through the tiny hole. Then it stopped, as if it couldn't go further.

So the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bits of cocoon. The butterfly emerged easily but it had a swollen body and shriveled wings.

The man continued to watch it, expecting that any minute the wings would enlarge and expand enough to support the body. Neither happened! In fact the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around. It was never able to fly.

What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand: The restricting cocoon and the struggle required by the butterfly to get through the opening was a way of forcing the fluid from the body into the wings so that it would be ready for flight once that was achieved.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our lives to allow us to rise and soar on our own. Going through life with someone else doing the job for us would cripple us. We will not be as strong as we could have been and we would never fly.

Now a lot of parents can't bear to let their kids try and fail on their own. They insist on helping them with their homework and often on doing it for them.

Which reminds me ...

Rabbi Mordechai demanded the very best of his pupils. So it was to be expected that he would blow up when little Joseph handed in a poor paper.

"This is the worst composition it has been my misfortune to read," stormed the rabbi. "It has so many errors I can't understand how one person could have made all these mistakes!"

"One person didn't," muttered Joseph defensively. "My father helped me."⁴

⁴ *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, compiled and edited by Henry D. Spalding, p. 299

6. Components of Education

Education consists of several components, and of course, the first and most basic of them is the transfer of information. But it cannot stop there.

We must remember that information is only a tool that we put in a child's hand. And just as there is much more to building a house than having the right tools and materials, there is much more to education than having the right information.

The true educator is not one who simply teaches facts, but who teaches his or her students to think for themselves – to find their own answers to their own questions, to develop independence from the teacher and solve their own dilemmas.

If your answers are constantly supplied by someone else, you may have the comfort of never having to take responsibility for a mistake. But if you learn to think for yourself, you earn the deep gratification that comes from having acted on your own initiative.

This is consistent with why God created the universe: not so that human puppets could play out a predetermined script, but so that each individual would have the freedom to choose to act honestly and virtuously.

7. The Child's Way

It is written in the Book of Proverbs that we should “educate the youngster according to his way” so that, as he matures, “he shall not depart from it.”⁵ But why the youngster's way? Isn't knowledge objective?

And why should we customize that knowledge for each student? Isn't that making education arbitrary?

Of course there are certain absolutes – in math, in science, and most importantly, in the value system that God has given us. But true education must be sensitive to each child individually, for each child has his own way and his own strengths.

⁵ Proverbs 22:6

[This is especially true for those children who are deemed “handicapped.” No matter what barriers a child may possess, it is incumbent upon us to educate that child with as much care and sensitivity – if not more so – as any other child, for if there were ever a child who needed individual attention to achieve his or her potential, it is the “handicapped” child].

A teacher must pinpoint and draw out each child’s strengths, not the strengths we think he or she should possess. The goal is for all children to grow into an adult who can stand on their own feet, not on your feet. A child who does not just learn about values, but comes to *own* them – they become one with his personality.

We often think that if we teach absolute, dogmatic values, then our children will undoubtedly perpetuate that value system. That is only half the story. Yes, those values must be expressed, but in a language that individual children can understand and absorb. It is only then that such lessons become part of them, integrated with their flesh and blood, instilled in their spirit.

8. Raising to Stand

And that brings us back to the subject of this week’s Torah reading – the raising of the flame.

We must raise our children so that they can stand on their own.

Indeed, this is the teaching of the *Ethics of Our Fathers*, which exhorts teachers: “Raise many students”⁶ which Torah commentators understand to mean: “raise them so that they can stand on their own two feet.”⁷

This is how we empower them, this is how we nurture healthy self-esteem in them.

⁶ *Avot* 1:1

⁷ *Tosafos Yom Tov*

In this vein, the Talmud teaches that a person has more pleasure from one measure earned on his own than in nine given to him by another.⁸ Why?

A man can certainly purchase more with \$9,000 than with \$1,000. But he will also far more easily blow the \$9,000 than the \$1,000 because he did not earn it through his own effort.

To initiate, to rise on your own may be more difficult and it may not initially yield the same quantity – but in quality it will yield infinitely more. When a child grows into an empowered adult he or she has the tools to deal with any challenge. But a spoiled baby who grows up with a false sense of entitlement with all the toys at his disposal will forever meander through life – unhappy, unsatisfied no matter how many material possessions may be his or hers.

9. The Objective (Optional)

It is true that a lamp cannot ignite itself – it requires a fire, an external source of energy to set it aglow. But the objective is that its flame should “rise on its own” – that it be transformed into an independent source of light.

When we act as “lamplighters” – whether to ignite our own potentials, or to ignite our children or our students or our fellow human beings – the objective must be to generate a flame which “rises on its own.”

In terms of our effort toward self-improvement, this means not to suffice with “resolutions” and behavior changes which must be constantly imposed by force of will. Rather, we should strive for a transformation of our nature and character, so that the new behavior becomes the natural, instinctive way to act.

⁸ *Baba Metzieh 38a.*

In teaching and influencing others, the objective should be to establish our students as self-sufficient luminaries in their own right – to assist in developing their talents and abilities so that their lamp independently glows and, in turn, kindles the potential in others.

For example, instead of just talking to our children about charity or involving them in our own charitable activities, we can help them fashion a *pushkah* (charity box) and install it in their room. Each time they place a coin in the box, it is training them in an act of charity.

Furthermore, even when it is not actually being used to perform a charitable deed, the charity box continues to act as a “lamp” which illuminates its surroundings. As a permanent fixture in the child’s room, it acts as a constant reminder to the child of his or her responsibility towards others. Thus even a physical object has become “a flame which rises on its own,” an independent source of guidance and enlightenment.⁹

10. The Secret of Jewish Education

This is the secret of Jewish education and its ability to extend for posterity.

Imagine, ninety generations since Moses – with all the terrible genocides and upheavals in between – and yet we are still inculcating our children with these teachings, exhorting them to follow this path ... all in an unbroken chain!

Why? Because this one word in the Torah – *b’haalotecha* – taught us to master the art of empowerment ... to raise the flames, not just kindle them ... until they burn on their own.

⁹ Based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Shabbat Behaalotecha* 5751 (June 1, 1991).

Jews always knew that this was their responsibility – to not just educate but empower the next generation. And today, in our generation, we carry that responsibility. Indeed, in our times the challenge and the need is greater than ever.

May we take our calling seriously to carry and pass on the baton to our children and students, by igniting their flames in ways that rise on their own and shine each with their unique light.

This, my friends, is the secret to bringing up children who – like the child who left the tip in our opening story – will forever be sensitive and caring to one and all. Amen.