

The Vertical Life

By: Rabbi Yanky Tauber

The space we inhabit has three dimensions, which means that there are six basic directions available to us -- right, left, forward, backward, up and down -- if and when we decide that we want to go someplace.

And where is it that we most want to go? It is often said that our language, particularly the idioms it employs, is most telling of our natures. If that is the case, then the human heart is definitely pointed upward. We talk about "raising" our children, "climbing" the ladders of our careers and "rising" to life's occasions. We think "highly" of the people we admire (and look "down" at the ones we don't), we "aspire" to high ideals, and regard "heaven" as representative of all that is good and "lofty" in life. It's true that we also speak of taking the "right" turns in life, moving "forward" and delving "deeper into the matter"; but the upward direction easily "tops" all other spatial metaphors.

And did you ever watch a group of children competing as to who is "bigger"? It's not the width of their bodies, the length of their stride, or even the longitude of their years that they compare, but their height. Higher, our most basic instincts ever, is greater.

In the words of King Solomon, "The spirit of man strives upward." He also calls the soul of man "a lamp of G-d."² The soul of man is a lamp of G-d, explain the Kabbalists, because of the four elements (earth, fire, wind and water), only fire gravitates upwards.

What does it mean to strive upward? The Chassidic masters explain that there are two kinds of growth, two kinds of advancement. There is the type of growth that occurs within the parameters of one's present existence. We each have a specific nature, specific fields of interest, specific talents, specific potentials. Within these specifics, we can "extend" ourselves to attain further and further goals, and "broaden" our achievements to cover more and more ground. But it all takes place on a certain plane of reality -- on the surface of who and what we are.

Striving upwards means not accepting the two dimensions of that plane. It means bursting through the ceiling of our lives to reinvent ourselves, to make of ourselves something that we never were and never even possessed the potential to be.

And this is a uniquely human quality. No other being has a need or desire to be something other than what it is. A rock wants to be a rock, an elephant wants to be an elephant, an angel wants to be an angel. Only the spirit of man strives upward.

This is why, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, when Aaron is instructed to light the menorah in the Holy Temple, the Torah uses a most unusual expression -- *behaalotecha et haneirot*, "when you raise the lamps."³ The lamps of the menorah represent the "lamps of G-d" that are the souls of the people whom Aaron, in his role as *Kohen Gadol* (high priest), is to inspire. So it's not just a matter of lighting the lamps, kindling the lamps or even igniting the lamps -- the lamps should be *raised*.

Aaron's job is to raise the lamps, to rouse our human potential to the point that "a flame rises of its own accord,"⁴ raising the roof of our world, raising heaven itself.

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Parashat Beha'alotcha

Shabbat Begins: 8:49 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:07 pm