

The Three Leaders

Category: Bamidbar, Be'halos'cha

Michael Alush is a Chabad Chassid and a former senior engineer at Aerospace Industries. A few years ago, he flew to Paris on an early morning flight. He boarded the flight and immediately wrapped himself in a tallis and tefillin for the morning prayer.

After takeoff, he was offered to be upgraded to business class, so he got up while still wrapped in tallis and tefillin and moved to the front of the plane. He found himself sitting next to the acclaimed author, A.B. Yehoshua, who passed away this week. The author immediately turned to him and said, "I understand in the synagogue, but here, on the plane, you need to walk around in a tallis and tefillin!?"

"Why not?" Alush responded. "G-d is on the plane no less than in a synagogue!"

It was the beginning of a wonderful conversation.

He told A.B. Yehoshua that in addition to working in the drone industry, he also translates the books of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel into French. Interestingly, his cousin was Jean-Luc Alush, also a translator — who translated the very books of A.B. Yehoshua into French!

When Alush offered him to put on tefillin, he replied that he was an atheist. Later, during their conversation, Alush showed him a passage from the book "Neshamah" by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel, in which he wrote that "Atheism at least moves the person from the realm of indifference to the realm of emotional involvement. The transition from 'I don't care' to 'it bothers me' is itself a step up." A.B. Yehoshua smiled.

They parted ways after landing.

A few days later, Alush was invited to lecture at the School of Engineering in Toulouse. A day before the lecture, the organizers asked him to come without external religious symbols, i.e., without a kippah. He replied that he could not possibly agree.

He wrote about the incident to his cousin Jean-Luc Alush, who replied that he was

just then sitting with A.B. Yehoshua. When Jean-Luc told the author about the incident, A.B. Yehoshua told him, “Tell your cousin that he must under no circumstances agree to their request; he must lecture there with a kippah.”

The Parsha

This week’s parsha is a long portion which dwells on a wide variety of topics. This week, a Jew who is a weekly Parsha student asked me if there is any common denominator between the various topics addressed in the parsha.

The parsha tells us about various events that happened with each of the “three shepherds” of the people of Israel in the desert — Moshe, Aharon and Miriam.

Aharon

The Parsha begins with G-d’s command to Moshe to say to Aharon, “When you kindle the lights, facing the face of the menorah the lights should shine.” That is, Rashi explains, they should face the center candle.

The question arises: why does the Torah command this now? After all, the commandment to light the menorah was first said in Parshat Tetzaveh and again in Parshat Emor. Why is it brought up yet a third time?

Rashi explains that behind this simple commandment lies an entire saga.

At the end of Parshat Naso, the Torah tells of the dedication of the Tabernacle in which a representative of each tribe brought an offering. That is, all the tribes except Levi — Aaron, the head of the Tribe of Levi, was not invited to bring a sacrifice.

Rashi says: “When Aharon witnessed the inauguration of the Nesi’im, he was saddened that neither he nor his tribe participated in the inauguration. G-d told him, by your life, yours is greater than theirs, because you prepare and light the candles.” (Rashi, beginning of B’haaloscha).

Aharon was disappointed, but G-d comforted him by saying that while the tribe leaders brought one sacrifice, you light the menorah every single day. As the Ramban points out, all the services in the Temple ceased with the destruction of

the Temple, while the lighting of Menorah continues forever, in its current iteration as Chanukah candles. This mitzvah, which was the sole purview of Aharon, is a mitzvah which lasts forever.

The Rebbe noted that Aharon must have known that he was the one to light the candles, and he also must have known he was chosen to do the whole service in the Temple. So why was he upset? Because, when a Jew sees others doing a mitzvah and he isn't a part of it, it should bother him deeply (Toras Menachem vol. 3 pg. 489).

Moshe

Later in the parsha, we read about complaints in the camp of the Israelites: "Who will feed us meat?"

Moses clearly did not like this complaint. He turns to G-d and begins speaking in a way he never did before:

"Why do you do evil to your servant . . . to place the burden of this entire people upon me?? Did I gestate them?? Did I give birth to them?? I cannot handle this nation alone!" Never in the Torah does Moses seem so agitated. He doesn't calm down until he declares, "If that's what You are going to do with me, please kill me!" That's how bad it was.

This is difficult to comprehend. What exactly happened that was so bad? The people of Israel want some meat? G-d should send them a container of steak and 'problem solved'! What is the reason for this hysteria? Is this the first time that the people of Israel complained in the desert?

Rashi provides us with the answer in his commentary on the verse, "If that's what You are going to do with me": He writes, "Moshe was weakened like a female when G-d showed the calamity that he would bring upon the Jewish people for this. Therefore, he said, 'Kill me first'" (B'haalosecha 11:15). G-d revealed to Moses that the meat they would eat would cause their death — and indeed it did — and Moses, the great Lover of Israel, could not handle it. He would rather die than see the punishment of those who begged for meat.

This is the sort of caring that is characteristic of a Jewish leader; he is willing to

die rather than see a Jew suffering.

Miriam

At the end of the parsha, we read that after Moshe's complaint that he could not handle the entire nation, G-d commanded him to appoint seventy elders to help him "carry the burden of the people," and indeed Moses did so. He appointed seventy elders and 'ordained' them so that they would be able to lead the people,

Then, as the ceremony was going on, they heard that "Eldad and Meidad are prophesying in the camp."

Rashi says:

"Rabbi Natan says: Miriam was at Tzipora's side when Moshe was told that Eldad and Meidad were prophesying in the camp. Tzipora said, 'Woe to those whom their husbands have begun to prophesied, for they will separate from their wives as my husband separated from me.' From there, Miriam knew and told Aharon." (12: 1).

When Miriam heard from Tzipora, the wife of Moshe Rabbeinu, that since he came down from Mount Sinai he had not lived a married life with her, she turned to Aharon and said, "Did G-d only speak to Moshe? He spoke to us as well, and we didn't separate from our spouses!" Why did Moshe feel compelled to separate from his wife?" G-d punished Miriam and Aharon for questioning Moshe's actions, and Miriam was punished with leprosy.

But the most important thing we learn from this story is that Miriam cared about Tzipora's suffering and talked to Aharon about it.

Caring

The stories of the "three shepherds" in our parsha have the same message: care and empathy.

This is also what is encouraging about atheists: the atheist actually thinks about G-d all day; he is constantly looking for evidence that he is right — and in the meantime, he is busy thinking about G-d.

The Rebbe explained a similar idea regarding the four sons in the Haggadah. The evil son is seated next to the wise son in the Haggadah. Ostensibly, he should be last on the list; why is he second? The Rebbe explained that this contains an important message: The wicked son, with all his shortcomings, at least has the knowledge and care to ask — and therefore has a chance to return. On the other hand, “he who does not know how to ask” has no such opening; he is apathetic; he doesn’t know because he doesn’t care to know. (Hisvaaduyos 5743 vol. 3 pg. 1279.)

Our job is to make people care about Judaism and the Jewish people. When they care, they will find their way back.