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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beha'aloteha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

For many years, we were regular customers of a local store. The proprietor always greeted us with a smile, called us by name, asked about our family. If our bill amounted to $51.10, he would often just round it off at $50. He genuinely loved his work and had a warm relationship with us and his many other customers.

But a few years ago, he retired and another person took over the business. The new proprietor always has a glum expression on his face, rarely greets us when we enter the store, seems to wish he was anywhere else but in the store. If our bill amounts to $51.10, we pay every cent of it, since he never rounds off the total.

We find that we now rarely shop at this store. The merchandise is the same…but the shopping experience has become unpleasant. We've found other stores to patronize.

What's true in business is also true in religious life. When a rabbi/synagogue/community is welcoming, approachable and genuinely interested in us, we are more likely to respond positively. If a rabbi/synagogue/community doesn't really seem to care about us—except for our membership dues and donations—we are likely to look for a more congenial religious setting.

This week's Torah portion relates the details of the lighting of the menorah by Aaron the High Priest. Aaron's role was not merely to provide light for the

sanctuary, but to symbolically create an atmosphere of holiness, warmth, and enlightenment for the public.

In the Pirkei Avot, we read the words of Hillel: Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah.  Aaron, who lit the menorah in the sanctuary, was himself a personification of the spirit of kindness; he brought light to others through his warmth, caring, and genuine desire to develop friendships among the community. He was successful in bringing people closer to Torah because they were attracted to his kindness, to his concern for them and their families.

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach founded a synagogue in Berkeley during the 1960s in order to reach out to the many young Jews who had drifted away from Jewish tradition. He named it the House of Love and Prayer. In the summer of 1967, he was asked to explain his vision for this synagogue.

He answered: “Here’s the whole thing, simple as it is. The House of Love and Prayer is a place where, when you walk in, someone loves you, and when you walk out, someone misses you.” (Quoted in “Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Life, Mission and Legacy,” by Natan Ophir, Urim Publications, 2014, p.119)

In these few words, Rabbi Carlebach expressed a profound insight worthy of immortality! He offered a vision not just for the House of Love and Prayer…but for all places of Jewish worship. When we enter a synagogue, do we feel welcomed? Does our presence mean anything to those in attendance? When we leave, does anyone miss us? Do the rabbi and synagogue officials take the time to get to know us, our needs, our concerns?

One might attend various synagogues and find the same general liturgy and customs—but in one synagogue one feels ignored or rebuffed, and in another synagogue one feels warmly received and appreciated.  Which would you choose to attend and support?