Details…

by

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*Every man's life ends the same way.*

*It is only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguish one man from another.*

- Ernest Hemingway

Imagine how Hollywood would film the moment when *Shemot* closes. There stands a people who, having been redeemed from slavery had come into the desert to receive the revelation of God’s Commandments! What a glorious moment! There would be the rapturous singing of angels! The people would dance! There would be lights, oh would there be lights! Technicolor, rainbow lights!

That might be the Hollywood version but, as we know, it is not the way that *Shemot* closes. There is no music. No dancing. No lights. Just the dry repetitive details of the building of the *mikdash*.

We want angels singing. We want epic imagery. We get specs and blueprints. We get *details*.What a drag! Pesky details. They so often seem to bog us down. Wouldn’t life be so simple if we didn’t have to “sweat the details”? But, as we learn over and over, Judaism is all about those details.

Leave it to others to live life as though it was defined by greeting card sentiments. We Jews are called to take care of the business of living which, as it turns out, means paying attention to detail.

Not long ago, I happened upon a story about a karate championship. As I read the story, I thought about the focus and discipline those champions employ in their every move. No motion is wasted or haphazard. Every kick if precise. *L’havdil*! Is the performance of God’s *mitzvot* any less important than the kick of a karate champion?

Really, when you think about it, is *any* aspect of life any less important? Life is not a gauzy ambiguity lived in generalities. It is a specific and constant series of small events – details! – that carry through the seconds, minutes, hours and years of our lives.

So, the real question is not whether or not our lives are made up of details. The question is, How *conscious* and *attentive* are we to that detail?

As Jews, we live according to *halacha*. That is Torah. It demands absolute attention to detail. If just one letter is missing from its hundreds of thousands, a written Torah is rendered *posul*. One letter? A single letter is an “error rate” of less than one one-thousandth of a percentage point! Certainly that is “good enough”, isn’t it? No. To observe God’s will – the personification of perfection – we can never be satisfied with “good enough”. We must attend to every detail. We must be conscious and aware and alive to those details for each is a glimpse of holiness.

 Our conscious attention to detail need not, and should not, be confined to ritual observance. Indeed, it is in our more “human” dealings that we need to be sure to be attentive to details.

I was recently having a friendly conversation with a *frum* young man when I said I had to end the conversation as I had to stop by the grocery on the way home. He looked at me curiously.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Is your wife ill?”

I thanked him for his concern but I explained that I always went to the butcher and the grocery and the bakery.

He seemed astonished. “Is that something a man should do?” he asked with genuine sincerity.

I did not know quite how to respond. Clearly, this twenty year old man who had never seen his father or any other adult male do such a thing could not fathom why a husband would lend a hand in such a way. He could not comprehend that being attentive to, and helping with, the details of the house adds to making a man a real husband.

No relationship in our lives mirrors the relationship between God and Israel more than marriage. The love shared between a man and his wife is real, is daily and it is defined by concrete actions and behaviors as well as emotions. The young man who found my visit to the grocery so astonishing has a great deal to learn in this regard but it is clear that the *frum* community is beginning to understand.

Certain communities have religious guides instructing *chasanim* in preparation for marriage. Their instruction goes far beyond the ritual dynamics of a new household and addresses many of the details of civility – details which I have always simply referred to as *menschlichkeit*.

The lessons are sometimes so simple as to seem painfully obvious to those who live in the “modern” world. The guide teaches his students to hold the door for their wives, to carry their heavy bags, to always show them consideration. In other words, he was teaching them to focus on life’s *details*. Doing so communicates respect and love far more than platitudes.

The significance and meaning of a Jew’s life is not in beautiful words but in the willing and cheerful attention to the details of life. How many times does one say, “I love you” when, in truth, actions do not match the words? I sometimes am reminded of Fiddler on the Roof’s lovely song, “Do You Love Me?” Tevye, trying to understand the world of love that was causing his daughter to want to *choose* the man she would marry, asks Golde, if she loves him. She seems confused and then annoyed by the question before she lists the many things she has done for him and with him during their twenty-five years of marriage. She’s washed his clothes, cooked his meals, cleaned his house, given him children, milked his cow. She’s fought with him, starved with him, shared his bed. She then concludes, “If that’s not love, what is?”

Love is not a theory. It is not an ideal. It is to live in and with the details of a life shared.

I found great comfort in the yeshiva’s guide “teaching” young men to open the door for their wives. Perhaps in opening the door, they would also learn to stop off at the butcher and the grocery and share the details of a life together!

It is all fine and good to learn *mussar* and ethics and *chassidus*, and to listen to all manner of uplifting talks but at the end of the day, it is our knowledge of and attention to the details of our lives that make for a meaningful and successful marriage and life.

“Reb Yisrael, did you take out the garbage? Did you help clear the table after that delicious meal? Did you put away yesterday’s clothes? Did you…?” Did you *engage* in the details and specifics of your life or did you rely on generalities, blind to the needs and comforts of the one you are married to?

The Torah’s emphasis upon detail is powerful*. Eighteen* times the Israelites followed the instruc­tions they were given regarding the *mikdash*. Eighteen times!

The repetition of the instructions to build the *mikdash* is not simply a repetition but a gesture of God’s love for His children, who were emotionally and spiritually crushed after making the golden calf.

It is in this continual repetition that we learn one of life’s great lessons. Life might be enlarged by remarkable moments, but it is not defined by them. Rather, it is defined by a lifetime of moments, of details.

The Jerusalem Talmud likens the repetition of God’s instructions for the *mikdash* eighteen times “just as God commanded” to the eighteen bless­ings of the *Shmone Esrei.*  At first glance, the comparison seems little more than a numerical agreement. But looking closer, we see that the *Shmone Esrei* , more than any other Jewish prayer, teaches us that life is not a *mishmash* of universal generali­ties or one-time needs and pleasures but the recognition that a particular God, who is capable of providing and responding to every single one of our very many detailed and specific personalized needs and requests, hears our very particular prayer.

When we recite the eighteen repetitions and eighteen blessings of the *shemoneh esrei* are we not being very detail oriented in asking God for what we need and want. Just as we understand God’s repetition regarding the *mikdash* as an expression of God’s care and concern, our own attention to detail can likewise be an expression of love!

As God tends to our needs and wants, doesn’t it make sense to likewise orient ourselves to the needs and wants of our wives?

Returning to the conclusion of *Shemot* and the details of the *Mikdash*, it would be well for each of us to remember that each Jewish home is a Mikdash me’at – a mini-sanctuary. Is this not reason enough to turn our attention – and our behaviors – to the needs of our homes and our wives?

Hold that door, husband! Take out that trash!