

The Vilna Gaon's Purim Blessing

On Purim, everyone is a little bit light-hearted, and even the Vilna Gaon stopped his normal learning to celebrate. His student, R. Chaim Itzkowitz (popularly known as R. Chaim Volozhiner), came to see him [on this auspicious day] and asked the Gaon, “Rebbe, give me a bracha (blessing).” [In response] the Gaon said, “You should merit to bring two *korbanot Tamid* (daily offerings) every day.” “But Rebbe,” said R. Chaim, “we don’t bring *korbanot* today.” The Gaon said, “open up the *Shulchan Aruch* — how does the [first section] *Orach Chaim* start off? *Shiviti Hashem lenegdi tamid* — I have set the Lord before me constantly. What are the last words? *V’tov lev mishte tamid* — A good-hearted [person] has a perpetual feast.”

as told by Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff in the name of his teacher, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z”l in a lecture available at: yutorah.org/lecture.cfm/739714.



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In many ways, Purim is a day set apart. It revels in the faithful nation’s redemption from those who believed in blind, unguided fate. Through communal, familial, and individual acts, we reinforce the belief that G-d is always working for us, with us, and that when we take brave action as Esther and Mordechai did, miracles happen. It’s a one-day whirlwind in which all that we wish to be true is, indeed, so blatantly true — that good triumphs over evil, and that tears of sadness can, in a moment, turn to tears of gratitude and joy.

Yet on this day of intense joy, the Vilna Gaon blessed his student within the realm of the everyday — sharing the famous “signature” of R. Moshe Isserlis’ commentary on the first and last phrases of the *Shulchan Aruch*’s first section, *Orach Chaim*: “two daily offerings according to their order.” *Orach Chaim* intricately describes quotidian Jewish ritual life. From the way we pray to how we celebrate each Jewish holiday, every distinguishable detail is mentioned and analyzed. Its first and last phrases, as mentioned in the Vilna Gaon’s blessing, share one word, and in addition share the name of the twice-daily communal offering in the Temple — *Tamid* (meaning, “constant” or “consistent”). On a festive day like Purim, it’s easy to get

swept away in the euphoric spirit of the day, and as with any burst of inspiration, the grandeur and glory that stoke a deep sense of mission and purpose, eventually wane. The Vilna Gaon’s blessing describes how two commitments, if weaved consistently into the fabric of everyday life, can uncover the miracles within seemingly ordinary moments, and within ourselves.

A Bit of Background on the *Shulchan Aruch*

Though we might not always be cognizant of it, we’re constantly looking for ways to make our lives unique and purposeful. As social-work researcher Dr. Brene Brown says, “we are hard-wired for connection,” and this manifests not only in the way we relate to others but also in how we relate to ourselves. Without guidelines and goals though, we can lose sight of what we most want and how to achieve it — namely, a steady sense of contentedness in who we are and the way we live our lives. In an effort to make the intricate complexities of Torah observance accessible, Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575) compiled the *Shulchan Aruch* (literally, “The Set Table”) in Safed, Israel. The inline commentary of R. Moshe Isserlis,

called *HaMapah* or “the Tablecloth” (1520-1572), is considered the central resource for Ashkenazic ritual practice.

שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד Committing the Mind and Body

יִתְגַּבֵּר כְּאִרִי לְעִמּוּד בְּבוֹקֵר לְעִבּוּדַת בּוֹרְאוֹ
שְׂיֵהָא הוּא מְעוֹרֵר הַשְּׁחֵר: הִגָּה: וְעַל כָּל פְּנִים
לֹא יֵאָחֵר זְמַן הַתְּפִלָּה שֶׁהַצְּבוּר מִתְּפַלְּלִין.
(טור) הִגָּה: שְׂוִיֵיתִי ה' לְנִגְדֵי תָמִיד הוּא
כִּלְל גְּדוּל בְּתוֹרָה וּבְמַעֲלֹת הַצְּדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר
הוֹלְכִים לְפָנֵי הָאֱ-לֹקִים, כִּי אֵין יוֹשִׁיבַת הָאָדָם
וְתַנּוּעוֹתָיו וְעִסְקָיו וְהוּא לְבָדוּ בְּבֵיתוֹ כִּי שִׁיבְתוֹ
וְתַנּוּעוֹתָיו וְעִסְקָיו וְהוּא לְפָנֵי מֶלֶךְ גְּדוּל, וְלֹא
דְּבוּרוֹ וְהִרְחֵבַת פִּי כְּרִצּוֹנוֹ וְהוּא עִם אֲנָשִׁי
בֵּיתוֹ וְקִרְוֵבָיו כְּדְבוּרוֹ בְּמוֹשֵׁב הַמֶּלֶךְ, כָּל שֶׁכֵּן
כְּשִׁישִׁים הָאָדָם אֶל לְבוֹ שֶׁהַמֶּלֶךְ הַגְּדוּל הַקָּבֵ"ה
אֲשֶׁר מְלֵא כָל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ עוֹמֵד עָלָיו וְרוֹאֶה
בְּמַעֲשָׂיו.
שְׁלַחַן עֵרוֹךְ אֹרַח חַיִּים א:א

One should strengthen himself like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator, so that it is he who awakens the dawn. Rem"o: At least, one should not delay beyond the time when the

congregation prays (Tur). Rem"o: "I have set the Lord before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8); this is a major principle in the Torah and amongst the virtues of the righteous who walk before God. Shulchan Aruch OC 1:1

The *Shulchan Aruch* begins with the challenge we all face every day, no matter our status or stage in life — getting out of bed in the morning. Our first moment of consciousness is an opportunity to direct how we'll conduct ourselves the rest of the day. Will the forces of nature awaken us, or will we be initiators and “awaken the dawn?” In his commentary, R. Isserlis strengthens this law with the words of the Psalmist, “I have set the Lord before me constantly” (Psalms 16:8). “This,” he assures, “is a major principle in the Torah and among the virtues of the righteous who walk before G-d.”

This “major principle” is more than philosophical prose, it is also a learned habit. From its first words, the *Shulchan Aruch* frames the critical importance of intentionally choosing one's actions, down to the

very first thought upon awakening. To transform this ideal into reality, the practitioner must be committed to taking seemingly insignificant details and channeling them into intentional, meaningful acts. At first this can be incredibly challenging. Many self-help literature works share surgeon Max Maltz's observation that it takes 21 days to adjust to a new behavior or situation. However, if a behavior is reinforced consistently, eventually it becomes what author Charles Duhigg calls a “habit loop”:

First, there is a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the routine, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally, there is a reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future.

While it does take time to create a new habit over time, when we develop well established habits, it clarifies just how effective we are in determining the quality of our lives. We can outwit morning fatigue and use our energy to



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reach higher levels of productivity and purpose. Good habits are the gateway to dignity.

The obstacle with habit, is that when we let them run on autopilot, we can lose sight of their purpose. In Judaism, being committed to habit comes with an additional facet — “setting the Lord before me constantly.” Nothing we do or accomplish is solely our own. We aren’t here simply to create lives for ourselves, but to create lives that honor the Giver of life. Commitment that is linked to a Greater Cause will stand the inevitable tests that follow any worthwhile endeavor.

However, for many of us, no matter how earnestly we want to see G-d’s guidance in everything we do, it remains a challenge. Balancing ambition with the overwhelming sense of dependency on G-d? It sounds like a task that only the religiously elite — who hear G-d calling them by name through the flames of covenantal offerings or burning bushes — can accomplish. The notion that recognizing G-d’s presence derives from external, mystical impetuses is inaccurate according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) in his commentary on Tehillim (Psalm 16). Fostering this awareness begins within:

There are those who labor under the delusion that G-d must be conceived of as Someone Who towers far above earthly affairs, and who thinks all things terrestrial to be far below Him. “But as for me,” says David, “my conception of Him is very different. I have perceived his presence on the level of my own earthly existence: I no longer seek Him in the heights but I have set Him before my

eyes in everything I do on earth. Nothing here is so small or insignificant that G-d would be indifferent to it. Whatever I am, whatever I wish to accomplish lies clearly before His eyes. I shall hold fast to this conviction, tamid, forever.

G-d is not “up there” waiting for us to reach Him. Our intentionally-developed habits — how we choose to think and act — are where we meet Him in an empowering and lasting way. Once we internalize that we are not invisible — that we are constantly in the presence of the Being who knows who we are and our most cherished dreams — then we’ll see how even the moment in which we pick our heads off the pillow has the power to influence our destiny.

טוב לב משתה תמיד Committing the Heart

While developing habits and mindsets that enable us to sense G-d is critical to seeing the miraculous in everyday life, there’s another dimension of our personal development that enables this perspective to thrive. This second facet is found in the laws of Purim, in the very last sentence of the *Shulchan Aruch*:

יום י"ד וט"ו שבאדר ראשון אין נופלים על פניהם, ואין אומרים מזמור יענף ה' ביום צרה, ואסורים בהספד ותענית; אבל שאר דברים אין נוהגים בהם; ויש אומרים דאף בהספד ותענית מתרים. הגה: והמנהג כסברא הראשונה. יש אומרים שחייב להרבות במשתה ושמתה בי"ד שבאדר ראשון (טור בשם הרי"ף) ואין נוהגין בו, מכל מקום ירבה קצת בסעדה כדי לצאת ידי המהמרים; (הגהות ממוני בשם סמ"ק) וטוב לב משתה תמיד (משלי ט"ו, ט"ו).
שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תרצז:א

[In a leap year] on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the first Adar, one should fall on his face [in supplication] and should not say the [twentieth] Psalm, “G-d will answer me on my day of distress.” On these days, bewailing or fasting is forbidden. However, other [Purim] matters are not practiced on them ... there are [authorities] who say that one is obliged to feast and rejoice most on the fourteenth day of Adar ... This is not the practice. Nevertheless, one should have a somewhat larger meal in order to meet the view of the authorities who are stringent [in this matter], “and a good-hearted [person] has a perpetual feast” (Proverbs 15:15).

Shulchan Aruch OC 697:1

We’ve all met someone who has something about them that’s hard to put into words. Their good-heartedness is markedly palpable; we intuit it in the depths of our own hearts. What sets these individuals apart most is beautifully described by *New York Times* writer David Brooks: *[They] radiate an inner light [and]... seem deeply good. They listen well... You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude.” They emote a mysterious, poised equilibrium that communicates a deep belief that life, even with its imperfections, is deeply good.*

Brooks goes on to explain that “deeply good people” aren’t necessarily that way because of external factors. They too know pain and adversity; they feel sorrow and loss. What makes them different is their focus. Rather than living for “resume virtues,” they put their energy into “eulogy virtues ... unfakeable inner virtue built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.” For all that the good-hearted may accomplish in

the great wide world, their sense of purpose and mission comes from developing an honest and kind character.

There are a number of views on what outlooks and circumstances yield a good heart, such as appreciating one's portion in life (Rashi, Mishlei 15:15), being patient, and being blessed with a good wife (*Sanhedrin* 100b-101a). Each stands firmly on its own, yet a look at Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's interpretation (Vayikra 7) of the *Shelamim* offering unites them into one:

Shalem implies a state of completeness... [it] is a relative concept ... it describes a person in relation to the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives ... the state of [a person's] affairs: they are in harmony with him, since he is in harmony with them.

This also translates into the relations between man and G-d:

Shelamim symbolizes seeking G-d's closeness on account of a sense of contentment ... Not grief but joy is to form the bridge to G-d.

The good-hearted person chooses to pursue *shleimut*, peace. Life doesn't always unfold as expected. Plans change. People change. However, despite the juxtaposition between expectations and reality, the good-hearted person sees good, not bad. Instead of finding faults, "they live with human foibles and see beyond the moment" (Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet). With all their capabilities, they invest in the most healthful, gratifying, and appreciated aspect of human nature — a happy disposition. Happiness is not simply joy, it is harmonious consistency between deeply treasured values and how they are expressed in our everyday life.

Another Purim Blessing

Aside from being a day of community, remembrance, and charity, Purim is a day of tefillah, when we turn inward and assess what is truly worth wanting. Perhaps that is why the Vilna Gaon wished for his student, R. Chaim Volozhin, the insight and foresight to live each day, in mind, body, and heart, as it is the most

important day of all. Every day is an offering from G-d to us, and what we do with that day is an offering from us to G-d. May this Purim leave us with increased resolve to see G-d's constant guidance and do so with kind, happy hearts.

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Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

R. Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) was a German rabbi most well known for his "Torah im Derech Eretz" approach which advocated for combining Torah observance with engagement in the modern world. His many works of biblical commentary and philosophy focus on presenting Torah as relevant and appealing to the modern reader. R. Hirsch was born in Hamburg, Germany. He studied under R. Jacob Ettlinger. In 1830, he was appointed as the rabbi of Oldenburg, Emden and in 1851, he was appointed as the rabbi of Frankfurt Am Main, a position that he held until his death. R. Hirsch's writings continue to have a major impact on Jewish thought.