



Greenburgh Hebrew Center

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Dear Friends,

In the early 20th century the Gerer Rebbe, the *Sfas Emes*, elected to comment on a rabbinic Midrash based on *Parashat Naso* (read June 3 this year) where we read of the priestly benediction, *birkat kohanim*. It ends with the familiar “May Adonai lift up His face to you....” The Midrash quotes a seemingly contradictory verse from Deuteronomy, “He will not lift up his face” (10:17) and then reconciles them by saying that one applies when the people Israel do God’s will and the other when we do not. But, asks the Midrash, when they are doing God’s will what need is there for God to lift up His face to show favor, since the blessing is earned by deed? The point, suggests the *Sfas Emes*, is that the Holy One accepts our little bit of service as if it were very much. This is what the Midrash means when it says,

כשם שהם נושאים לי פנים כך אני נושא להם פנים

“As they lift their faces toward Me, so will I lift My face toward them.” Just as a person rejoices in a good deed and is glad to have done God’s will, whether great or small, so does the Creator accept this offering with a smile. God knows that this is a sign of the person’s inwardness, from where the joy comes forth. This is the meaning of “and may He give you peace.” Shalom or *shelemut*, wholeness is the inner point of truth. Within even the smallest bit of light, all is there. That’s why God is called Shalom; God is the wholeness of all. When we have this wholeness, even a tiny point is considered a lot.

The spirit of this Hasidic teaching is diametrically opposed to the notion of God as cosmic accountant, maintaining a balance sheet of our good deeds and transgressions. A single mitzvah done in joy contains God within it, and may give us all the wholeness we need. The seeming smallness of the deed or of the moment is no obstacle to its containing the infinite fullness of God’s presence. The late Rabbi Judah Goldin defined mitzvah as both commandment and a good deed, not only a particular halakha, but also an act that increases the practice of goodness. It is not whether we do much or do little, but that we do it for the Sake of Heaven.

We read in *Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers*: “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (2:21) and “Anyone who works for the community, let your work with them be for the sake of Heaven... And as for you all, I will make your reward great as though you had accomplished all the work” (2:2). Phil Karmel has worked mightily throughout his years of service to the Greenburgh Hebrew Center. He has demonstrated over and over again that all that he does is l’shem Shamayim, for the sake of Heaven. As we salute his presidency, and as we thank his family, Barbara, Jacob and Anna, for sharing him with us, we thank Phil for the several points of light that have illuminated us a community. May that light continue to inspire and motivate each and every one of us to achieve the best of which are capable for our families, our people, and our God.

B’ididut,

Barry

Barry A. Kenter

Rabbi Emeritus

A vibrant egalitarian Conservative Jewish community in Westchester County,
embracing our traditions while actively participating in our changing world.