

BEHAR (LEVITICUS 25:1-26:2)

Aharon Moshe: Servant of G-d and His Children

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz



Count ... forty-nine years. Sound a blast on the Shofar... on Yom Kippur you shall sound the Shofar throughout your land. (Leviticus, 25:8-9)

Every 50 years, the Jubilee Year was announced with the sounding of the Shofar. (See “Free as a Bird.”)

Nowadays, in these post-Temple (and pre-Temple!) times, the Jubilee is not currently observed. However, to retain the Tradition, and to remind us of how things are supposed to be, we continue the practice of sounding the Shofar at the end of EVERY Yom Kippur.

The Shofar at the end Yom Kippur has come to symbolize the end of the fast. When we hear the Shofar, we breathe a sigh of relief; the *Yom HaKadosh*, the holy day, has come to an end and we look forward to a healthy, successful, and happy year. The Evening Service is said, Havdallah is recited, and everyone leaves the synagogue to break the fast.

For me, over the last few years there has been an additional component to the ritual. The *Gabbai* (for lack of a better translation, the sexton, in charge of calling people up for honors, and keeping track of the million-or-so little details that make a *Shul* run efficiently) would come up to me and congratulate me on conducting the Services. We would hug each other and wish each other well.

It was a great hug, one that I really appreciated. After all, one should always strive to receive blessings from righteous people. He blessed me with wishes for a good year. I, of course, blessed him too, but it is clear to me that I got the better end of that deal.

Next Yom Kippur, things will be different. My beloved Gabbai will not be there to hug me and bless me. Our beloved Gabbai, Aharon Moshe ben Shmuel Zanzvil, Mr. Aaron Steinhart, *Zeicher Tzaddik Levrachah*, of Blessed Memory, has gone home. After 91 years, he has returned his *Neshamah*, his soul, to its Creator.

It is customary among Chassidim to bring written requests to righteous people. All of their needs are written on these “*Kvittlach*” -- notes, and the righteous people are asked to pray to G-d for the fulfillment of these requests. After the Second World War, there was a dearth of such holy people.

One great Rabbi, the Rebbe of Satmar, of Blessed Memory, was asked what to do. “Now that so many of our *Tzaddikim*, righteous people, have been killed, to whom should we bring our requests for blessings?”

The Rebbe gave two answers. “Go into any *Shul* on a weekday morning,” he said. “Watch the men rolling up their sleeves to put on their *Tefillin*. If you see numbers on their arms, ask them to bless you.” Any person who could endure the hell of a concentration camp and still be devoted to G-d, he reasoned, is truly a *Tzaddik*, a righteous person.

The second alternative that the Rebbe gave was an American-born Sabbath observer.

Today in America it is easy to observe the Sabbath. But it wasn’t always that way. Mr. Steinhart, born in the Bronx in 1914, told me that many of his friends abandoned religious observance. He was eternally grateful to a Chassidic rabbi who had reached out to this 16-year-old and helped him maintain his identity and religious commitment.

And that religious commitment was total and uncompromising. During his career as a mailman, and while working at the local “Y”, he managed to squeeze in charity collection and distribution, bathing people who couldn’t bathe themselves, and even conflict resolution with members of the local Bronx gangs.

CORRECTION: He didn’t “squeeze in” those good deeds. If anything, he squeezed in his career. If you would ask him “*Vos macht ir*,” -- “How are you?”-- Literally, “What do you do?” he would answer with a smile, “*Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim!* (Good deeds)”

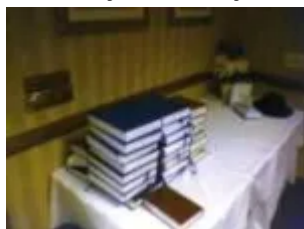
To Aaron Steinhart, your profession is what you have to do to pay your bills. But what does a Jew **DO**? What he **DOES**, his entire purpose, his *raison d’être*, is *Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim!* G-d put us here to serve Him and His children, and there’s a lot to do!

When I became the rabbi of a new retirement community six and a half years ago, I knew that we needed a *Gabbai* for our *Shul*. I had just met this friendly man who was obviously comfortable in *Shul* and I asked him if he would consider serving as our *Gabbai*. I didn’t know that he had already been a *Gabbai*

in the Bronx. He readily agreed and went on to serve our congregation with distinction and devotion.

Mr. Steinhart always managed to be aware of who needed to be given what honor and when. He truly saw himself as a servant of the people, and made it his business to know the needs of our congregants. If someone needed to be pushed into *Shul* in a wheelchair, he did it. (Let us remember that he came to us at the age of 85!) If someone needed a prayer book, he ran to get it. When I was going to speak, he ran (when I wasn't able to stop him) to roll the heavy lectern into place and put the appropriate book on the lectern.

[This past Monday, three days after he passed away, I noticed 3 large piles of heavy books on a table in



the *Shul*. That is very unusual. They were obviously still out after being used on Shabbos. They are usually back on the shelves long before Monday. Suddenly I realized why they were still out. Mr. Steinhart had been putting them away all along!]

Torah study was paramount. He made every effort to attend Torah lectures whenever possible, and share what he had learned. The closest thing to a complaint one would hear about his advancing age was that he couldn't remember the lectures as well as he had in the past. But this, too, he accepted with a smile. "G-d is teaching me how to be an old man."

He possessed a wonderful *Simchas Hachaim*, a joy in living. He took an almost child-like pleasure in doing Mitzvos. If the *Shul* bought new prayer books, or anything else that enhances Mitzvah observance, he was thrilled.

He respected Torah students of all ages. "Oh, you're going to Israel to study in Yeshiva? *Yofi!*" (Beautiful!)

A rabbi, in his eyes, was especially honored. He would often address me in third person, as "the *Rav*," or "the *Rebbe*." I'll never forget the time, several years ago, on Erev Yom Kippur. On the eve of Yom Kippur, we are supposed to apologize and forgive each other before we ask G-d for forgiveness. He approached me with tears in his eyes. "I want to ask the *Rebbe* for forgiveness if I offended his honor in any way."

"The *Rebbe*." I was half his age, and he felt he had to ask for forgiveness. And he meant it. And it wasn't just rabbis. It was ANYONE. The following year, on Erev Yom Kippur, he made the identical request to the entire *Shul*! Such humility! Such nobility! In his devotion to serving G-d and His children, he gave it his all, always fearing that he was not doing everything he could.

I went to visit him when his wife passed away. “When I get up from *Shiva*,” he said, “I need to talk to you. I have to decide now where I should live.”

He had come to our retirement community because his wife needed the additional help. Now that she was gone, he no longer needed to be there. However, by the time we got to speak, he had already made his decision. Walking back into the building, he came upon a new resident in the community, a retired rabbi with some medical problems. Here was a person who needed some help. “G-d has already answered my question, and showed me what I need to be doing.”

One Rosh Hashanah I was leading the Services and heard people praying a little louder than usual. When I finished my own prayers, I turned around and saw what the commotion was all about. He was standing next to a resident whose macular degeneration prevented him from reading. The man knew most of the regular prayers by heart, but not the High Holiday prayers. Our *Gabbai*, servant of the congregation that he was, was standing next to the man, reciting the prayer one word at a time so the other fellow could say each word. He later told me that he realized he could pray with more concentration if he went elsewhere for the High Holidays, but he felt that he had to help others.

His Hebrew name was Aharon Moshe. Like Aaron, he “loved people and brought them close to Torah.” Like Moses, he was the devoted servant of G-d, who went to great lengths to serve His People.

In recent months, our 91-year-old *Gabbai* began to slow down. That beautiful smile was still there, but walking became more difficult, and he was often very weak. Still, he pushed wheelchairs and helped other residents with their *Tallis* and *Tefillin*. He often talked about “retiring” as *Gabbai*, but I wouldn’t hear of it. First of all, there was no other resident in the retirement home who could fill his shoes. More importantly, HE was our *Gabbai*. I told him that I would call people up to the Torah, and do whatever I had to do to make it easier for him. But I would not consider taking that honored title away from our dear *Gabbai*.

Last Wednesday, I called him to ask a favor. (Another *Shul-*related *Gabbai*-type activity.) It turned out that he wanted to speak with me.

“Rabbi,” he said weakly, “you’re going to have to find someone else to take over. I’m just too weak. *Higi’ah Hazman*.”

“*Higi’ah Hazman -- The time has come.*” I sensed that he was talking about more than just the *Gabbai* position.

The next morning he remained in his seat as I called up the various people for honors. I did a sloppy job. A professional is someone who makes a hard job look easy. I joked to him that he had sent a boy to do a man’s job.

Later that day he went into the hospital. His son heard him say, “Ribbono shel Olam! *Ich hob nisht kein koach l’ovdicha.*” (“Master of the World! I don’t have any strength to serve You!”)

That’s what it was all about. “*L’ovdicha -- to serve You.*” That’s why we’re here. To serve G-d and His children. To do “*Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim -- Good deeds.*”

Aaron Steinhart spent 91 years “*L’ovdo -- to serve Him*” with Mitzvos and good deeds. He was no longer able to do that. His mission accomplished, he left us.

This was not an easy article to write. (Tears don’t show up on computer screens.) He loved everyone, and everyone loved him. Another person’s *Simcha* was his *Simcha*. Another person’s sorrow was his sorrow. He called me “the Rebbe,” but he taught me more about how G-d wants us to live than I ever could have taught him.

Friday afternoon, at the end of my eulogy, I referred to that Erev Yom Kippur. Now, it was my turn to cry. “I want to ask the Rebbe for forgiveness,” I said, “if I offended his honor in any way.”

I am profoundly saddened over this loss. I feel impoverished over the departure of this very special man. But I am forever enriched by having known him.

Yes, next Yom Kippur’s Shofar blast will be different. Let us pray that we will soon hear the sounding of the Shofar that will announce our ultimate redemption. Let us pray for the day that we will enjoy the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (25:8): “*Death shall cease forever and G-d shall erase the tear from every face.*”

May G-d console his family among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. May we all enjoy happiness and good health. May we all learn from the example of this exemplary human being.

Have a good Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz