



May 4, 2024



*With  
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ב"ה

Parshas Acharei Mos

26th of Nissan 5784

### The Aharon Effect

There is a fascinating Midrash in this parshah (16, 3). It explains that when describing Aharon entering the Kodesh HaKodashim, the inner sanctuary, the pasuk uses the word bezos, which has the gematria (numerical value) of 410. This, says the Midrash, alludes to the number of years the first Bais Hamikdash stood. Rabbi David Pardo (an 18<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi from Sarajevo) in his sefer, Maskil L'Dovid, explains that the Midrash means to say that all the 410 years that the Bais Hamikdash was in service were credited to Aharon. Year in, year out, it was as if Aharon was there serving in the Bais Hamikdash. His presence was palpable.

The question is, why? What was it about Aharon that made him the supreme seminal figurehead whose personality inspired the Jews for the duration of the entire first Bais Hamikdash? How did Aharon earn this distinction? Why was he the one credited for the Bais Hamikdash as long as it stood?

### Why Do Gedolim Live So Long

Ever wonder why so many gedolim have lived such long lives? Why is it that the rabbinic leaders of the generation seem to have such incredible longevity? The global leader of Jewry from the previous generation, the Chofetz Chaim, lived until almost one hundred years old. The leader of the Jews living in Israel, Rav Shach, lived until 102, and he was succeeded by Reb Aharon Leib Shteinman, who lived to the age of 103. One of the greatest sages of the last one hundred years, Reb Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, lived to the age of 102, as did Reb Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg. The leading Halachic authority, Rav Vosner, lived until 100 years old, and Rav Kaduri, a leading Sephardic rabbi, lived until the remarkable age of 108. The current leader of the Torah Jews in Israel, Reb Gershon Edelstein, is 100 ka"n, and the current leader of American Torah Jewry, Reb Shmuel Kamenetsky, is 98 bli ayin hara.

And this is not a new phenomenon. Hillel lived to the age of 120, as did Reb Yochanon, Rebbi Akiva and Reb Yehuda Hanasi. There seems to be a massively disproportionate number of holy leaders that lived incredibly long lives. Why is that? Of course, they please Hashem with their Torah learning and acts of kindness and He therefore grants them longevity, but is there perhaps another layer to it? I believe there is.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (1, 6) states something that is seemingly obvious: “One should strive to have friends.” The Rosh in his sefer, Orchos Chaim, explains this Mishnah with an idea that is both novel and fascinating. He says that more than merely giving us practical advice promoting the concept of living a vibrant social life and saving one from living hermetically, the Torah is actually offering us a powerful method in attaining a longer life. How so?

Hashem, in His unparalleled supreme justice, will never cause pain to an individual, even if deserved, if another person who is undeserving of pain will be negatively affected by it. Hashem will never allow a man to go to jail or get hurt or die if his sentence, injury or death will cause unjust pain to that individual’s spouse, family or friend. Conversely, if Hashem does place pain on an individual, and thus causes pain to his immediate surroundings, it is indicative that the spouse, family or friend deserves, to a certain extent, that pain, for not rebuking, standing up to or inspiring the relative or friend.

Hence, the more friends one accumulates, the more people his death would pain and, in turn, the less likely Hashem is to cause the death to occur. In a slightly roundabout way, then, acquiring friends is acquiring life, for the more people that love, respect and need you, the less likely it is that Hashem will take you away from them.

### **Why Do We Mourn?**

The Sefer HaChinuch in mitzvah 264 writes a similar idea in regard to mourning. Why do we mourn the loss of a relative if everything that Hashem does is for our benefit? Much like if Hashem took away all of one’s money, the appropriate response would be to proclaim, “*Gam Zu L’Tova*” – this, too, is for the good – shouldn’t the same be true when a relative dies? How do the intricate laws of mourning fit into the overall belief that everything Hashem does is for the best? The Chinuch explains that Hashem would never have allowed the relative to die, which in turn caused pain to others, if those others did not have a sin that required repentance. The pain of a relative’s death as it pertains to the mourner is a wakeup call to inspire teshuvah.

No one has more people under their umbrella than a gadol, a man whose every heartbeat is for Klal Yisrael. A man who lives and breathes for Klal Yisrael. A man who uses every moment of his day, every vestige of his strength to think of how he can help teach, love and nurture Klal Yisrael. Such a man's death would cause incalculable waves of pain that would reach the four corners of the Jewish globe. Such a person is much more complicated to be taken away, because it has such far-reaching effects.

Aharon Hakohen was the supreme paradigm of love and kindness. He was the ultimate peacemaker. He would cry with the widow. He would encourage the downtrodden. He would do everything he could to ensure that families experienced nothing but harmony. The Midrash says that when Aharon died, his coffin was accompanied by 80,000 boys all named Aharon. All were born to parents whose marriages were saved due to Aharon, and so they were named in his honor. 80,000! And that's just the boys! He so embodied the idea of loving peace, that when the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos beckons us to be nice and kind, it doesn't merely tell us to do so; rather, it tells us to emulate Aharon. So effective was Aharon at spreading love and peace that he literally became the definition of it.

Aharon's love and peace was so widespread, that its ripple effects lasted generations. His warmth and kindness echoed for centuries. Those who witnessed the love and respect he exuded when he served as Kohen Gadol were so awestruck that they were inspired to do the same. That, in turn, spilled over to their kids and grandkids, creating generations of peaceful, harmonious people. His inspiration was so dramatic that the Midrash says that the entire first Bais Hamikdash, all 410 years of it, was built on the foundation of love that he erected.

Where there is peace, that is where our nation flourishes the most. Peace in the home, peace in the streets. Peace in the offices and kitchens, coffee rooms and shuls. We need it desperately. How many families were ripped apart due to strife and fights? How many holy marriages were destroyed due to machlokes? How many glorious institutions got smothered by the ashes of internal squabbling? Peace is essential for our continuity. Those that promulgate it reside in a special place in the hearts of man. Their lives and their inspiration last centuries.

### **The Secrets of The Mir**

The largest yeshiva in the world is the Mir Yeshiva. It is also one of the oldest. Of the hundreds of yeshivos that stood tall in the glorious days of European Jewry, virtually all of them were decimated in the Holocaust. Not so the Mir. It was saved. With unimaginable miracle after miracle, the entire yeshiva fled to Japan and hid out the war years

there. Its learning never stopped. Its flame never diminished. Why? Why were they saved while the rest were not? What was it about the Mir that protected it from the rabid jaws of European destruction?

Of all the traits that the Mir Yeshiva personifies, there seems to be one that rises above the rest. That trait is its unwavering dedication to peace at all costs. Staunch, steadfast dedication to peace, and ensuring that it exists no matter what. The founder of the Yeshiva, Reb Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, was never a man to let honor get in the way of spreading Torah. Despite being the leader of the entire Yeshiva and the central figure in it, he happily hired a new leader, the younger and more energetic Reb Yerucham Levovitz, who instantly became the draw of the yeshiva. Reb Leizer Yudel was there to bring honor to Heaven through spreading Torah values. If it meant hiring someone who would become more popular and more effective in doing so, then so be it. All this is for Hashem.

The Mir was a yeshiva that stood for peace. Not once did a petty fight break out amongst the staff, a fact that is as rare as it is beautiful. When a Jordanian rocket was fired in the direction of the Mir during the Six-Day War, it merely bounced right off the side of the building. A place that stands for peace is blessed with longevity. Its inspiration knows no bounds. It is where Hashem wants to place His presence. It carries us on its wings, and in turn, Hashem carries it on His.

### **Ishbitz: Your Typical City**

Ishbitz was a typical city in Poland before the war. Not too big, not too small. Everyone knew everyone and the Jews were happy. All of that horrifically changed with an episode that had global consequences, that would wreak havoc in the entire Jewish world. One ordinary day, the rabbi took issue with something the town shochet (ritual slaughterer) was doing, and publicly declared that his shechitah was no longer trustworthy. This sparked many conversations in the tavern and in the back bench of the shul. First there were murmurings, then there were rumblings, and then an all-out verbal war took place, with some people defending the rabbi and others defending the shochet.

The climax was on Rosh Hashanah, when, moments before shofar-blowing, the Rav got up to call out the tekios. A man from the back of the shul yelled out, "Who do you think you are to ruin a simple person's life like that? Get out of town!"

Immediately, things heated up and the verbal jabs turned into an all-out physical brawl in the middle of the shul. Punches were thrown, benches were flipped over. Things escalated into such violence that the police were called

in to restore order. Immediately afterwards, the Rav ran to his house, packed a suitcase and walked out of the town, only to collapse dead on the road from a heart attack.

You may not have heard of this town, but you have certainly heard of what this town became. A few months later, the town of Ishbitz was overtaken by the Nazis. Electric fences were erected, railroads were built and the name was changed from Ishbitz to Auschwitz. The sleepy little town ravaged by machlokes became the largest death factory in human history. And those horrid gas chambers, the place where millions upon millions of Jewish souls were ripped out of their holy bodies, were built on the exact spot that the shul had stood only a few months prior. The. Exact. Same. Spot.<sup>1</sup>

Machlokes tears us apart. It causes a thick blanket of darkness to descend upon the earth. Bitter fights destroy everything in its path, leaving room for nothing except the angel of death.

The very place that Hashem chose to erect the Bais Hamikdash was on a field owned by two brothers who loved each other to such a tremendous degree, that every night, one would secretly sneak across the other one's portion to bring him extra stalks of grain. Their love knew no bounds, and hence, Hashem erected his house upon their field. Sadly, our bickering and squabbling burned the house down. The house that was carried on the shoulders of Aharon's love and kindness.

For thousands of years, every tefillah of every minyan of every shul in every corner of the globe has ended with the exact same words. "*Oseh shalom bimromav*," Hashem, the God of ultimate peace, "*Hu yaseh shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael*." We plead, we cry, we pray for peace. Peace amongst our neighbors, peace amongst our rabbanim. Peace amongst our institutions and peace amongst our shuls. Peace amongst our couples and peace amongst our children. We take three steps back, and we bow to the left, and we bow to the right, and we beg Hashem to spare us the pain of machlokes in all directions of the world. We look up and we hope that our lives will be long and plentiful with nothing but peace for us and our entire nation. And the whole shul, no matter if they are young or old, Ashkenazi or Sefardi, modern or traditional, chassidish or misnagdish, yekkish or litvish or heimish – Every. Single. One. Of. Them. Says Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> We know this to be true because a resident of Ishbitz escaped Auschwitz and has since relayed this story.