

More is Better

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R. Chaim Shmulevitch, the great Rosh Yeshiva, the venerable Torah scholar of the famous Mir Yeshiva in *Yerushlayim*, Jerusalem, once met a young man who had come to spend a year at the yeshiva from America. The young man's father was an *alte* Mirer, he himself was a student at the original Mir Yeshiva in Europe, where he had studied alongside R. Chaim Shmulevitch, a dear and old friend. Before the young man departed to *Yerushalayim*, to Jerusalem, his father shared some warm wishes, tender words of friendship for his dear and beloved old friend, the now esteemed teacher, R. Chaim Shmulevitch. The father also gave his son a picture, a faded photograph of R. Chaim Shmulevitch from those years, to present as a gift to the rabbi.

When at last the young man was permitted a moment's time with the rabbi, with the great Rosh Yeshiva, he shared with him who his father was. Of course R. Chaim remembered the man's father, and he was happy and deeply moved to have met his dear friend's son. The young man proceeded to present the Rosh Yeshiva with the picture his father had sent. R. Chaim took the photo in his hands, he looked at it, and out of nowhere, he began to cry. R. Chaim sobbed and wept, almost uncontrollably. When R. Chaim finally regained himself, he thanked the young man for the photo. He appreciated the gift very much. He then added, as an afterthought, an explanation: "I looked deep into my eyes, my eyes in the picture, my eyes from sixty years ago... There was such a fire burning in me." And the young man tried to console the great rabbi, "Rebbi," he said, "you did good. Rebbi, you did great." But R. Chaim could not be consoled, because in those eyes he saw so much more than he had become. (The story is adapted from a *shiur* by R. Moshe Weinberger in which he develops the midrashim quoted below).

My question tonight is not, 'Are we doing good?' By nature I am an optimist, and I believe that our community shares my sense of optimism, that we share a deep belief in the goodness of people. So when I look around this modest, yet majestic sanctuary, I know that I am surrounded by good people, people who are doing good.

My question is slightly different. My question is: Are we doing *enough* good or are we just doing good enough?

A midrash, a rabbinic commentary in the book Ruth Rabbah helps us sharpen this question.

רות רבה (וילנא) פרשה ה

א"ר יצחק בר מריון בא הכתוב ללמדך שאם אדם עושה מצוה יעשנה בלבב שלם

R. Yitzchak bar Marion taught that a person should fulfill mitzvot with a *lev shalem*, a whole heart. And R. Yitzchak bar Marion offers three surprising examples from the *Tanach*, from the Bible.

שאלו היה ראובן יודע שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו [\(בראשית ל"ז\)](#) וישמע ראובן ויצילהו מידם, בכתפו היה מוליכו אצל אביו,

Had Reuven known that *HaKadosh Baruch Ho*, that the Holy One, would describe in the Torah how he saved his younger brother Joseph from being killed by his other brothers, then surely Reuven would have lifted Joseph on his own shoulders and carried him home to his father instead of just leaving him at the bottom of the well, to be sold to the Egyptians.

ואילו היה יודע אהרן שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו [\(שמות ד\)](#) הנה הוא יוצא לקראתך, בתופים ובמחולות היה יוצא לקראתו,

Had Aaron known that *HaKadosh Baruch Ho*, that the Holy One, would describe in the Torah how he went out to greet his brother Moses, after Moses had been chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, then surely Aaron would have gone out with musical instruments, in song and in dance, instead of just going out plainly, as he did.

ואלו היה יודע בעז שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו ויצבט לה קלי ותאכל ותשבע ותותר, עגלות מפוטמות היה מאכילה,

And had Boaz realized that *HaKadosh Baruch Ho*, that the Holy One, would describe how he fed wheat to Ruth to satiate her hunger in her great time of need, then surely Boaz would have fed her fatty meat, the choicest calves instead.

All three of these individuals did the right thing, the good thing. And still, the midrash dares to wonder, have they done enough good or just good enough.

Reuven saved Joseph's life from the hands of the other brothers. Aaron, unlike any other brother described in the Torah, goes out to greet with love and affection his younger brother Moses, who was chosen to take the lead instead of him. And Boaz reaches out to Ruth and Naomi with kindness, with a generosity not shared by any other person around. And yet, the midrash challenges each one and their actions...

'Had they known...' wonders the midrash.

How would things have turned out if only they had realized that their actions were being recorded in the great book of God, that their deeds formed a critical link in the story of Israel, would they have acted differently?

Had Reuven realized that Joseph's story would forever be linked to Israel's descent into Egypt, into slavery and oppression, would he have acted differently? Would he have acted more decisively and more whole heartedly? *B'lev shalem...*

Had Aaron realized that his particular moment of encountering Moses would give birth to the greatest spiritual and political partnership between siblings in the history of the people of Israel, had he realized that their encounter would give birth to Israel's journey of redemption and revelation, would he have gone out more passionately, would he have gone out more whole heartedly? *B'lev shalem...*

And had Boaz realized that his loving relationship with Ruth would lead to the historical basis of all of Israel's longings, aspirations, and dreams, and that this very relationship would eventually give rise to the coming of *Mashiach*; the ultimate completion of the story of Israel, would he have given more of himself, of his heart, whole heartedly? *B'lev shalem...*

On Yom Kippur we must struggle with the challenging question raised by this midrash. If we recognized, if only we knew that our actions were being recorded in the great book of God and that our deeds form a critical link in the story of Israel, would we act differently? If only we knew, would we place greater weight on each and every one of our deeds?

If like Reuven we could come to recognize that our actions can make a decisive impact on the imprisonment, or state of oppression, of our brothers and sisters, would we truly believe that simply saying a *misheberach*, a prayer for Gilad Shalit, the young, now 23 year old Israeli soldier, who has been captured and abducted by terrorists over three years ago, was sufficient? But not only Gilad Shalit, but also all other Israeli MIAs, and not just them, but all other oppressed people in the world, from Darfur to Iran.

In fact, earlier this month I received an urgent email from the New-York Board of rabbis. The message read: "Leadership requires that we not ask "What can we do?" but "What else can we do?""

The message continued: "The arrival and address of the President of Iran at the United Nations warrants... a strong moral stand during his presence in New York. The New York Board of Rabbis is sponsoring a major rabbinic civil demonstration on Wednesday, September 23rd. A number of our colleagues have volunteered to be arrested... to emphasize the severity of the issue. Our message of protest of Iran's threats to Israel, repressive treatment of dissidents and journalists requires a massive outpouring of rabbis."

This is the message that Reuven ultimately learnt, that leadership requires that we not ask "What can we do?" but "What else can we do?"

If like Aaron we could come to recognize that our actions can make a decisive impact on American Jewry's exodus out of assimilation and into greater communal affiliation and Jewish engagement, would we greet and welcome every Jew who expressed even the slightest interest in their Jewish identity, any differently? Would we think more carefully or broadly about whom

we invite for Shabbat meals, and for Passover *seders*, and who we reach out to during the High Holiday services?

But not only disenfranchised Jews, but also members of our own community, if only we recognized that our behavior towards each other can strengthen or weaken our own observance of the mitzvot, our community's place as a link in Jewish continuity, would we continue to invite each other for Shabbat meals on Thursday night, or would we begin to invite each other at least a week in advance?

And if like Boaz we could come to recognize that our actions can make a decisive impact on ensuring the dawning of the days of *Maschiach*, a time of complete redemption, through our generous giving to and support of Jewish causes and Jewish institutions that fight hunger and poverty in our own community and ensure Jewish education for all of our children, would we still be satisfied with our 5% or 7% of generous giving or would we all edge closer and even meet the Torah's proscribed standard, a total annual giving of 10%?

On Yom Kippur, the question is not 'Are we doing good?' This room is full of people who are doing good. But let us not shy away from the more pertinent question of the day. Are we doing enough good? How many of us can easily answer this question *be'lev shalem*, whole heartedly?

In one of his journal entries Rav Kook questions his life, questions his own status in the community. Rav Kook writes: "*Va'ani be'onei, eini raoy le'shem tzadik*" – "I am impoverished and I do not deserve to be called a *tzadik*, a righteous person." "*Ve'halevay sh'yezakheini hashem ytbarach, sheochal be'lev shalem lomar: "kegon anna beinoni"*" – "But I pray that the Holy One will bless me that I may merit to be able to say, *be'lev shalem*, wholeheartedly: 'That I am average.'" "*Aval ha'orach sheani mitametz lalechet bah ho, baruch hashem, orach tzadikim be'ein shum safek*" – "Nevertheless, the path that I strive to follow, thank God, is the path of the righteous without a doubt."

Says the great Rav Kook, the gentle, the poetic, and pious, Rav Kook, "*eini raoy le'shem tzadik*" – "I do not deserve to be called a *tzadik*." In other words, "I am not righteous, nor am I perfect."

But I do strive. I strive *be'lev shalem*, wholeheartedly, all the time, to be above and beyond who I am in the hope that at least I'll end up the average of who I am supposed to be.

To be good enough we must make sure that we are doing enough good, *be'lev shalem*, wholeheartedly, all the time.

Hakadosh Baruch Ho, blessed and holy God, this year we pledge ourselves to continue to do good, to do enough good, and more good, and more, *be'lev shalem*, wholeheartedly, all the time, and may we merit, for our sake, for our people's sake, for the sake of the world, may we merit to see the dawning of a new day, a greater day, a time of *Maschiach*, a time of redemption.