

PEKUDEI (EXODUS 38:21-40:38)

Sure, You've Got the Keys, But WHO's REALLY Driving?

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

In the closing chapters of the Book of Exodus, the Torah goes into great detail describing all of the work that went into the construction of the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle that served as the Temple in the desert. The entire Nation of Israel worked together -- weavers, embroiderers, silversmiths -- craftsmen of many disciplines performed this labor of love to build a House of G-d. Although Moses was the organizer of the project, he himself had no personal hands-on involvement. Now that was about to change.

And they brought the Tabernacle to Moses, the tent and all its equipment; its hooks, beams, crossbars, pillars, and sockets...the roof of colored hides, ... the Ark ... the Menorah...all the equipment used in the Tabernacle's service. (Exodus 39:33-41)

The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the people brought all the parts to Moses because they weren't able to put it all together due to the weight of the beams. Now Moses was expected to do it for them!

How, wondered Moses, would any human be able to put those massive timbers together?! G-d told him, "You involve yourself in the effort, and it will APPEAR as if you are setting it up, but it will rise and stand up by itself."

Allow me to share with you an experience I had last week.

A resident in the retirement community where I serve as chaplain was dying. The family organized a vigil and stayed by her side around the clock. They consulted with me and with the rabbi who would eventually be handling the final arrangements. For several days, the family waited with her, not knowing when our Merciful Father would reclaim her soul.

The end came last Friday night. After Shabbos, I received a call informing me of a change in plans. The rabbi who was supposed to perform the funeral was available at any time EXCEPT Sunday at noon. That was the time that the funeral was scheduled to take place. Would you be available, Rabbi Seplowitz? I agreed to officiate at the service.

The next day, at the funeral, I told a true story about a group of Yeshiva students from Cleveland who were on their way to a wedding in Baltimore, but, due to inclement weather, never made it. They were redirected to a different city. Eventually they decided to skip the connection to Baltimore (they had already missed the wedding) and fly back to Cleveland.

Since sundown was approaching and they needed to recite the *Mincha* (Afternoon) Service, they asked a janitor to unlock a private room for them to pray. Imagine their surprise when the janitor followed them into the room and asked one of the students to help him say Kaddish!

After Services, the janitor told them a story that put their travel plans into perspective. "I never had any religious education," he explained. "Last night I had a dream in which my father came to me and asked me to say Kaddish in his memory. I said to him, 'first of all, I don't know HOW to say Kaddish. Secondly, I don't know WHERE to go to say Kaddish!' My father responded, 'I'll supply the Shul, you just make sure to say Kaddish!'"

Imagine the reaction of the Yeshiva students. They had actually left Cleveland thinking that they were going to Baltimore! Little had they realized that G-d was taking them to an airport to help a son memorialize the soul of his father!

[NOTE: I WROTE THE ABOVE STORY THE WAY I TOLD IT AT THE FUNERAL, BUT I LATER LEARNED THAT I PROBABLY TOLD IT INCORRECTLY. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF VERSIONS OF THE STORY. I ORIGINALLY READ, ON THE INTERNET, THAT THE STORY HAPPENED TO RABBI MORDECHAI GIFTER, OF BLESSED MEMORY, DEAN OF THE TELZ YESHIVA IN CLEVELAND. RABBI GIFTER'S DAUGHTER TOLD ME THAT THE STORY IS TRUE, BUT THAT IT WAS SOMEONE ELSE FROM CLEVELAND, NOT HER FATHER. ANOTHER, PROBABLY MORE ACCURATE VERSION, IS WRITTEN IN THE INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTSCROLL SIDDUR FOR THE HOUSE OF MOURNING, BY RABBI JJ SCHACTER.]

After telling this story, I explained to the family at the funeral that they have the ability to memorialize the soul of their mother/grandmother/great-grandmother. By doing Mitzvahs, by emulating her kindness and generosity, they would bring comfort to her in the next world, and, in effect, allow her to live on through their good deeds.

After the funeral and burial, I went to the cemetery office. At that point, with the mourners on their way home, I switched hats. I changed from professional rabbi to amateur genealogist. I asked the gentleman in the office to check the computer to see if anyone named Seplowitz, Cheplowitz, or Chaplowitz is buried there.

For the last few years, I have been doing research on my family tree. I won't bore you with the details, but, to make a long story short, everyone named Seplowitz seems to have their roots in the same little Lithuanian town. (Postav, in what is now Belarus) I have been trying to figure out how we are all related. Most specifically, I have been trying to track down information on a Kalman Seplowitz, the great-grandfather of one of my possible/probable relatives. [Note added in 2010: Recent DNA testing indicates that we ARE relatives with a common ancestor going back perhaps 8-10 generations!] I have suspected that he might be a "missing link" to different branches of the family.

The cemetery office informed me that there were four Seplowitzes in two different sections of the cemetery. Two of them turned out to be the parents of the possible relative I referred to above. In the other section, I found the illusive Kalman.

Once I found the gravestone, I copied all the information: father's name, date of death, etc. Then, in respect to the soul of this possible relative, (actually, a definite relative -- a Jewish brother!) I recited a Psalm. I often do that; it's standard Jewish practice to recite Psalms at Jewish graves. Then I did something that I don't usually do; I said *Kel Molei Rachamim*, a memorial prayer. This prayer is usually recited at special times of the year, for example on the *Yahrtzeit* (the anniversary of the person's death), before the High Holidays, or on holidays when *Yizkor* is said. As part of the prayer, I pledged to make a donation to charity in his memory.

Now, why did I do that? I was wondering if anyone ever comes to visit this grave, if there are any relatives who ever give charity in his memory. I felt a certain bond; after all, I had been looking for him for two years! Perhaps it was also because a similar prayer had been recited a half-hour earlier at the funeral.

That night I was sitting at home looking up something on a calendar, when something suddenly occurred to me. I went back to the notes I had copied from the gravestone and realized what had happened. That afternoon, as I stood in front of Kalman Seplowitz's grave reciting Psalms and pledging charity, was his 60th *Yahrtzeit*!!!

Remember the Cleveland story? It took several "coincidences," but the janitor ended up fulfilling his father's wishes that Kaddish be said. Is this what G-d did for Kalman? Why did I decide to change my standard procedure and say a memorial prayer? Why did I pledge charity? And, let us remember, I wasn't even supposed to be there that day. The other rabbi was supposed to officiate at the funeral. It is only due to the fact that she passed away when she did, and that the family chose to schedule the funeral when they did, that I found myself at Kalman Seplowitz's grave on his *Yahrtzeit*!

The "coincidence" doesn't end here. I decided to call Kalman's possible great-grandson (I should state for the record that I am not 100% positive that I found the right Kalman!) to tell him what had happened. It turns out that he was also at that cemetery that day, visiting his parents' graves because his mother's *Yahrtzeit* was coming up in a few days! He had no idea that there were other Seplowitzes buried in that cemetery! So not only did I end up praying at Kalman's grave on his 60th *Yahrtzeit*, but his (possible) great-grandson came to the cemetery as well!

Who is REALLY running the show around here? I think we see the answer in this week's Torah Reading. As G-d told Moses, "You involve yourself in the effort, and it will APPEAR as if you are setting it up, but it will rise and stand up by itself."

We go through the motions of living our lives and running the world. But it is the Master of the World who is actually the One in the driver's seat.

Have a great Shabbos.

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