

Who Takes the Credit?

Category: Shemos, Vayakhel

When does something truly become yours?

True Dedication

Let me tell you about my sandek.

He was an elderly Lubavitcher chosid named Rabbi Zalman Leib Estulin. This Jew had been a soldier in the Red Army during World War II, during which he got a bullet in his leg. Ever since then, he had been disabled.

Despite his challenges, he remained a Torah scholar, a happy man, a friend to all Jews and a person whose face lit up for everyone.

In the 1940s, when many Lubavitchers lived in Tashkent, which is in Uzbekistan, there was a non-Lubavitcher named Rabbi Aharon Chazan who also lived there. He was my grandfather. The Lubavitchers in Tashkent asked him to help organize underground cheders, Jewish schools. Since he wasn't a Lubavitcher, the Communist KGB agents did not suspect him of illegal activity, so it would have been easier for him to do it. (The teaching of Judaism in Communist Russia was a crime against the state.)

Indeed, Rabbi Chazan organized four groups in four different locations throughout Tashkent. Each branch had 20 students and its own teacher. One of these teachers, who was ready to sacrifice his own life to teach Torah under the Communist regime, was Rabbi Zalman Leib Estulin. Since he was disabled because of the war, he was less afraid that they'd arrest him—after all, what could they do to him?

But one time, Rabbi Estulin was suddenly visited by the KGB.

The kids, who already knew what to do when the police show up, acted as if their meeting was some kind of children's club and that this disabled person had just showed up accidentally. So they started throwing things at him, laughing at him, snatching away his crutches and so on, so that the KGB would think that they

were nothing more than a bunch of young punks who found some unfortunate to pick on.

When the KGB agents saw how they were treating this poor man, they started yelling at the kids: “How can you torture and bother a disabled man?! Shame on you!” They kicked the kids out. And that’s how they were saved from being caught learning Torah from Rabbi Estulin.

For the rest of his years in the Soviet Union, Rabbi Estulin literally risked his life to teach Torah to Jewish kids in his house—because nobody wanted him to come to their homes. Rabbi Estulin, for his part, was not fazed at all, come what may. He only cared that Jewish children should learn Torah. This was true self-sacrifice.

And this brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

In His Name — Betzalel

In this week’s Parshah, we find something very interesting. Moshe Rabbeinu appoints two individuals to be responsible for the construction of the entire Mishkan, the Tabernacle. These two individuals were Betzalel and Ahaliav.

After that, the Torah tells us how the whole tabernacle was actually built. “Every wise-hearted person participated in the performance of the labor...”, then saying, “And he made the beams,” “And he made the Menorah,” “And he made the Incense Altar,” “And he made the washstand.”

But with the exception of the Aron, the Holy Ark, where it says, “And Betzalel made the Aron,” it doesn’t tell us who made these things. The making of the Aron is the only place where a name is associated with the crafting of a particular part of the Mishkan—and only Betzalel’s name. Ahaliav’s name is not mentioned at all!

Now, we can ask an obvious question here: Why did the Torah break its pattern and mention Betzalel when it mentions the Aron? It should have kept to its pattern of not mentioning names!

So along comes Rashi to comment on the words, “And Betzalel made.”

Rashi says that “Since Betzalel gave his life to the labor more than the other wise-

hearted ones, it was named for him.” In other words, even though the other wise-hearted craftsmen also helped craft the Aron, and it wasn’t just Betzalel who made it, since he sacrificed his life for it, it was named for him: “And Betzalel made...”

In His Name — Moses

We find something similar in the Midrash regarding Moshe Rabbeinu.

The Midrash says, “And so you find regarding Moshe that he sacrificed his life for three things that were named for him.” One of these three things was the Torah. So the Midrash continues: “How do we know that Moshe sacrificed his life for the Torah? Because the verse states, ‘And Moshe was on the mountain for 40 days;’ the Torah is therefore named after him as it says, ‘Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe.’”

Now, how can the Torah be called “Moshe’s Torah”?! It’s G-d’s Torah!

The answer is that since Moshe didn’t eat or drink for 40 days when he received the Torah, thus sacrificing his life for the Torah, it was named for him.

In His Name — David

We find the same thing in the prayers we say every day. Immediately after the Hodu prayer, we say “A Psalm of Song at the Dedication of the House, by David,” which refers to the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple. But again, who built the Beis Hamikdash? Shlomo HaMelech—King Solomon! So why is it called “the Dedication of the House, by David?”

What’s more, G-d told King David that he would not be able to build the Beis Hamikdash, (as Chronicles, Volume I, chapter 22, verse 7 and onwards tells us:) “And David said to Shlomo his son, ‘It was in my heart to build a house for G-d’s sake. And the word of G-d was upon me, saying, “Blood to a great amount did you spill and great battles did you wage; you shall not build a house for My sake because much blood did you spill on the ground before me. Behold! A son shall be born to you; he shall be a man of tranquility... he will build a house for my sake.”””

If that was the case, why was David given the credit as if he had been the one who built the Beis Hamikdash?

To answer this, the Midrash says, “Wherever a person strove and gave his life to something, G-d does not skimp on his reward. If you want to know, Shlomo built the Beis Hamikdash, as the verse states, ‘And Shlomo built the house and completed it’—for David who gave his life so that the Beis Hamikdash be built, as the verse states, ‘G-d remembers for David all his suffering: And G-d did not skimp on his reward but rather, named the Beis Hamikdash for him: “A Psalm of Song at the Dedication of the House, by David.” Thus we have: ‘One who plants dates shall eat its fruits.’”

In Her Name — Esther

We are now approaching the holiday of Purim, on which we read Megilas Esther, the Scroll of Esther.

Regarding the reading of Megilah, the Rebbe asks, “Why is called the Scroll of Esther and not the Scroll of Mordechai—or at least the Scroll of Esther and Mordechai?” After all, Mordechai was the one who told Esther to go to the palace, as it says, “As Mordechai had ordered her; and Mordechai’s word, Esther did.” Rather, the answer is that in actuality, Esther was the one who had risked her life for the Jewish Nation and so therefore it’s named after her.

Similarly, we find that the Nation of Israel is called the Am HaYehudi, the nation of Yehudim, or Jews, after Yehudah, or Judah. As a matter of fact, the Megilah is the first place where the title “Yehudi” appears in Scripture.

In the Megilah, when Mordechai (who was not from the Tribe of Judah) is mentioned, it says as follows: “There was a Yehudi man in Shushan the capital and his name was Mordechai... a Yemini man.” Yemini means from the Tribe of Binyamin, or Benjamin— meaning that although Mordechai was a Yemini, he was still called a Yehudi.

Perhaps we can explain this as follows: Since Yehudah had been the one who had risked his very life for Binyamin, more so than the other brothers, when Yosef had wanted to take him as a slave, the entire Jewish Nation is thus named for him—because he was the only one prepared to sacrifice his life for his brother.

Make It Yours

And here we come to the lesson of all this.

A person might be able to complain: “It’s very nice that a person risked his life one time 50 years ago. Great! More power to him. But today, how is he better than me?”

Those who saw Rabbi Zalman Leib Estulin or knew him personally can testify that his self-sacrifice was not a onetime event—rather, it’s something that influenced his entire life. Every mitzvah that he did was different.

When Rabbi Estulin would recite the blessing on the lulav and esrog on the first day of Sukkos, the happiness and pleasure that spread all over his face was difficult to describe—he had such passion, and such tears in his eyes, when he would say the blessing.

When he would recite his daily prayers in the morning, he prayed with a totally different strength, and when he would sit down to conduct a Passover seder, it was something else entirely. A Jew who risks his life for Judaism, even once, is placed on an entirely different level and has a different kind of connection with G-d. His entire life is constantly rising from level to level—even the mitzvos he does are not the same mitzvos we do. Each one of his mitzvos has a bit of self-sacrifice.

Now, you may ask, “What’s the point of sharing all this? We don’t have these tests! Who knows if we would withstand such tests?” But here’s the point, my friends: Just talking about people who risked their lives itself warms our souls and puts us in a different space.

And even if it’s only for a short time, it’s worth it.