



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Behaalotecha

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Behaalotecha

**Does G-d Need Our Mitzvoth?
Menorah and Mitzvah**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why would G-d, the source of all light, need our light? Why would G-d, divinity itself, need our divine acts? So why did He give us mitzvoth to do?

The answer lies in the mitzvah of kindling the Menorah, which the Midrash explains via an eye-opening analogy of a sighted person and a blind person. While walking on the road, the sighted one guides the blind one; while at home, the blind one illuminates the room for the sighted one by lighting a candle.

Life is less about basking in the light and more about generating light. The ultimate dignity is to be a giver rather than a taker. This is the gift of the mitzvah, which turns the bread of shame into a light unto the nations.

This sermon is learning about light, an inquiry into illumination, and a rhapsody on radiance.

It is topped off with an incredible story of a pole vaulter who reached unfathomable heights – a story guaranteed to open your eyes so that you may see the light.

DOES G-D NEED OUR MITZVOTH? MENORAH AND MITZVAH

1. True Height (Story)

I would like to begin with an amazing story about a unique pole-vaulter:

His palms were sweating. He needed a towel to dry his grip. A glass of ice water quenched his thirst, but hardly cooled his intensity. The Astroturf he was sitting on was as hot as the competition he faced today at the National Junior Olympics. The pole was set at 17 feet. That was three inches higher than his personal best. Michael Stone confronted the most challenging day of his pole-vaulting career.

The stands were still filled with about 20,000 people, even though the final race had ended an hour earlier. The pole vault is truly the glamour event of any track-and-field competition. It combines the grace of a gymnast with the strength of a body builder. It also has the element of flying, and the thought of flying as high as a two-story building is a mere fantasy to anyone watching such an event. Today and now, it is not only Michael Stone's reality and dream – it's his quest.

As long as Michael could remember, he had always dreamed of flying. Michael's mother read him numerous stories about flying when he was growing up. Her stories were always ones that described the land from a bird's eye view. Her excitement and passion for details made Michael's dreams full of color and beauty. Michael had this one recurring dream. He would be running down country road. He could feel the rocks and chunks of dirt at his feet. As he raced down the golden-lined wheat fields, he always out-ran the locomotives passing by. It was at the exact moment he took a deep breath that he lifted off the ground. He would soar like an eagle.

Where he flew always coincided with his mother's stories. Wherever he flew was with a keen eye for detail and the free spirit of his mother's love. His dad, on the other hand, was not a dreamer. Bert Stone was a hard core realist. He believed in hard work and sweat. His motto: If you want something, work for it!

From the age of 14, Michael did just that. He began a very careful and regimented weight-lifting program. He worked out every other day with weights, with some kind of running workout on alternate days. The program was carefully monitored by Michael's coach, trainer and father.

Michael's dedication, determination and discipline were any coach's dream. Besides being an honor student and an only child, Michael Stone continued to help his parents with their farm chores. Michael's persistence in striving for perfection was not only his obsession but his passion.

Mildred Stone, Michael's mother, wished he could relax a bit more and be that "free dreaming" little boy. On one occasion she attempted to talk to him and his father about this, but his dad quickly interrupted, smiled and said, "You want something, work for it!"

All of Michael's vaults today seemed to be the reward for his hard work. If Michael Stone was surprised, thrilled or arrogant about clearing the bar at 17 feet, you couldn't tell. As soon as he landed on the inflated landing mat, and with the crowd on their feet, Michael immediately began preparing for his next attempt at flight. He seemed oblivious of the fact he had just surpassed his personal best by three inches and that he was one of the final two competitors in the pole-vaulting event at the National Junior Olympics.

When Michael cleared the bar at 17 feet, 2 inches and then at 17 feet, 4 inches, again he showed no emotion. Constant preparation and determination were his vision. As he heard the crowd moan, he knew the other vaulter had missed his final jump. Now it was his turn.

Since the other vaulter had fewer previous misses, Michael needed to clear this vault to win. A miss would get him second place. Nothing to be ashamed of, but Michael would not allow himself the thought of not winning first place.

He did his ritual of three finger-tipped push-ups along with three Marine-style push-ups. He found his pole, stood and stepped on the runway that led to the most challenging event of his 17-year old life.

The runway felt different this time. It startled him for a brief moment. Then it all hit him like a wet bale of hay. The bar was set at nine inches higher than his personal best. That's only one inch off the national record, he thought.

The intensity of the moment filled his mind with anxiety. He began shaking the tension from his body. It wasn't working. He became tenser. Why was this happening to him now? he wondered. He began to get nervous. Fear would be a more accurate description. What was he going to do? He had never experienced these feelings.

Then, out of nowhere, and from the deepest depths of his soul, he envisioned his mother. Why now? What was his mother doing in his thoughts at a time like this? It was simple. His mother always used to tell him that when you felt tense, anxious, or even scared, to take deep breaths.

So he did. Along with shaking the tension from his legs, he gently laid his pole at his feet. He began to stretch out his arms and upper body. The light breeze that was once there was now gone. He could feel a trickle of cold sweat running down his back.

He carefully picked up his pole. He felt his heart pounding. He was sure the crowd did, too. The silence was deafening. When he heard the singing of some distant robins in flight, he knew it was his time to fly.

As he began sprinting down the runway, something felt wonderfully different, yet familiar. The surface below him felt like the country road he used to dream about. The rocks and chunks of dirt, the visions of the golden wheat fields seemed to fill his thoughts.

When he took a deep breath, it happened. He began to fly. His take-off was effortless. Michael Stone was now flying, just like in his childhood dreams. Only this time he knew he wasn't dreaming. This was real. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. The air around him seemed the purest and freshest he had ever sensed. Michael was soaring with the majesty of an eagle.

It was either the eruption of the people in the stands or the thump of his landing that brought Michael back to earth. On his back with that wonderful hot sun on his face, he could only envision the smile on his mother's face. He knew his dad was probably smiling too, even laughing. Bert would always do that when he got excited: smile and then sort of giggle. What he didn't know was that his dad was hugging his wife and crying.

That's right: Bert "if-you-want-it-work-for-it" Stone was crying like a baby in his wife's arms. He was crying harder than Mildred had ever seen before. She also knew he was crying the greatest tears of all: tears of pride.

Michael was immediately swarmed with people hugging and congratulating him on the greatest achievement thus far in his life. He went on that day to clear 17 feet and 6-1/2 inches: National and International Junior Olympics record.

With all the media attention, endorsement possibilities and swarming herds of heartfelt congratulations, Michael's life would never be the same. It wasn't just because he won the National Junior Olympics and set a new world record. And it wasn't because he had just increased his personal best by 9-1/2 inches. It was simply because Michael Stone is blind.¹

The title of this story in the *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* collection is "True Height," and the reason why I just read it to you is because it captures the key theme of the opening of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Behaalotecha*.

¹ <http://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/38830/true-height>.

2. Parshat Behaalotcha

The title of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Behaalotecha*, is usually translated as "when you light/kindle" but literally it means, "when you uplift/elevate," so it has to do with rising to great heights (true height), lighting the Great Menorah, and overcoming our blindness.

This is how it begins:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and say to him: 'When you light (behaalotcha) the lamps, the seven lamps shall cast their light toward the face of the Menorah.'"*²

A keen and incisive reading of this single verse reveals a deep truth about our role in this world, and how we can elevate our relationship with G-d to truly vaulted heights and become "a light unto the nations," unto ourselves, and unto G-d Himself.

But wait a second.

Why would G-d need us to become a light unto Him? Why would G-d whose light is brighter than a billion suns need our puny little candles? Why would the Master of the Universe, who is the Endless Light Himself, require us to kindle a Menorah here on earth?

And yet He commanded us to do so - He ordered us to perform this mitzvah. Why?

For that matter, why did G-d, the source of all light, give us all of the mitzvoth, which are compared to "light" - why does He need our light?

3. Midrash

This question is posed by the Midrash, which provides the answer via an incredible analogy that also addresses the purpose and power of light in general.

² Numbers 8:1:2.

Said the Children of Israel to the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the World, You have told us to light [the Menorah] for You, yet You are the light of the world and light dwells with You. For does it not state [in the Book of Daniel³], *And light dwells with Him?*”

Said the Holy Blessed One, “It’s not that I need you [to light the Menorah], rather, I want you to illuminate [the earth] for Me the same way that I illuminate it for you. Why? To elevate you before the nations, so that they shall say, ‘See how Israel illuminates [the earth] for the One who illuminates the entire universe!’”

To what is this analogous? To a sighted person and a blind person traveling on the road. Said the sighted person to the blind person, “Upon entering the house, go and light this candle and illuminate the house for me.” Replied the blind person: “When I was traveling on the road you guided me until we entered the house; now you tell me that once we enter the house I should light this candle to illuminate it for you?” Answered the sighted person: “I do not want that you should owe me any favors for guiding you on the road, thus I ask that you illuminate the house for me.”

The sighted person is analogous to the Holy Blessed One, as it states [in the Book of Zechariah], *The eyes of the Lord scan all the earth.*⁴ And the blind person is analogous to the Nation of Israel, as it states [in the Book of Isaiah], *We tap a wall like blind men.*⁵ G-d guided Israel, as it states [in the story of the Exodus], *And the Lord went before them by day.*⁶ When the Tabernacle was erected, the Holy Blessed One called to Moses and told him, “Illuminate it for Me,” as it states [in *Parshat Behaalotecha*], *When you light the lamps,*⁷ so that you may say you have illuminated [the Tabernacle] for G-d.⁸

³ Daniel 2:22.

⁴ Zachariah 4:10.

⁵ Isaiah 59:10.

⁶ Exodus 13:21.

⁷ Numbers 8:2.

⁸ Numbers Rabbah 15:4.

The Midrash asks the most obvious question: Since G-d is the source of light and light dwells with G-d, since G-d illuminates the entire universe; why would G-d ask us to light a candle, a Menorah, when G-d Himself is the ultimate candle, the ultimate Menorah, the ultimate source of light?

The Midrash answers: G-d does not need us to illuminate anything for Him, but G-d wants us to do this in order that we become lights for our own sake, not His. On the road G-d lit the way for us and we were like blind people tapping the wall. When we reached our home – the House of G-d which was the first Tabernacle – G-d asked that now we light the Menorah for Him, so that we could achieve the ultimate dignity – becoming givers and not just takers. So that we, the blind, might become lamplighters for the world and a light unto the nations.

The source of light doesn't need our light as much as we need our light. This is the greatest gift of all. This is the gift of this mitzvah as well as all the mitzvoth of the Torah.

4. Sfat Emet

The 19th century Chassidic Master, the Sfat Emet,⁹ expounds on the above Midrash. He cites the Jerusalem Talmud which states that anyone who does not earn his own livelihood is inwardly ashamed.¹⁰ This is called in Aramaic, *nehemah d'chesufah*, “unearned bread” or “bread of shame.”

We have the option to live life in one of two ways: 1) by being a taker – partaking of others' freebies, or 2) by being a giver – earning our way, contributing more than receiving.

⁹ Behaalotecha 5655.

¹⁰ Jerusalem Talmud, Orlah 1:3.

Jack fell out of his boat and was drowning at sea, when his two friends saw him flailing in the waters. They quickly rowed over to him, one of them stretched out his arms and yelled: “Jack, give me your hand!” Jack refused. Thinking that perhaps Jack didn’t hear him, the fellow yelled again: “Jack, Jack, give me your hand!” Again, no reaction from Jack. Frantic that Jack would soon be lost to them, the other friend suddenly had an epiphany. He yelled out to Jack: “Jack, *take* my hand.” Without hesitation, Jack grabbed his hand.

The friend explained: “You see, Jack has always been a taker, not a giver...”

G-d offers us the ability to light the world on our own – by fulfilling His mitzvoth – so as not to be indebted to Him.

It’s true that everything in this world is G-d’s. When we partake of any part of creation, we are partaking of G-d’s bread. In this regard, we are like blind people being guided by G-d’s light.

But G-d desires to empower us by gifting us the ability to be G-dly, to be givers, to be creators of light and illuminators of the world. G-d gifts us the mitzvah of illumination, of kindling a Menorah not for His sake but for ours, so that we may transform the world by being torchbearers and lamplighters.

5. Proverbs

The process that takes us from being blind people to becoming sighted lamplighters is exemplified by the verse in the Book of Proverbs: *A mitzvah is a candle, and the Torah is light*¹¹

The Torah is light, a lighthouse guiding our journey through the raging seas and tumultuous oceans of life. It is light from on high, G-d guiding us *who are blind on our journey*.

¹¹ Proverbs 6:23.

A mitzvah is a candle. Together with the light of the Torah, G-d gifted us the candles that are mitzvot, each mitzvah shedding its unique light, in order to teach us that we should be lamplighters, lights onto the nations and ourselves.

We tap a wall like blind men. At first we tap, tap, tap until we find our way. Slowly but surely, beginning with nothing, blind to all there is, we proceed – simply by doing what G-d asks – and before long, we are lighting candles and illuminating multi-branched menorahs.

6. Personal Lesson: One Menorah, Many Branches

We often travel on the road of life blindly. No one can anticipate the twists and turns, the ups and downs that lie ahead of our journey called life. Thank G-d, the Master of the Universe illuminates our way through the Torah He gave us – called Torah Ohr, the Torah of light, which illuminates the dark roads.

But, in addition to illuminating our way for us, the Master of All Creation enlightens us in a deeper way – by providing us with our souls, which are like a flame (*ner Hashem nishmat adam*), and with the ability to illuminate the way ourselves through the mitzvot we perform, and the candles and menorahs we light.

After we have journeyed on the road of life, and we arrive home, we must illuminate the house, our environment, our family. How?

Here the two elements of the Menorah provide a clue:

- It was hammered from a single piece of gold.
- It had seven branches.

What does this tell us?

First, we are all part of the same solid piece of gold, the same Menorah, every single Jew, no matter what he or she looks like. We are all solid gold.

Second, like the various branches of the Menorah, we each serve G-d in our own inimitable way. We follow the Torah, each of us unique in our service of the Creator.

7. Conclusion

Our opening was a story of someone turning the challenge of blindness into a soaring reality of true height.

There are many things in life we do not see, things we are blind to, things we cannot begin to envision. We can lie down and bemoan our limitations, feeling lost and accomplishing nothing, or we can bask in the guiding light of the Creator of the Universe, and tap our way one mitzvah at a time, kindling candles wherever we go, enlightening the world and turning blindness into illumination.

Perhaps this is also why the Torah uses the word *Behaalotecha* to convey the idea of lighting, even though this word literally means to elevate or uplift. By lighting candles we elevate ourselves, our life experience, and the world.

This type of living vaults us into stratospheres reserved for a special few: walking, talking, living, breathing lights unto nations, unto our own selves, our families and communities, and unto the source of life Himself, the Master of the Universe, with whom all the light dwells!

Shabbat Shalom!

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