Unleash Your Energy | Get It Done

Rabbi Shlomie Chein
University of California S. Cruz

Option 1: Unleash Your Energy

In the 9th Century BCE, (almost a thousand years before the start of Christianity, and more than 1500 years before the inception of Islam), the Jewish people lived and flourished in our Holy Land, Israel. The land was governed by a “checks and balance” system of “three houses”: the political governance of a king, a Torah legal system with a supreme court of 71 justices, and spiritual guidance – as well as miracles - from prophets.

It happened one day that a broken woman came crying to the senior prophet of her generation, Elisha (disciple and successor of Elijah).

“Holy prophet,” she cried, “please help me. My husband died, I am broke, and the creditor wishes to sell my two children as slaves. Please,” she cried, “please help me!”

Speaking softly the prophet looked at the poor woman. “Tell me, what have you still in your home?”

With her eyes on the ground the woman bashfully responded, “I have nothing, but one small jug of oil”.

“Fantastic,” replied the holy man with a glimmer in his eye. “Hurry, go and borrow empty vessels from your neighbors. Do not act scantily; borrow many. Bring them into your home behind locked doors. Then pour from your one jug of oil into the borrowed vessels.”

Thus she did. She borrowed many vessels. Locked the doors to her home, and she formed an assembly line with her sons; they would place a vessel in front of her and she would miraculously fill it from the small jug. Soon there were no empty vessels left.

Now the prophet advised her: “go and sell all this oil. You will have enough money to pay up your debt, and there will be plenty remaining with which to live.”

My friends, there is a deep message in this story.

The Chassidic masters explain that the woman in this story is our soul. And the soul sometimes feels like it is a widow – it lost its connection with its mate, it fell out of its relationship with G-d. And it feels like its offspring, the love and awe it generates, its passion, is being taken into captivity, is being sold as slaves to serve alien interests – instead of having a love and awe for holy things, it loves vanity, it fears the shallowness of peer pressure or human superiors; instead of being passionate about our Judaism, it is passionate about superficialities like clothing, food, sports, Game of Thrones and the Kardashians.

---

1 Haftorah of this week, Melachim II ch. 5.
2 The explanation in the Mamar is that איש, which literary means my husband, refers to my fire, my passion for G-d. So (it is not "h"n saying that Hashem died, but) my passion for G-d has died.
Sometimes, in a moment of inspiration or just out of the blue, the soul lets out a cry. It feels spiritually bankrupt. It might be clinging to one Mitzvah, maybe some memories of Jewish summer camp, or distant memories of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, or perhaps not even that; all it has is the awareness of its title as a Jew. Sometimes the soul feels so broke, so bereft of spiritual passion and Jewish drive; it doesn’t know where to start. It doesn’t know if it can even rebuild.

But the soul always knows it has one thing that cannot be taken away. Inside its house, deep at its core, there is a capsule of spiritual fuel, a capsule of Jewish energy waiting to shine.

And so the prophet tells us:

If you’re feeling empty, spiritually deficient, go ahead, borrow. Find a Mitzvah even if it feels foreign to you, like a borrowed deed. Don’t be frugal. Borrow a lot. Then close out any distractions and open your soul. Let your Jewish energy flow. Give your soul an outlet. Engage your soul in a Mitzvah. Then another. And another.

Soon, very soon, we will feel spiritually rich. Our inner spirituality will pour forth. Our fuel will kindle bright flames. We won’t need to borrow. We will have spiritual fuel running through us, we will feed our spiritual hunger, and even more so, we will become beacons of light for our surroundings.

It’s that simple. We need not wallow on a down day. We need not bathe in Jewish guilt. We need only to find some vessels which could serve as outlets for our pent up Jewish energy. We need just to borrow some Mitzvahs, begin to pour our soul into them, and let the holiness flow.3

Option 2: Get It Done

This week’s Torah reading is one of the most action packed of the weekly Parshiyot, with a whole assortment of suspenseful and thrilling tales.

G-d visits Abraham after his circumcision. Abraham interrupts the visit to run out and care for three unknown travelers. The travelers turn out to be angels, who heal Abraham and relay the good news that Sarah will finally, at the age of 90, give birth to a child. G-d set His mind on destroying the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorra. Abraham dares to challenge G-d. Lot risks his honor and his life to host two travelers in Sodom. They turn out to be angels who save Lot’s life. The list goes on,4 concluding with the enigmatic, suspenseful, and powerful story of the Binding of Isaac.

What might be the underlying message prevalent throughout the readings?

3 Based on Likutei Sichos, vol. 5, pp 331-335; particularly the Mamar from the Alter Rebbe printed there, p. 334.
4 Lot’s daughters have their own perverted ideas for creating life. The despotic Abimelech abducts Sarah, and after returning her unharmed, Abraham mercifully prays on his behalf. Isaac is born, the cause of much celebration, but his half-brother Ishmael threatens him, and some people will have to make some tough choices in the events that follow. (All of these stories feature an unexpected hero who steps up to the plate. V’ulai Yesh Lomar: The flip side of appearing to fill a need is when you step up at a time that you are not really needed or qualified. E.g. Lot’s daughters: they were not the only people left in the world, and they did not qualify for a relationship with their father. Thus the perverted and twisted result of stepping up to the plate when you were not supposed to).
Perhaps it can be found in the Title of the Torah Portion: Vayeira “And He Appeared”. When there is a need, appear. This is a collection of stories about stepping up to the plate and getting it done! It doesn’t matter who we are, or how many reasons we have for why not to. If we can, we must.

- Abraham is recovering from a minor surgical procedure. Is this cause for much ado? But G-d himself comes to visit.
- There are three weary travelers. Who will care for them? Abraham, 99 years old, healing, and in the middle of a meeting with G-d, runs out to host the guests.
- Two travelers arrive at the gates of miserly Sodom. Lot, himself a foreigner in Sodom, takes the risk of hosting them.
- G-d wants to destroy Sodom and Gomorra. Can anyone stop G-d? Soft/kind/loyal-to-G-d Abraham stands up to challenge G-d. And the list goes on.

About 40 years ago, a journalist, Gershon Jacobson, was in a private audience with the Rebbe, when the Rebbe surprised him, offering Mr. Jacobson the opportunity to ask any question. A candid no holds barred interview.

A bit uncomfortable Jacobson took the opportunity to ask a pointed question that others had been asking him about the Rebbe. Why is it that the Rebbe voices opinion and actively engages in issues that are beyond his community of Chabad Chassidim?

The accusation was true. The Rebbe took on many causes and issues that most Rabbis or Rebbes consider outside their jurisdiction. From the plight of Chinese immigrants in China Town New York, to pending legislation in the Israeli Knesset, the Rebbe actively sought to make a difference. The Rebbe answered Jacobson with an insight from the Torah.

One of the earliest accounts we have of Moses’ life, long before he was the famous Moses, was a day in Egypt when the young Moses, a noble in the palace of Pharaoh, went out to see how his brethren, the Jewish people, were holding up under harsh slavery. Moses saw an Egyptian slave master mercilessly beating a Jewish slave. The Torah tells us “Moses looked this way and that way, and saw there was no one,” and he killed the Egyptian.

The Rebbe asked Jacobson, “but we see a few verses later that there was in fact at least one bystander who observed the incident. So what does it mean that Moses looked this way and that, and saw there was no one?” It means,” said the Rebbe, “that Moses looked this and way and that to see if there was anyone who would stand up for this poor Jew being beaten, and he saw there was no one, there was no one doing anything about it!”

And when there is no one standing up to a need, you must rise to the occasion.

Each of the three angels who came to visit Abraham had their own job. Why? Are angels that incapable? Couldn’t G-d give one angel three jobs? Would that be asking too much?
There is a profound lesson here about the uniqueness of a job. Even when in a group of three, or more, each individual has his/her unique job!

There may be 50 other people in your dorm, 20 other people on the bus, 100 other students in your class, 40 other people at Shabbat dinner; nonetheless, you are not absolved of your responsibility. Each angel was accompanied by two angels upon whom he could have theoretically conferred the responsibility. But no, each angel had a unique mission and each was exclusively responsible for its job.

A comedian once said, “There was a study conducted, and it was concluded that 1 in 3 people is ugly. Which means 1 in 3 people in this room is ugly. Look to your right, look to your left, if it is not them...” (Just pause and wink, the implied punch line of course is “I guess it’s you”).

The Torah says all three are angels. But even amongst beautiful angels, only 1 in 3 was given this specific mission, this responsibility; look to your right, look to your left, if it is not them, it is you.

Moses says if you see a need, look to your right, look to your left, if it is not being filled, it is up to you.

You see a Jewish student on campus, look to your right, look to your left, is somebody else presently inviting him/her to Shabbat dinner? No? Then get it done.

You see a student spreading lies about Israel. Look to your right, look to your left, is somebody else sharing the truth? No? Then get it done.

You know a fellow student who is sick. Look to your right, look to your left, is somebody else going to visit? No? Get it done.

It may feel a bit uncomfortable inviting a student you don’t know that well to a Shabbat dinner. But is it more uncomfortable than a 99 year old man healing from circumcision running to prepare a meal for three strangers?

I know defending Israel might be unpopular, but is it more unpopular, more dangerous than Lot hosting guests in the hostile city of Sodom?

Visiting a friend takes time, and we are busy. But G-d himself was ready to visit. Are we busier than G-d?

It might be daunting to petition campus for more kosher options; to stand up to your landlord for the right to put up a Mezuzah; to ask your college administrators for special permission and a special place to light Shabbat candles... but is it more daunting than standing up and petitioning G-d!

This week’s Parsha tells us that there are always excuses, but winners get it done!

And I will tell you a secret:

When Abraham went to host the three guests, he had no idea that this story would make headlines in the bestselling book of all time, the Bible. When Lot invited the guest despite the danger, he had no idea that these two angels would actually save his life.
We can never know the fame and honor, the benefits and blessings, inconvenient acts of justice and kindness will bring to our lives.

So in reality, it makes no difference whether you’re driven by the role models of the past, or the dream of fame and blessings in the future. When you see a need, just get it done.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Inspired by two Sicha summaries in Pininei Or p. 32.