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The Power of Youth

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vayakel Pikudei

The Power of Youth

We recently marked the anniversary of the Arab Spring, the series of revolutions that changed the Arab Middle East for good—and hopefully, for the good. So let's take a look at what the Arab Spring really was: a youth movement.

All the young people across the Arab world rose up and rebelled against their leaders. It was they who led the revolutions. And in general, every revolution in history was carried out by the youth—they're always the ones who form the tip of the spear of every revolt.

Which, of course, brings us to Judaism.

Judaism has always recognized the awesome power of the youth. It has always believed in them and depended on them.

While the secular mainstream doesn't consider a youth to be an adult until he or she turns 18 or even 21 for certain things, the Torah considers a lad of 13 (or a girl of 12) a full adult—and expects him or her to take responsibility for their actions just like any adult.

In the world at large, we tend to view these young men and women, these teenagers, as little more than troublemakers. But the Jewish Nation has always depended on its youth to make the right decisions.

During the Temple Eras, Kohanim (priests) who served in the Temples from ages 13 to 20 were called the "Pirchei Kehunah," the "Young Priesthood." Only at age 20 would they begin full service in the Temple. (Until then they only did ceremonial things like standing guard.) But still, the point is that even from a young age, they were included in joint services at the Temple—they would serve as trainees and would be given all sorts of various jobs so as to get used to working in the Temple.

The Talmud tells us about several things specifically done by the Pirchei Kehunah. For example, on Yom Kippur, the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest, would have been up all night and, after having stayed up the entire night of Yom Kippur, would begin the special Yom Kippur services at the first light of day.

Now as a general rule, the Kohein Gadol would be a mature adult, and sometimes even an old man. And the Pirchei Kehunah would be responsible for seeing to it that he did not doze off, even for a moment.

The custom for Yom Kippur night was that "if the Kohain Gadol was a scholar," and he often was, "he would sit and expound."

Now we all know that if you give a rabbi the opportunity to speak, you can be sure he's not going to fall asleep—rabbis can talk for hours and not get tired. So the Pirchei Kehunah, the young Kohein trainees, were the ones who had sit there for the whole night and listen to his speeches.

But there were situations in which the Kohein Gadol was not such a scholar and didn't have what to lecture on. In such cases, they would "expound before him," meaning that they would teach him something—but there was the danger that he'd fall asleep.

So the Pirchei Kehunah were authorized that if the Kohain Gadol asked to take a nap, they would call in the Pirchei Leviya (the equivalent young trainees of the Levites who served the Kohanim), who would poke him with their fingers and say to him, "Honorable Kohain Gadol! Rise and cool yourself a bit on the floor so that you don't sleep!"

In the Temple, everyone went around barefoot. And so, when the Kohain Gadol was made to stand up on the cold stone floor of the Temple, especially during the fall months, it would be cold enough to wake him up.

And Maimonides further explains that in addition, the Pirchei Kehunah would busy themselves with the Kohein Gadol until the time for the morning slaughter arrived. The Talmud explains this to mean that "they would sing before him"—the young guys would sing and dance, all to ensure that he wouldn't fall asleep.

But the Pirchei Kehunah were also in the middle of things on Sukkos too.

On the holiday of Sukkos, the Temple would celebrate Simchas Beis HaShoeivah, the Water-Drawing Festival. All the people would gather in the Temple's courtyard and basically party all night, and then they'd get up in the morning and strike out on a walk to the Shiloach Spring not too far away, where they'd draw water that would be poured ritually on the Mizbayach, the Altar of the Temple.

Simchas Beis Hashoeivah was a major festival, and they would build a special balcony in the Temple just for it. The womenfolk would stand on the balcony and look down at the festivities below, while the menfolk stood on the ground—and from here came the custom in many synagogues for the Ezras Nashim, the Woman's Gallery, to be above the men's section.

Now during the Simchas Beis HaShoeivah celebrations, it was the job of the Pirchei Kehunah to light the candles. However, the candelabra were 50 cubits, or 75 feet, high in the air—kind of like the floodlights you have at stadiums today. So the Pirchei Kehunah would climb up there with huge jugs of olive oil, where they would fill the candelabra and light them, and all of Jerusalem would be lit up by these huge towering lights kindled by the Pirchei Kehunah.

The Talmud (Tractate Taanis 29a) further tells us that "When the Temple was first being destroyed, many groups of the Pirchei Kehunah gathered with the keys to the Heichal in their hands, and they went up to the roof of the Heichal and said before

G-d, 'Master of the Universe! Since we did not merit to be faithful caretakers, let the keys be given over to You!' And they threw the keys toward Heaven, and there came forth what appeared like a hand and accepted it from them."

The Rebbe says that we learn from this story that the keys of the Beis Hamikdash were normally in the hands of the youth, and it was they who ran the place—and woe to the Kohein who trifled with the youth.

And this brings us to this week's Torah portion. In this week's Parshah, we learn about a similar story.

But first, to preface, we must mention the Chet HaAgel, the Sin of the Golden Calf, which we read about last week.

In that story, everyone had too much energy and they came to Aharon, saying, "Make for us a god... which will go before us." And Rashi explains that when it all started, Chur, the nephew of Moshe, tried to stop them, but they killed him. And then they all converged upon Aharon.

Aharon tried to buy some time by telling them, "Tomorrow shall be a festival unto G-d," but they didn't change too much—the youth were filled with energy, "and they rose the next morning" and there was a big party.

When Moshe arrived, he heard all the chaos from afar—and when he got close to the camp "and he saw the Calf and the dances," meaning, all the partying, he knew it was the youth. After all, who else has the strength to stay up all night and party, and then continue the next morning?

And so Moshe went back up onto Mt. Sinai, and on Yom Kippur, he came back down and notified the Jewish Nation that G-d wanted them to build Him a Mishkan—which brings us back to this week's Torah portion.

Right in the beginning of the Parshah, we read that everyone got all excited and wanted to donate to the Mishkan.

But here we have an expression that is not usual at all: "And the men came with the women" (Shmos 35:21), on which the Midrash comments, "They were pushing each other and coming with men and women in a mix." And within two mornings, all the donations needed had been brought in.

So you had a scene that was a mob scene—everyone pushing everyone and everyone wanting to be the first to donate. And here too they came early in the morning.

So what you had happening here was the channeling of the energy of the youth for something positive—where they once had made a Golden Calf, now G-d commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to build a Mishkan, giving them something positive into which to invest their energies.

And not only that, but who did Moshe appoint to lead this mighty project? Betzalel. And how old was Betzalel? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 69b) tells us that he was all of 13 years old.

In other words, G-d entrusted the second-most important thing ever constructed in the history of the Jewish Nation into the hands of a 13-year-old lad—to teach us how much the Torah believes in youth.

When the Rebbe established Tzeirei Agudas Chabad, otherwise known as the Lubavitch Youth Organization, he said that it's not just for people young in age, that age is not something that is measured by one's passport and not even by one's external appearance.

This is because youth is a feeling. A young person can feel and act old, and a mature adult can be full of energy and vigor like a young lad.

So what we learn from the Pirchei Kehunah is that young people don't sleep. Young people don't fall asleep on the job. Just the opposite—the youth are the ones who keep everyone up. And if a young person sees someone asleep on the job, even the Kohein Gadol in all his glory, he's not intimidated, and so he wakes up even the Kohein Gadol.

And we learn the same lesson from the building of the Mishkan being delegated to a 13-year-old, and from the youthful energy of the first donors to the Mishkan.

The lesson here, my friends, is that G-d charged us with educating the youth, the future of the Jewish Nation. And in this guard duty, it is forbidden to sleep. We have to be constantly alert and take pains to channel the energy of the youth into positive things.

And when we do that, we can be sure that the youth of today will become the leaders of tomorrow, helping us make the world a better place!

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