

Jewish Education: Our Cloud of Glory Parashat Beha'alotkha

By Rabbi Jason Miller

A quick search on the Internet for inspirational stories about teachers will result in thousands of hits. And each of these stories is indeed inspirational and meaningful. Many are quite spiritual and religious, but there are simply no stories about teachers that are more inspirational than our own personal stories. These stories might be about a teacher who had a profound impact on you. Or, you in fact might be the teacher in the story. For me, I am the teacher. And it seems as though my inspirational story is an ongoing journey.

You see, I began teaching at an early age. One week into my first year in college, I received a phone call from a local rabbi sharing some unfortunate news. His wife had been diagnosed with cancer and would have to stop teaching her Hebrew School classes immediately. He had heard I was a day school student, with a solid Jewish background and good Hebrew skills. Would I be willing to step in? We met and decided that I would teach his wife's advanced Hebrew and Judaics classes three days a week effective immediately. I was given a key to the synagogue, a nice size classroom, and eight fourth graders. The rest, as they say, is history.

I taught those children for the next three years. I watched them grow from ten year olds to teenagers. I trained many of them for their bar and bat mitzvahs. I could see that I was an influence on these young Jewish souls. But they didn't know they had such an influence on me or on my journey.

Over this recent Passover, I went back to college. I was invited to the Hillel on campus as a scholar-in-residence for two days. It would be the second time I was invited back to teach since I graduated from college and began my rabbinical studies. Only this time, due to a scheduling mistake, I was slated to teach during finals week when the students had more academic responsibilities to take care of than to come to the Hillel to hear me. And so I found myself with the study material I had planned, but no college students to teach. And just as I was feeling letdown, in the door walked three of those little fourth grade students I had taught years before. Only now, they were high school seniors giving me hugs and informing me of which university they would be attending come fall. For the next hour, the four of us sat and learned from the study sheets I had prepared. We caught up on our lives. They asked me questions that were still lingering from discussions we'd had years prior.

The following is an e-mail I sent them last week on the occasion of their high school graduation:

Dear Jay, Marc, & Alex-

I just want to take a quick opportunity to wish you all mazel tov on graduating High School. This milestone certainly makes me feel old and question where the years have gone. The three of you should know that you made quite an impact on me as a teacher. My experience with you was my first as an educator, and it allowed me to see the power a teacher can possess. There have been many influences in my life that have guided me on the path to become a rabbi, but you should know that your influence as students is high on that list. And for that, I thank you. As you go on to college now, please never forget the "Torah" that you learned with me. By "Torah," I mean the experiences we shared, the lessons we learned, and the values we realized were important as Jews and as human beings. No matter what you guys do in your life, you will be mentches (good, ethical, educated men). My only desire is that you keep in touch no matter where you wind up.

*All the best to you and your families.
Your Teacher, Jason Miller*

In this week's parsha, Parashat Beha'alotcha, the Torah reverts to its account of the Israelites' travels in the dessert after having spent the entire book of Leviticus describing the priestly laws. We learn that God leads Israel in the wilderness march not by vocal commands, but by a sign. That sign being the cloud-encased fire – a pillar of cloud (*amud he'anan*) during the day and a pillar of fire (*amud ha'esh*) at night. As soon as the mishkan, the Tabernacle – God's dwelling place on earth – was set up, the fire-cloud would descend over it, and when our ancestors would journey in the dessert, the fire-cloud would ascend, being their guide along the way.

This fire-cloud served as a source of protection, comfort, and security for the Israelites. When it hovered over the Tabernacle, it was there for all to see. When the cloud lifted, it led the nation en masse toward the Promised Land. Many might not have even been cognizant of its appearance, merely marching in toe with the rest of the tribe. Nevertheless, this divine sign was ever-present, always with the people, whether they were aware of it or not. This fire-cloud is emblematic of our Jewish education.

For many of us, our Jewish education is something we regard as a relic of the past. It might have been a positive experience. Or it might have been a negative experience. It might have profoundly affected our lives today or not. However you choose to classify your Jewish education as a youngster, whether it was a day school education or in a synagogue or community school, or privately, the one word that best describes it should be "foundation." For that is what it was, a foundation. Even if it didn't serve as a strong foundation. And I think that might be true for many of us.

I also think that when we speak of the Jewish education we received when we were growing up, we must consider that perhaps it was more of a gift than we may have initially realized. Today, in the Jewish community, "continuing adult Jewish education" is all the rage. So many are deeply engaged in what we term to be "Torah Lishma" – Jewish learning for its own sake. And so many of these learners feel energized, and so they question why the Jewish education they received early in their lives was not this exciting. Perhaps, the issue is realization. They have yet to realize the gift that it truly was.

While in Hebrew School, our teachers, like our ancestors' fire-cloud, hovered over us at times. They were there as a source of comfort and as a source of enlightenment. They enveloped us with their Torah, passing on the values of our people. They shared the tenets of our faith with us, our customs, and traditions. They gifted to us the cherished words of our millennia-old tradition and allowed us to discover its meanings as individuals.

Another name given for the fire-cloud in the Torah is *kavod*, and *kavod* has many meanings in Hebrew. It can mean honor, respect, and glory. And it can also connote a challenge. Our teachers commanded our *kavod* and in turn, they respected us as individual learners. They challenged us, and so too, they were challenged by us. In the Torah, the miraculous fire-cloud is the very locus of God's presence. And it is through our teachers that God's presence shines on us. Our teachers, through their *kavod*, are the embodiment of God's Torah and God's presence. Our pillar-cloud is indeed our Jewish Education.

And now, as adults, we are passionate to learn more about our faith, about our history and peoplehood. We are on a journey and our protecting force; our fire-cloud will not depart from us. In fact, the Torah teaches that the fire-cloud's power, its intensity, increased while in motion. Perhaps, we didn't listen so well in Hebrew School. Maybe we were indifferent to the experience.

Well, you can rest assured that our tradition understands this well. Rabbi David Wolpe brought the following teaching to my attention. It is a wonderful lesson taught by the commentator Shem Mishmuel, who quotes it in the name of his grandfather, the Kotzker Rebbe. In the Shema, we are instructed to place its words "on our hearts" – *al levaveicha*. The Kotzker Rebbe asks why it does not instruct us to place the words "in our hearts." He answers that it is because hearts are not always open, and in moments when we are callous or indifferent, we cannot listen. But if the words are on our hearts, in more tender moments they will eventually sink in. Therein lies the essential lesson in education. Teachers teach students who might not seem to get it immediately, students who don't seem mindful or

appreciative of the gift. The gift of a solid Jewish education. But for the many students who might seem uninterested today, a seed is planted deep within that will one day come to fruition.

My prayer for each of us is that the seed that was planted when our Jewish education commenced will blossom and continue to blossom. Eventually, our community will realize a beautiful garden, the garden of Jewish education. Passionate and committed learners engaging in God's Torah, giving thanks to the most glorious gift of all – a Jewish education.

Shabbat Shalom.