

Parashat Beha'alotcha

Turning Our Sparks into Flames that Keep Burning By Themselves

Facilitating Independence

I was told that as a baby, even before I was able to walk, that the first kind of sentence I would say was: "I can... I want... do it myself!" Since then, independence and responding to challenges has always been important to me. It is part of my calling to also encourage others to rise to challenges and gain skills for independence. This month, I decided to challenge myself by joining the special swimathon and swim across the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) for the benefit of a center for impaired children and youth. When I met my cousin at a recent family gathering, he proudly announced my 'altruism' to be willing to swim 3.9 km in order to raise money for children in need. In truth, it was the other way around. My main desire was to swim across the Kinneret with a group of women in a safe setting, and the only way I could do it was by raising NIS 2000 for Sadnat Shiluv. It was only at the festive dinner, the night before, that I learned what a worthwhile cause the money I raised supported. I was moved by the movie of a day in the life of a 25-year young blind, brain-damaged woman, Bat El. The staff supported Bat El and encouraged her to express her personal aspirations, develop her abilities and achieve her goals in life. They worked around Bat El's disabilities to help her become as independent as possible, by weaving baskets and working behind the counter of the special coffee shop that Sadnat Shiluv manages. I was inspired and thought about how this is similar to our work at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, where we emphasize teaching learning skills to help our students to delve into the vast sea of the Torah on their own. Even if we are not physically impaired, we are all a bit spiritually impaired until prophecy returns to Israel. It is quite a challenge, both as a parent and teacher, to not only impart life lessons to our children and students, but to facilitate them to stand on their own two feet, and keep moving forward on the Torah path.

Finding the Balance between Igniting Sparks and Keeping Them Burning

We learn about the importance of engendering independence in our dependents from this week's parasha, which opens with the mitzvah to light the Menorah in the Mishkan (Tabernacle).

ספר במדבר פרק ח (ב)

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהִעָלְתָּךְ אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יֵאָרוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:

"Speak to Aharaon and tell him when you raise the candles, let the seven candles give light over against the face of the Menorah" (*Bamidbar 8:2*).

Why does it state raising the candles rather than lighting them?

רש"י על במדבר פרק ח פסוק ב

בהעלתך - על שם שהלהב עולה כתוב בהדלקתן לשון עליה שצריך להדליק עד שתהא שלהבת עולה מאליה:

Because the flame rises upwards, an expression denoting "ascending" is used in kindling them, implying that one must kindle them until the light ascends by itself (Rashi, *Bamidbar 8:2*).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

It is not enough to ignite each candle until a spark appears. We need to keep the fire connected to the candle long enough for the spark to become a flame that will continue to burn on its own. It can be quite a challenge to find the right balance between igniting sparks and keeping them going. When looking back on how I educated my two sons with this principle in mind, there are some things I would have done differently today.

Rising to the Challenge for Children and Adults Alike

The tendency of mothering in a smothering way takes work to overcome. It is so much easier in the short run to just spoon-feed and take care of everything by yourself. It is also hard for parents not to take responsibility for their children's obligations. For example, many parents take responsibility for their children's homework. Why should the child remember to do his own homework, when Mommy makes sure it gets done? In hindsight, I was too quick to direct my children to do what I felt was right, rather than encouraging them to make their own decisions. This can cause rebellion in one type of children and a lack of independence in another kind of child. In the long run, everyone benefits when children are encouraged to be independent and take responsibility. I recall when my little son, Netanel Shalom, was a bit late in crawling; I helped challenging him by putting a favorite toy a distance away from him and urged him to go for it. He quickly caught up. It is surprising how children and adults too rise unexpectedly to challenges when there is no choice. When my first-born son, Mordechai Meir, had just completed first grade in a very chareidi yeshiva in Israel, he was abruptly pulled out of his protective environment and moved to a more modern English-speaking school in NY. This was because my husband was stationed to fulfill his obligation to the US, working in a physician shortage area. Meir wasn't used to the American teaching style or culture. He also skipped a class due to the higher level of Judaic studies in Israel, so he was a year younger than everyone else, in a completely foreign environment, while his father worked 24/7 and was unavailable to give support. Yet, Meir quickly learned the ropes, and even began to read his Hebrew Torah studies with an American accent! After only six months in the new school, my husband was transferred to Memphis TN, and again Meir was uprooted from where he had just begun to adjust and placed in a very different environment. After four years abroad, we were finally able to return to our beloved Land of Israel. Meir enrolled in the fifth grade, which was another adjustment from Memphis to Bat Ayin. I believe that all these challenges during his childhood, helped Meir adjust so well when he recently had to separate from his wife and children for nine months to get a degree in the US. He managed unexpectedly well, even returning without any trace of English accent in his Hebrew!

Believing in Hashem Helps Us to Believe In Ourselves

It was not an easy decision to choose between the longer and the shorter swim-track in the swimathon. I didn't want to take a bigger bite than I could chew, yet, I like to go for the greater challenge. Since I am a relatively slow swimmer, the safety boats kept offering me a ride to catch up with the others, but I refused, since I wanted to see if I could do it on my own. It was truly a great exhilarating feeling when I finally arrived at the destination on my own. Over the years, I have come across numerous women who do not believe in their ability to manage challenging situations. Some have a hard time taking responsibility. Others prefer the easy way out. Just as there is a *yetzer hara* (negative impulse) of arrogance, there is a corresponding *yetzer hara* of not believing in our own power. This applies to the spies in next week's parasha, who were afraid to

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

face the seven Canaanite nations and conquer the land. They preferred continued spoon-feeding of the manna in the desert (Chafetz Chayim on the parasha, *Parashat Beshalach*). Often, I find that the root of lacking self-confidence and having difficulty facing challenges comes from being raised by overly critical mothers. Therefore, the challenge of motherhood includes striking the balance between not doing too much for our kids while still being encouraging and not overly critical. Hashem, our perfect parent, hides His face, in order to allow us to figure things out on our own and make our own choices. How painful it must be for Hashem to allow us to learn from our own mistakes. Yet, simultaneously, He sends us encouraging signs and gently guides us behind the scenes, even when we least expect it. It is the realization that Hashem supports us in our holy endeavors that empowers us when necessary, to take upon ourselves even more than we can manage on our own. When we have emunah in Hashem's help, our sparks can turn into flames that continue to burn on their own.