

## Beha'alotekha: The Light That Comes From Uplifting Sarah Pincus, Class of 2026

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In the fourth chapter of Pirkei Avot (4:13), Rabbi Shimon famously teaches: “There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but a *keter shem tov* (the crown of a good name), supersedes them all.” Commenting on this *mishnah*, the Vilna Gaon,<sup>1</sup> an 18th-century Talmudist, references a Gemara in Masechet Yoma (72b) that equates these different crowns with “crowns” that adorned vessels in the *mishkan* (tabernacle)— the crown of Torah is represented by the *aron* (ark), the crown of priesthood is represented by the *mizbeakh* (altar), and the crown of royalty is represented by the *shulkhan* (table). The Vilna Gaon picks up on the absence of both the *keter shem tov* and the menorah in this analogy, and equates the two. The menorah corresponds to a *keter shem tov*, the crown that supersedes the others.

With this in mind, let’s take a look at the beginning of this week’s *parsha*, which opens with the lighting of the menorah in the *mishkan*. Why are we told that Aaron, the High Priest, is lighting the menorah *now*? Chapter three already reviewed the roles given to the Kohanim and there is no mention of the menorah then! Further, Moshe has already finished setting up the *mishkan*, after which, the head of each tribe brought offerings during the twelve days following its consecration. Only now we are told about the lighting of the menorah?!

What insights can we glean from the juxtaposition of these two narratives, of the menorah lighting directly following the offerings of the heads of the tribes? Quoting a midrash, Rashi (on Bamidbar 8:2) addresses this question by saying that this section of the menorah was intended to comfort Aaron. Aaron was sad, and understandably so. Bnei Israel are excited because they finally have the *mishkan*. Of course he wanted to celebrate this joyous occasion and connect to God. But Aaron was from the tribe of Levi and, since the Leviim aren’t included in the twelve tribes, they couldn’t bring offerings to God. By placing the section of the menorah after the narrative about the gifts brought by the heads of the tribe, God is saying to Aaron, “I didn’t forget about you, you have a special job. You have the capacity and, God-willing, will have many opportunities to be there for your community in times of joy. But you have also been given the responsibility of lighting the menorah, and through lighting the menorah, you have the ability to uplift those around you, even on days when there is less to celebrate. Each evening, you will kindle the menorah, and its light will illuminate the night and accompany everyone until the morning.”

While this is a beautiful idea, it is hard to square with the interpretation above regarding the menorah as a *keter shem tov*. *Keter shem tov* is greater than the crowns of Torah, priesthood, and royalty. So, how could Aaron, the High Priest, both be the epitome of the crown of priesthood and also better than it?

Perhaps an answer lies in the precise wording found in Pirkei Avot and in our *parsha*. In English, the line from Pirkei Avot reads “the crown of a good name **supersedes** them all,” which one

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<sup>1</sup> Gra on Pirke Avot 4:13.

might translate as “*gadol*” or “*yoter*” as seen in other places in Pirkei Avot. But the *mishnah* uses the word “*oleh*”- the crown of a good name *ascends* or *rises above* the other types of crowns. It’s not simply better. It’s transformative. It’s uplifting.

This is exactly the reputation that Aaron had. Aaron was known as being a lover and pursuer of peace. He loved all of God’s creations and brought them closer to God’s Torah. How did he do that? Of course he was there for people during their own experiences, like the consecration of the *mishkan*, that brought with them incredible happiness. But he was also there for them during the days that were a little darker. Rabbeinu Yonah,<sup>2</sup> a 13th-century scholar, teaches that when Aaron sensed someone was struggling, he would befriend them. The person might think to themselves, “Why would Aaron, the High Priest, want to associate with me?” But through this relationship, Aaron would uplift the individual, so that this thought would no longer cross their mind. Aaron would convey to the individual “you bring light to my life just by being you.”

Perhaps Aaron’s behavior was grounded by his daily practice of lighting the menorah. The typical words that mean “to light” like “*l’hadlik*” or “*le’ha’ir*” are not used with the menorah. Instead, we have the same root of “*oleh*” found in the Pirkei Avot: “*Beha’alotekha et hanerot*” “you shall *uplift* the candles” (Bamidbar 8:2). Aaron lit the menorah every night, even though it wasn’t necessary for the functioning of the *mishkan*. After all, the heads of the tribe brought offerings in the *mishkan* before the menorah was lit, and the menorah was located in an inner part of the tabernacle that was rarely entered. But that’s precisely what we can learn from Aaron and the menorah. Aaron understood that reaching out to those in our lives isn’t strictly reserved for times when there are things to celebrate or things to mourn. He didn’t claim he was too busy or engaged in work that was so holy, to find the time to connect with people, though doing so did not support his particular responsibilities as High Priest. He understood that even amidst mundane routine, when everything is going just fine, day is followed by the inevitable darkness of night. The menorah needs to be lit, and people need to be reminded of the light they bring to this world.

Just as Aaron lit the menorah every night, may we be reminded to regularly think about those in our orbits who we haven’t heard from recently, or who could use a pick-me-up. In doing this, we can strive to transform our personal “crowns of priesthood”—in which our actions are often prescribed, regimented, and routine—to a “*keter shem tov*,” in which our actions are imbued with thoughtfulness, care, and bring light to those around us.

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<sup>2</sup> On Pirkei Avot 1:12