

No “Why” Too Small

RDI Sermon 060526

So I want you to take a moment now. I want you to sit with the question and really sit with it before you answer yourself. The question, this question that I've been asking this week, which is when did I or when did you last feel the light? Not happiness, not productivity.

Not a good day, not optimal living or optimization, but the light. The thing inside you that knows why you're here. That cares about your life.

That makes you feel like you're actually present in this world and not just moving through your days. When did you feel that last? You can think. I'm not asking.

I just want you to think. Some of you I'm sure know exactly what I meant and some of you might have been thinking. It's been a while.

Some of you might have thought, oh today or yesterday. And I want to say that the gap between and the distance between that light that you know that you carry and that you've had at various moments of your life and that has dimmed. How dim it is.

That dimness, that gap is not a character flaw in you. It's a spiritual practice. It's not a failure point.

It's one of the most human things that we do, which is there's a gap between that light and that clarity and it's dimming and it's difficulty in conjuring it. And the Torah has a name for that. And a teaching about what to do with it.

Because the question is not whether or not you have that light. The question is whether or not we've turned that into an automatic light. In the Parsha, there's something remarkable that happens in the beginning of this week's reading.

The Torah opens with a command to Aaron the priest. It says to him, Aaron, when you will light the candles. Moshe, go tell Aaron that when he lights the candles, when you raise them up.

It doesn't say when you light them. It doesn't say when you burn the candles. Those are both words for ignition.

It says when you raise it up. When you cause it to ascend, literally means when you cause it to ascend, Bahalotcha, when you make it ascend. As if the flame has somewhere to go and your job is to lift it there, to that place.

And on that, the rabbi's comment, the Sifrei, the Kohen had to hold the source of fire to the wick until the flame rose on its own. The Kohen had to, you're here, parrots, you're listening to this because you're a Kohen. Right? You're a Kohen in the back, you're Kohanen.

If you're listening to this, that's the phrase that is brought in the Sifrei that Rashi quotes. You have to stand there and you have to light the candle. And when can you walk away? Yeah,

you're with me? When can you walk away? When what? When, if you were to walk away from it, it would, it would, it would still burn.

Don't just light it and then, okay, I'm done. It's like, okay. Oh, where's, oh, there it is.

I lit it. That's not Baalotcha. Baalotcha is, You have to light it until, if you were to walk away from it, the light that was already latent in the candle, in the wick, can stand on its own.

Doesn't need you. This is my retirement sermon also. Not tonight.

He had to stay with it. He had to hold the candle there. Wait there with the candle until the flame no longer needs you.

Think about what that means for us. The light in you has somewhere to go, eh? But it needs to be tended to. It needs someone.

Let's just say, in a non-codependent universe, you. It needs someone. Could be an errand in your life.

It could be, hopefully, at least you. That me, I, have to be that one that stays with my light long enough until it's, Oh, la, me, la, where it's still, it wakes up. It has its own rising up.

So hold that. And then right after that, there's another commandment. The Torah says, I'm sorry, right after that commandment, the Torah says something else that is also always, I sit with this all the time.

I think about this all the time. So immediately after Aaron hears that mitzvah, that commandment, the Torah says, And Aaron did exactly what Moshe told him. Now this, for those of you who know the way the Torah is interpreted, there's a neon sign blinking above this phrase.

It says, unnecessary, unnecessary, unnecessary. And whenever there's an unnecessary phrase in Torah, it's got a little song that I, it's like midrashic moment. A midrash is about to happen.

Because the rabbis can't believe that God, in God's incredible editorial acumen, would have, like, why say that Aaron did what he was told to do? What would, what would have been the hafaminah? What would have been the thing that you would have thought? Tell me that he did it. Why? Of course he did it. When Aaron, like Aaron took it into consideration, thought, that's a good idea.

I'm going to go light the candles. Let me go think about it. And I'll come back to you with my response.

Why did the Torah tell us that Aaron was dutiful? I'm, of course, not the first one to think of this. The sifra, the same midrash, a couple thousand years ago said, what is that? And Rashi quotes the sifra, and says, in Aaron's praise, melemei tshelosh shina. It teaches us that Aaron didn't change what God had told him to do.

Which is also, Yiddish speakers here? It's a modnazakh. It's a modnazakh. It's like an odd thing for Rashi to say.

Again, we need these vayas kenaron. And Aaron did what God told him in order to teach us that, that Aaron was thinking, I'm not sure. I can change it a little bit.

I'll do it a little bit differently. I'll do it my way. I'll put my Aaron brand on it.

Everybody's got a brand. And so in the 1800s, the Mea Shiloh, the great Ishbetser Rebbe, quoting the Rashi, quoting the rabbinic strata that is struggling with Aaron's dutiful obedience, that he didn't change it. He looks at Rashi's comment, and he hears something completely different.

When Rashi said, melemei tshelosh shina, that he didn't deviate, the word l'shanot is to change, and that is praise for Aaron. But the Ishbetser reads it more radically and more internally. He answers that the word can be understood not as tshelosh shina, that he didn't change, but tshelosh shana, mishna.

He didn't repeat it the same way. He didn't do it every day exactly the same way. He didn't do it like a person that was just doing it by rote.

tshelosh shina means he didn't just wake up and say, you know, automatic pilot. I'm just going to do it. Aaron had to find a way every day to make it new, even though he didn't change it.

tshelosh shina doesn't mean tshelosh hishtana, that he didn't change it. It means tshelosh shina, that every day it wasn't a repetition by rote, automatic, automaton, AI, plug it in, go to bed. He wanted to be lit.

He wanted to be on fire. And he was looking for tachbulos. He was looking for skills.

He was looking for practices and practicum. How do I do my daily thing in a way that isn't routine, that isn't dialed in? That would be the way that I think the Ishmaelites say. He didn't dial it in.

He didn't just dial it in. He showed up. He didn't let it become rote.

For 40 years, every morning, every evening, and every single time, Aaron brought himself to it as if for the first time. And I think that what that looks like is this. We, I, we are all very good at maintaining the forms of things.

We show up, going through the motions, saying the words. That's a madrigal. That's a level.

Just to show up is already a level. We do our practices. We light the candles on Friday night.

We send the flowers, the note, the text. Shout out to my wife, Ariel. I forgot.

I love you. Hi, and I'm not talking about spiritual laziness. I'm talking about something deeper and harder.

I'm talking about the way that life, by the sheer accumulated weight of each and every day, places a layer of glass between you and your own experience. You're present. You're doing the thing, but you're not really there for it.

There was a psychoanalyst named Winnicott, D.W. Winnicott. The British psychoanalyst had a phrase for this, glass between us and our experience. He talked about people who build a false life based on reactions to external stimuli.

A life that looks full from the outside, active, engaged, productive, but has lost contact with what he called id experience. The real thing, the thing that feels like yours. It's your thing.

I think the Ishmaelites are pointing at that. At the same phenomena, three centuries earlier than Winnicott, you can light them in order every day, never once actually be present to the light that you lit. Does that sound familiar to anybody? Maybe me.

Okay. You can do the same thing every single day. And that routine is great.

But glass between you and your experience, you're just going through the motions. The form is surviving. The flame goes through.

The motions, but lo naseh, it's not being done like lo shinah. It's just the same thing. It's just each and every day the same thing.

And I think most of us know that somewhere in our honest selves, that can happen to us and maybe is happening. Maybe not completely, but enough. Enough that we feel the gap between the light we know is there and how dim things feel for us.

So the question then becomes, how did Aaron do it? Like, it's great that he did it, but how? How did he do it and break the routine? 40 years, the same act every single day. And so I said, I wanted to talk about Rachel Goldberg-Pollan in my conversation with her. And I think she offered an answer because I was thinking about this all week.

And then I was sitting with her and she said something incredible. She said everything she said was incredible. And if you haven't read her book, I highly recommend you just jump in with a box of tissues and time to process.

But Rachel said, when she was speaking about Viktor Frankl's line, the one that goes, He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how. That line became the mantra that her son Hirsch taught and said over and over again to all the hostages that came into contact with him. During those horrible days, those unbearable days, he gave hope to them.

He looked at them, they said, one person who got in contact with Hirsch, they walked away with that line. Each one of them. He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.

What is your why? And now that has become Rachel's mantra. She doesn't go anywhere without Man's Search for Meaning, the book in which those lines are found. And she said something on Wednesday night that was creative, raw, and very pastoral.

She said, a why for your whole life might be too big. Thinking about a why that is your whole life is enormous. Some days it's too heavy to look at it directly.

So maybe what you need, she said, is a why for this month. And then she started almost like Abraham bargaining with God. She said, or maybe you need a why for this week.

Maybe you need a why for today. And maybe you just need a why every 15 minutes. Whatever why you can bring.

And then I added these words in my head. There's no why too small. There's no why too small.

There's no increment of time that doesn't deserve to have your imprint of a why. And the why can be idiosyncratic, can be today, this unique day, this unique moment where I find myself. What's my why for this moment? What's my why for this next hour? She didn't make Frankl's teaching smaller.

She was making Frankl's teaching livable. She was saying the light doesn't have to illuminate everything all at once. It doesn't have to be a grand light, a big light.

It just had to be enough for right now, enough for this step, enough for this hour. I think she was describing exactly what the Ishbitzer was speaking to. Aaron didn't light the menorah with a why that covered 40 years.

He had 40 years worth of why. And maybe subdivided his 40, 40, 40, 40 more times every day. He had to think, why am I lighting the candle today? What's today's reason? It's an amazing hara.

It's an amazing teaching. He never let the why become an abstraction. He didn't let it become so large that it dissolved into the background.

He kept it small enough to actually hold. No why too small. No moment too small to require a fresh moment.

That was the song that we were singing. The people familiar with the words that we were singing? It's a, it's a mash-up that Menachem, Rabbi Menachem Predator put together a song that is still in use today. He sang with his daughter.

And I heard it and it just stuck in my head. And he took Moshe and Yonah, Jonah, and Esther. And each of their moments of reticence to become leaders saying, who am I? Mi anochi ki elekh? Who am I to go? The Pharaoh.

And then, mi yodei im le'ed kazot? Who knows if this moment is the moment that was destined for you? And I'm just hearing it differently though tonight. I'm hearing it at mi yodei im le'ed kazot. Who knows what this moment's why is? Who knows how we infuse each moment? But that's the practice.

The practice isn't once and for all. We say, you know, I established my why. You can look it up.

I wrote it down when I started this company called me and it's there. It's my mission statement. But the why is something that comes back to over and over and over again.

There's one more thing I want to show you in the text and then we're going to go home and eat. I want you to look this Shabbos at the menorah itself. The thing that Aaron lit every day.

How many arms, how many branches were in the menorah in the temple? Seven. Seven branches, the hanukiahs later. And the Torah teaches us that all of the candles that Aaron was to light had to be el-mul playa menorah ya'ir u'shibat.

And he wrote, towards the menorah, the seven lights had to illuminate the face of the menorah. And there's a disagreement about what that means. But the why the accepted opinion is, is that all six of the candles have to be facing the center candle.

All the candles have to be facing the center. Seven branches and one central branch. All the six outer flames would face inward towards the central light.

And that's the Ishvitzer. He reads this story. Each one of us is one of the outer flames and the work, the whole work is to keep turning towards the center.

To keep turning towards the center of the menorah. We don't turn to the world or to validation, not to the external measure of how bright we appear from the outside. We face the source, the inner light that is the Nir Hashem Nishmas Adam.

If we continue to look towards the center candle, which is our why, which we light every day anew. And then everything we do, all the six branches of our day, all the things we get into, we keep wondering, what's this moment's center candle? How do we continue to focus our hearts and our minds and our bodies towards the why that this moment demands? It asks of us the menorah image that no matter how much flame we think we have, if it's not facing the center, it won't stay lit. So here's the homework for tonight.

It's not a practice for you. It's not a program. It's just a simple question.

And I think it was Rachel's question on Wednesday night and it's Aaron's question and the menorah's question. What is your why for the next half hour? I gotta get some food. That's my why, right? I gotta love somebody.

I gotta be happy for someone. I have to, what's my why for the next half hour? To show up in the world as a full human being. And maybe that's too much.

Maybe just being. My why is just to radiate light. Whatever is your why.

There are a million infinite, there are an infinite number of whys. But Milamit Shaloshina, says the Ishbitzer. Aaron tried every day to keep it as a routine.

But it never was. He kept infusing each moment with meaning and purpose. Ayaz kin Aaron, Aaron did it every day, every morning, every evening, 40 years, never.

And I wrote, miyodea. Nobody knows what your why is. But maybe this moment is exactly the moment that you were made for.

That's your why. Let's rise.