

Remembering Chayim Borukh: Thoughts for Parashat Beha'alotekha, June 7, 2014

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By

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The Torah informs us that Aaron the High Priest lit the Menorah exactly in accord with God's command (Bemidbar 8:3). Our commentators wonder: why would the Torah need to state that Aaron followed the instructions? We would surely have expected him to heed God's command!

Rashi notes that Aaron is being praised for not having deviated from the rules. Although he may have had an inclination to be innovative or creative in his assignment, his virtue was that he fulfilled his task exactly to specification.

Ramban suggests that Aaron fulfilled this mitzvah himself, rather than assigning it to his sons who also were eligible to do the lighting. Aaron felt a personal joy and satisfaction in his performance of the kindling of the Menorah in fulfillment of God's command.

Perhaps there is another lesson to be derived from Aaron's faithfulness. He was serving as a religious role model for the people of Israel. Through his devotion and punctiliousness, he was demonstrating to the Israelites that their service to God should be conducted with enthusiasm and with precision.

In his article, "Identification and Dislocation: The Breakdown of Worshipful Expression," (Conversations, Issue 19, Spring 2014) Michael Haruni discusses how we learn to pray—and generally how we learn to observe Mitzvoth. We watch our parents or teachers ...and we imitate them. Our imitation, though, goes beyond just mimicking their actions: we also come to internalize the sentiments that accompany the actions. By emulating spiritual role models, we have the urge "to emphatically identify the mental states of which these physical aspects are expression, to discover, that is, the mental states motivating their worshipful behavior" (p. 81).

We learn to pray not merely by learning how to read the words of the prayer book; and not merely by learning when to stand and when to sit and when to bow. We learn to pray by observing people who are spiritually alive at prayer. We

imbue some of their holiness, their sentiments, their intimacy with God. Whether prayer role models are great sages or simple pious folk, when we are in their presence we internalize how to pray. By emulating their prayer, we ourselves become engaged in prayer, real prayer not just lip service.

I have personally derived ineffable religious lessons from my parents, grandparents, teachers, and many other pious souls. These are gifts which cannot be bought with money. They are gifts of the soul that are transmitted with purity and love and that are received with purity and love. But along with these wonderful and powerful ongoing role models, I have also learned much from individuals who have passed in and out of my life, without even knowing how much of an impact they have had on me.

I want to refer to one such individual, Chayim Borukh Oklan, who passed away the first week of June, 2001. I am fairly sure that Chayim Borukh did not even know my name.

For many years, we have spent much time during the summer months in Long Beach, New York. We have been summer members of the Young Israel of Long Beach since 1991. When I attended services on weekdays and Shabbatot during the 1990s, one of the people I discovered was an old man, hunched over, a bit eccentric. He apparently had no family. I believe he lived in a senior citizen facility, and had no material wealth to speak of. I knew him simply as Chayim Borukh.

He had certain habits that tended to annoy congregants. For example, in the midst of the prayers he would suddenly shout out in a loud, high-pitched voice: "Almighty God!" As the congregation rose to pray the Amidah, Chaim Borukh often would scream: "Pray with contrition! Pray with devotion!" His behavior was not in keeping with proper decorum. But it was...authentic! Chayim Borukh—whoever he was—knew how to pray, to really pray.

My son, Hayyim, and I developed a special reverence for Chayim Borukh. We always felt better and happier when we saw him at services. We felt uplifted—not annoyed—when he shouted his beseeching words. Hayyim and I imagined that if Elijah the Prophet were to appear on earth, he might well appear in the form of Chayim Borukh.

When Chayim Borukh passed away in June 2001, the Young Israel arranged his funeral and covered the expenses. They put a memorial plaque in his name on the memorial board in the sanctuary. While Chayim Borukh seems to have left no

family or friends behind, he did leave an impact on the synagogue in which he prayed. And he left an impact on me, my son Hayyim, and others who experienced him as a role model in prayer.

Aaron the High Priest understood that he was a religious role model. When he lit the Menorah with devotion and punctiliousness, he set an example for the Israelites and inspired them to internalize their intimacy with the Almighty.

Chayim Borukh probably did not at all realize that he was a religious role model. Yet, when he prayed—and when he challenged us to pray with devotion—he was surely helping us to internalize our own spiritual potentials. His memory is a blessing.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)