

## It is the olah [that stays] on the flame, on the Mizbayach... and the fire of the Mizbayach shall be kept aflame on it. (6:2)

In the *Talmud Succah 28a*, *Chazal* relate an incident to express the idea which is reflected in both parts of the above *pasuk* by two different commentators. *Chazal* relate that Hillel *HaZakein* had eighty students, thirty of whom were worthy that the *Shechinah* rest on them, as it did on Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Another thirty of them were worthy that the sun stand still for them, as it did for Yehoshua bin Nun. The remaining twenty ranked in-between. This means that they were on a greater spiritual plane than those disciples who were compared to Yehoshua, but were not quite as spiritually developed as those who had achieved a status that was compared to Moshe. The greatest of the disciples was Yonasan ben Uziel, and the least of them all was *Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai*!

Anyone aware of that *Chazal* should be amazed by the “spread” between the top student and the one on the lowest rung – *Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai*. *Chazal* proceed to explain the disparity between these two Torah giants. *Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai* had mastered every aspect of Torah study: its expositions; Scriptural and Rabbinic attributions; the speech of the Ministering Angels; the language of the demons (thereby knowing how to control them), the medicinal properties of plants and herbs; and the various parables which are used to rebuke the Jewish nation. He was a veritable encyclopedia of every area of study concerning Judaism. Yet, he was the individual who was considered to be on the lowest rung of the spiritual ladder of ascendancy achieved by Hillel *HaZakein*'s eighty students! What about Yonasan ben Uziel, the greatest of his students? *Chazal* teach that when he sat and studied Torah, the spiritual fire that emanated from him would burn any bird that flew above him.

We now have some idea of the spiritual distinction achieved by the students of Hillel *HaZakein*. The question is raised: If these are the achievements of the students, clearly Hillel was greater. How do we describe his Torah eminence in contrast to that of his students? The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, uses the words, *Hee ha'Olah al mokdah*, “It is the *Olah* [that stays] on the flame.” He notes that the *mem* of *mokdah* appears in a diminutive form, sort of “depressing” the flame. He says this alludes to the fire of religious fervor within a person. The flame that is ignited to serve Hashem does not need to be apparent, pushing itself forward for everyone to see. The passion should remain within, embedded deep in his heart, emanating outward. This describes Hillel *HaZakein*'s level of spirituality. He studied Torah with tremendous *hislahavus*, fiery passion. Yet, no birds were burnt as they flew over his house. He was able to control his fiery fervor and keep it within.

Likewise, the *Sefas Emes* derives the same idea for the words, *V'eish ha'Mizbayach tukad bo*, “And the fire of the *Mizbayach*, Altar, shall be kept aflame *bo*, on it (within it)” (Ibid. 6:2). The greatness of Hillel *HaZakein* was manifest in that the birds that flew over him when he studied Torah did not burn. His flame burned brightly and passionately from within. Externally, even to the discerning eye, nothing could be observed.

Passion for serving Hashem is the way an observant Jew should live, but it may not be at the expense of another Jew. The idea of being *frum oif yenem's cheshbon*, being observant on another person's account, or executing religious authority at the expense of another Jew without consideration for his feelings, is the antithesis of religious observance.

*Horav Shalom Schwadron, zl*, decries the absurdity of such an expression of religious activity, citing the following example: Some people make a point of publicizing themselves as devoted, G-d-fearing Jews, who will stop at nothing in observing Hashem's *mitzvos* with every stringency, to the highest level of exactitude. At times, however, this passion for meticulousness takes its toll on others, as these "G-d-fearing" individuals in their pursuit of perfection in one *mitzvah* forget and even trample on the rest of the Torah.

*Rav Sholom* cites an instance in which a young boy slightly past the age of *bar mitzvah*, but clearly not displaying any outward physical signs of maturity, was reading the Torah in the *shul*. It was *Parashas Zachor*, in which the reading of Amalek's attack is *d'Oraysa*, a Biblical obligation. Consequently, one is very careful to read the words and *trop*, cantillation notes, perfectly. The boy was about to begin *Parashas Zachor*, when a "G-d-fearing" Jew had the nerve to ascend to the *bimah*, lectern, where the boy stood and yanked him off, declaring that since he was not "sure" that the boy was *halachically* a *gadol*, adult, he could not read *Parashas Zachor*. Needless to say, the boy was humiliated by this spiritual extremist. While he might have been *halachically* correct in his legal debate, it should not have taken place at the expense of the boy. This was an individual who was empowering his own detestable character shortcomings by using the Torah as an ally. While this is certainly not the meaning of "burning birds that were flying overhead," it does demonstrate the significance of seeing to it that one not be carried away with his religious observance at another Jew's expense.

There is another issue to be addressed: Accepting stringencies when one is not on the proper spiritual plane of observance can be disastrous. One might say that the word "disastrous" is perhaps a bit strong. It is not. The *Sefer Ish l'Re'ieihu* quotes *Horav Moshe Shmuel Shapiro, zl*, who posits a number of *sakanos*, dangers, for one who is *machmir*, assumes certain stringencies, at a point in his spiritual development when he is not yet spiritually and emotionally ready for this level of observance. The *Rosh Yeshivah* focuses on the *koach ha'havchanah*, ability to discern between right and wrong, between *halachah* and *chumrah*.

In the famous *Vidduy* of *Rabbeinu Nissim*, which is recited at various intervals during the year, we confess the following misdeeds: "*Eis asher tiharta timeisi, va'asher timeisa tiharti*, that which You deemed ritually pure, I deemed impure;" and "*eis asher Hitarta asarti, va'asher Asarta hitarti*, that which You permitted, I prohibited, and that which You prohibited, I deemed permissible." These confessions are enigmatic. It is understandable that we may neither permit nor render ritually pure that which the Torah has seen otherwise, but what is wrong with adding a *chumrah* and prohibiting that which is permissible, or rendering impure that which is actually pure? Are these activities considered sinful?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that one's perception of right and wrong becomes misconstrued. His understanding of *mutar/assur*, permissible/prohibited, and *tahor/tamei*, ritually pure/contaminated becomes deviated. This can lead to his permitting or rendering pure that which is otherwise prohibited or impure. Thus, one should be proficient in areas of *Halachah*, knowing with clarity: what is a Biblical prohibition; what is Rabbinic; what is a stringency; what is a custom; and what is merely a *chashash*, an unease concerning how a person might act under certain conditions.

There is another danger to premature *chumrah* acceptance. The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that to the unenlightened, someone who has not decided to countenance such a stringent attitude appears to be a sinner. Immediately, the fellow who does not see it my way, whose perspective of the *Halachah* might quite possibly be much more rational than mine, is now guilty of imperfect observance. This egregious attitude goes so far that one begins to condemn *gedolei Yisrael*, Torah leaders, who see the *Halachah* from a completely different vantage point and therefore choose not to adopt the various *chumros*.

*Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, was a *gadol baTorah* and *middos*. His exceptional character refinement was on a plateau equivalent with his encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. He was especially sensitive to the needs of others. *Rav* Moshe was accustomed to baking *Pesach matzos* at a certain *matzoh* bakery. This had been his custom for years, despite this bakery's lack of state-of-the-art equipment and space. After a while a new *matzoh* bakery opened, providing new equipment and enough space to carry out all of the *hiddurim*, embellishments/strict adherence to perform a *mitzvah*. When *Rav* Moshe heard of this new bakery, he thought of switching his baking to the state-of-the-art facility. When it came time to execute his decision, he changed his mind and stayed with the original bakery. He said, "If I switch to the new bakery many others will follow my example, causing a monetary loss to the owner of the old bakery. I will not bake my *matzos* at the expense of this man's livelihood."