

What's New?

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

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Congregation Shaare Tefilla, Dallas, Texas

The year was 1898. The town was Bialystok, one of the great Jewish communities in Poland. The Jewish community was reeling from the passing of their revered Chief Rabbi, Rav Shmuel Mohliver, a Torah giant who was a founder of the Chovevei Zion movement, which encouraged Jewish settlement in the land of Israel. Finding a new Chief Rabbi was no easy task; you know how involved it is to find the Rabbi of *one* shul...imagine how sensitive and politically charged it is to find a Rabbi for an entire city! One name kept coming up, though- that of Rav Meir Simcha HaKohen, a renowned Torah scholar who wrote many commentaries on Chumash, the Talmud and the works of the Rambam. Though he was serving in a Rabbinic position in Dvinsk, Latvia at the time, he had lived in Bialystok, was a known entity and was considered by the community to be a fitting replacement. Unfortunately, his candidacy failed to advance; word was that some of the influential and wealthy citizens of Bialystok felt that he was an unsuitable choice, precisely because he was well known to the community and could therefore not be an effective leader. Upon being told the disappointing news, Rav Meir Simcha turned to his close disciples and explained, through words of Torah, why he wasn't surprised.

Picture the scene: *Am Yisrael* is standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, waiting for their beloved leader Moshe to return. It has been 40 days, and there is no sign of him, and their erroneous

calculation told them that something terrible must have happened. What would they do? How would they function without their beloved leader?

וַיִּרְא הָעָם, כִּי-בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לְרֹדֶת מִן-הָהָר; וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל-אַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִלְכוּ
לְפָנֵינוּ--כִּי-זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה-הָיָה לוֹ

No name suggested itself, so they asked Aharon to fashion a leader for them. Now, whether the calf that emerged was deliberate or miraculous is the subject of debate, but regardless, a simple question must be asked, and it was asked by Rav Meir Simcha. If they were so concerned about a leadership vacuum, why did they have to fashion some kind of bovine idol? Couldn't they turn to Aharon and ask *him* to lead the nation? After all, Aharon was a humble, articulate servant of God who strove relentlessly to foster peace among his nation. And Aharon was not just some kind of mouthpiece or sidekick. Rashi explains that Aharon and Moshe were complete equals, such that the Torah sometimes uses the name of one first, and sometimes the name of the other:

רש"י שמות פרשת שמות - וארא פרק ו

(כו) הוא אהרן ומשה - אלו שהוזכרו למעלה, שילדה יוכבד לעמרם, הוא אהרן ומשה. יש מקומות שמקדים אהרן
למשה ויש מקומות שמקדים משה לאהרן, לומר לך ששקולין כאחד:

Why not ask Aharon? Rav Meir Simcha answered, with a wry smile, that the answer was simple. The troublesome element that proposed making the Golden Calf felt *it was better to follow a calf they didn't know than a person they did...*

Rav Meir Simcha's explanation is pithy and humorous, but it defies logic. Could they really have preferred the so-called leadership of an inanimate object? To ask this question reflects a misunderstanding of the appeal of *Avodah Zarah*. We tend to think that *Avodah Zarah* means the

worship of idols or symbols, and that is true- or at least is its most common manifestation. But *Avodah Zarah* is also the worship of *zarut*- a gravitation toward anything that is unfamiliar, new and exciting. There is a quote I'm sure many of you are familiar with. It goes, אין נביא בעירו - a prophet can't prophesy in his own city. People know him too well, they won't listen to his message- they want someone they don't know, someone new, to speak to them. We think this is a Jewish idea, and probably a phrase from somewhere in Rabbinic literature, but it isn't. It's actually from the so-called New Testament, found in slightly different forms in the books of Luke and Matthew. Not only is the source of the idea not Jewish; the idea itself is not Jewish, either, though it is but it is potent and widespread- indeed, it was the idea that thwarted Rav Meir Simcha's candidacy. In fact, Torah tradition teaches us not to seek newness, but renewal- preserving and reinvigorating time tested observances and modalities. In fact, this is woven into the fabric of our halachic observance, as well. Given the opportunity to perform two rituals or recite two prayers, one which is more common than another, which one takes precedence? For example, on Shabbos that is also a Yom Tov or Rosh Chodesh, in *bentching*, we include both *Yaaleh VeYavo* and *Retzeh*. Which one do you say first? The answer is that we say *Retzeh* first, based on the principle of תדיר ושאינו תדיר, תדיר קודם - we give precedence to that which is more common and observed more regularly- in this case, Shabbos- over that which is less so. Make no mistake about it. New is not inherently *bad*- it's just that not intrinsically good, either, and not *better* by virtue of its newness.

The truth is that we often fall prey to the allure of *zarut*- in the language of logic, we espouse a fallacy known as *argumentum ad novitatem*, the appeal to novelty. It's not just the people who

clamor to purchase the newest devices the moment they are released; it's people who hold a deep seated belief that anything new is better, by definition- that which which was described by CS Lewis as "chronological snobbery." In his words, it is the

"... uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."

There are so many ways in which this is manifest and is reinforced societally. For example, when documentaries describe ideas they consider outdated, they run stock footage of "old timey" scenarios. You will see people walking around wearing fedoras, driving cars that are now antiques, wearing clothes that were fashionable 50 years ago in grainy, old reel-to-reel films. The narration is often by someone with a unique, confident Hollywood accent, as if to show that the idea being expressed is past its sell-by date. But aside from our entertainment preferences, there are other areas in which we seek newness rather than renewal. For example, established shul communities tend to seek and gravitate toward our newest members. In the name of *hachnasas orchim*, in the name of communal growth- we want new blood in our community, new faces in our seats and new people at our Shabbos tables. To be sure, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this; quite the opposite- we *need* to make sure our new members feel welcome and stay long enough to become old members. But at the same time, there are plenty of people in shul that have been here a long time and many of us don't know well, who are looking for friends- or would welcome the opportunity to get to know us better over our Shabbos tables. Our challenge is to seek renewal- reenergizing or deepening our relationships with people who may be familiar to us even as we connect with those who are not. Do you know who did a great job of teaching this lesson? *Lehavdil*, it was Sesame Street. As a young kid, I watched that show religiously,

despite most of its humor being way above my head (back before the awful Elmo took everything over). One of the segments that played often, in various forms, featured Bob McGrath introducing familiar faces and common occupations that kids might regularly come across by singing the song,

“Who are the people in your neighborhood?

They’re the people that you meet, when you’re walking down the street,

they’re the people that you meet each day.”

It is the familiar people that this song challenged us to get to know better. And if this is true for the people who are familiar yet casual acquaintances, על אחת כמה וכמה, how much more relevant that is for the closest, most familiar relationships we have- with our families, spouses and closest friends, as we are challenged to reinvigorate these relationships that can often flounder, fall into a routine or even a rut on occasion.

But the worship of the unfamiliar holds true as well in the way we relate to our own study and observance. We gravitate toward new intellectual ideas and interesting religious trends when it comes to Tefillah, communal worship and study, but basic concepts are often ignored- like the laws of Shabbos, or the meaning of the prayers that hopefully we say three times daily. Thank God, our community is actually quite good at this; in our recently concluded Kashrus class, we had about 20 people each week, but we could do better, both in terms of numbers and in terms of range of attendees. One of my colleagues lamented to me not long ago that he has a perennial problem each year on Shavuos. In order to keep people awake, he has to pick a bunch of hot topics- or a theme that includes in it many hot topics- and speak about that all night. For him, this

past year, it was “The Shabbos Switch,” at the time the latest and greatest in dubiously Shabbos friendly technology. My colleague was certain that if he had simply dedicated the learning to basic laws on Shabbos and their conceptual underpinning, no one would have come. That’s not daring, or edgy... Now, I assure you that our programming on Tikkun Leil Shavuot *will*, with God’s help, keep you excited and interested. But then and at many other times throughout the year, we will also talk about timeless texts, historical awareness and crucial basic concepts in Judaism, as we seek to renew that which is familiar and which we might otherwise take for granted. I remember once receiving a ride from the Catskill mountains to Brooklyn, and one of the passengers in the ride with me was a Skverer Chossid. We got to talking and his parting words for me, as we left him off at his destination, were “If you want to bring people closer to Yiddishkeit, you have to learn Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh with them.” In his mind, the key to Jewish outreach was simple- take an unaffiliated Jew and study the commentary of the great 17th century Moroccan sage, Rav Chaim Ibn Attar. I thought then that his view of outreach was naive and simplistic, and I still do to some degree. But maybe there is something to what he was saying. Instead of shtick, instead of pop culture and pop psychology, we should stick to the basics in strengthening ourselves and reaching out to others, instilling with a sense of meaning and excitement that which we already know.

Let us learn the lesson of the Jewish people’s mistake, and privilege renewal over newness. In that merit, may God fulfill the words of the verse we just said a few moments ago:

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּב [וְנָשׁוּבָה]

Return us to you, Hashem, and we will return

חַדָּשׁ יְמֵינוּ כְּקֵדָם.

And invest our days with a sense of renewal, in the spirit of the days of old.