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Absence as Absolute Presence

Parashat Tetzaveh holds the distinction, among the middle three books of the Torah, of not containing the name of Moshe. The *Ba'al ha-Turim* attributed this to what Moshe said while imploring God to forgive the Jews for the Golden Calf: “If not, erase me from the book which You have written” (Exodus 32:32). Because when a righteous person utters a curse—even a conditional one—it is destined to be fulfilled. His absence from the *parashah* is his own doing.¹

While answering one question, the *Baal ha-Turim* raises more. Wasn't Moshe's intercession on behalf of the Jewish people a noble deed that saved lives? Why would Moshe's name be omitted if the condition was never met?

Rebbe Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin was in his younger years an opponent of *Chassidut*. It was exposure to the Ishbitzer Rebbe that would turn this child prodigy into a full-fledged Chassidic Rebbe. He attributed to his teacher the following explanation.

The Talmud interprets a verse to mean that David ha-Melech, in the midst of battle, was faced with a complicated halachic question

and did not know the answer. Three soldiers risked their lives to bring the question to the sages and return with an answer. Although David ha-Melech accepted the answer, he would not credit them by name, based on the following principle: “We do not attribute a halachic statement to whomever risks their life (מוֹכֵר עֶצְמוֹ) for words of Torah.”² Rebbe Tzadok explained, contrary to other interpretations,³ that David ha-Melech did not intend this as a condemnation of his courageous warriors but as praise. Their names are not attached to their halachic statement because through their total sacrifice they became part of the Torah itself, losing their particular identities in its divine source.

Rebbe Tzadok claimed that in the same spirit we can understand why Moshe's name is missing from the *parashah*. A name represents the very essence of a person, so Moshe proposed a full negation of himself to save his people. As a result of this pure act of self-sacrifice (מְסִירַת נַפְשׁוֹ), in which he was willing forfeit his place among his people, his name was enveloped by the Torah itself. He became inseparably linked with the Giver of the Torah.

Rebbe Tzadok further suggested a

2. See *Bava Kama*, 60b–61a.

3. For example, the *Netziv* teaches that although our tradition assures protection to those performing a mitzvah, where the performance is not mandatory one may not endanger oneself to perform it. If one does so, one forfeits being cited for halachic matters. See *She'iltot de-Rav Achai Ga'on*, vol. 3, *kidmat ha-emek*, §§2–4.

beautiful symbolic link between the absence of Moshe's name and the opening passage in *Parashat Tetzaveh*, which describes the oil used for the menorah. The oil to be used is "pure olive oil," the best quality oil that produces a stable flame and has no contaminants. In the service of his brethren and of God, Moshe exhibited this same clarity and purity.⁴

Rebbe Menachem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl, among others, pointed out that *Parashat Tetzaveh* is nearly always read immediately before or after the seventh of Adar, Moshe's (birthday and) *yahrzeit*. His absence from this specific *parashah* alludes to his departure from this world at this time of the year.⁵

The confluence of Moshe's *yahrzeit* with the reading of *Tetzaveh* urges us to take note of Moshe's most outstanding qualities, including his self-sacrifice. Absolute devotion, to the point of negating the self, has a special place in Chassidic thought and life. We need not search high and low to find examples, as they fortunately abound. Anyone familiar with the work of the Chabad *shluchim*—or has vacationed or been stuck in a remote location—knows full well the extent of the mission-critical sacrifices made by these emissaries. To be a Chassid is to make sacrifices.

The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, transplanted Chabad-Lubavitch *Chassidut* to America. He once recalled a thought-provoking exchange between his father and

predecessor, Rebbe Sholom Dovber Schneersohn, and a Chassid:

"Rebbe, what is a Chassid?"

"A Chassid is a streetlamp lighter. A streetlamp lighter has a pole with fire. He knows that the fire is not his own, and he goes around lighting all the lamps on his route."

"But what if the lamp is in a desolate wilderness?"

"Then, too, one must light it. Let it be noted that there is a wilderness, and let the wilderness feel ashamed before the light."

"But what if the lamp is in the midst of the sea?"

"Then one must take off his clothes, jump into the water, and light it there!"

"And that is a Chassid?"

The Rebbe thought for a long moment and then said: "Yes, that is a Chassid."⁶

This succinct, vivid description of what defines a Chassid accentuates the responsibility to "jump into the water" if need be. The hallmarks of one who strives to be close to God include passion, intense devotion, and selflessness. Like Moshe, by making one's self absent, a person can become part of the ultimate Presence. ■

6. See Schochet, *Chassidic Dimensions*, vol. 3, 196–197, and the original, *Sefer ha-Sichot 5701*, 136–137.

Rabbi Goldscheider is the author of the newly published book 'Torah United' (OU Press), featuring divrei Torah on the weekly parasha from Rav Kook, Rabbi Solovetichik, and the Chassidic Masters.

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4. *Peri Tzadik, Tetzaveh*, §4, s.v. ט'העבבו. This same approach is presented by Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, *Or Gedalyahu* (end of *Tetzaveh*), in the name of the *Chidushei ha-Rim*.

5. See *Me'or Einayim, Tetzaveh*, passim.