

דרכים בפרשה כי תשא

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ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל בן אורי בן חור למטה יהודה “Behold, I have designated by name Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur” (31:2)

In the 1930's, Rav Elchonon Wasserman Hy"d was on a fundraising trip in New York for his Yeshiva, Ohel Torah of Baranovich. He gave a drasha along with a fiery appeal in the shul on Friday night. Rav Elchonon implored the kehillah: “For 80 dollars, every one of you can have the zechus to support the Yeshiva for an entire week.” He continued that for those that could not afford the 80 dollars (think 1930's), eleven and a half dollars would still cover a full day of learning Torah for the entire Yeshiva. Rav Elchonon was passionate and the people were inspired. However, the Rabbi of the shul was not that excited about so much money leaving his shul, so he got up to speak right after Rav Elchonon. For the next fifteen minutes, he spoke about the incredible opportunity of supporting Torah and how even just one dollar would be a tremendous mitzvah and an important donation. (Perhaps he even felt that aniyei ircha kodmim, and the money needed to stay local.) Obviously, after everyone heard from their Rabbi that they could do the same mitzvah with only a small amount, the fire of Rav Elchonon's words were extinguished — causing him to walk out almost empty handed.

That night, the Rabbi went to where Rav Elchonon was staying and said to him, “I know you're probably upset with me about what happened in the shul; I hope you don't have too many taynes on me and my congregation.”

“Ich hubb nit kain taynos bichlal (I have no complaints at all),” Rav Elchonon replied. “Let's look at Parshas Ki Sisa where the Torah writes: ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל בן אורי בן חור למטה יהודה — ‘Behold I have designated by name Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur.’ He is the one who is supposed to build the Mishkan. Let's picture the scene: Moshe Rabbeinu leaves the Ohel on a mission to track down Betzalel. How was Moshe supposed to find him, out of two million people living in the midbar? So he walks up to the first person he sees and says, ‘Excuse me, are you Betzalel ben Uri ben Chur?’ Let's assume the first person responds: ‘No, my name is Chaim Yankel ben Burich Zeilig.’ So, Moshe continues to the second person and a similar scene plays itself out: ‘No, I am Usher Anshel ben Yoinason Getzel.’ Would there be a reason for Moshe to have any complaints against these people? Certainly not! These people were simply not Betzalel. They were not chosen by Hashem to build the Mishkan.”

Rav Elchonon then proceeded to make his point: “Likewise, Hashem said that my Yeshiva would have supporters. Who are they? Obviously, it's not your shul and not you. So you are not Betzalel in this case, and that's too bad — but I certainly cannot have taynes on you. It's just obvious that you are not the person or the community that Hashem has chosen to support my Yeshiva. Someone else will have that zechus in Olam Habah. One needs to have a zechus to be able to give to a proper tzedakah, and you clearly did not merit that zechus.

On the other hand, a man once stopped by the home of the Chofetz Chaim en route to America (which was known as the treifeneh medinah at that time), requesting a bracha and words of chizuk. The Chofetz Chaim asked him: “Are you a Kohein?” The man answered that he was not. “And why not?” the tzaddik inquired. “Well, my father wasn't,” the man replied, now slightly confused at where the gadol was going with this. But the Chofetz Chaim wasn't quite done yet: “What about your father — why wasn't he a Kohein?”

The visitor was clearly befuddled at this point, so the Chofetz Chaim exclaimed: “You know why I am a Kohein and why my father was a Kohein? Because after the maaseh ha'eigel, when Moshe Rabbeinu cried out מי לה' אלהי, the children of Levi gathered around him, and they became the Kohanim. And not just them, but their children and grandchildren for all future generations. My zeideh ran to Moshe, but yours did not. Therefore, I am a Kohein, and I will be able to enter many areas of the Beis Hamikdash, performing the avodah, but you will need to stand on the sidelines.

The Chofetz Chaim concluded that the cry of מי לה' אלהי occurs each time we need to make a decision that will affect our future. “If you will answer the cry and make the right decisions, your children will merit to remain frum.”

Granted that Rav Elchonon Wasserman (and for that matter, anyone else that comes and asks for tzedakah or any chesed) was for sure going to get what his Yeshiva needed. But these people could have raised their hands and said, “Yes, my name is Yankel, but for today you can just feel free to call me Betzalel. Please sign me up for this incredible opportunity.” When the cry of מי לה' אלהי is called out, it is not a question of how the mitzvah will happen, but rather, who will be the lucky one that will step up to the plate and claim the zechus.

Hashem presents us with many opportunities to come closer to Him. It is incumbent upon us to recognize these calls for connection and respond in the same manner that the Levi'im did — doing our utmost in each case to be the one, rather than leaving the opportunity for others.

Good Shabbos, מרדכי אפפעי