

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Ekev

Lebanon was a crazy place to be back in the early eighties, but after almost a year and a half in military courses and training I was glad to finally be dealing with the bigger picture.

My first 21 months in the IDF were mostly spent in course after course after course. Ten weeks of basic infantry training followed by ten weeks of the armored corps' tank school training as a tank driver, followed by three months in the field training to be part of a tank crew and then a tank unit, followed by three weeks of intense training prep to be accepted to tank commander's course, followed by three months of tank commander's course in the desert, with a brief study respite leading to an intense month of prep for Officer's course to 14 weeks of Infantry Officer's course followed by eight months in Tank officer's course; just reading the list still makes me weary.

So, finally with Officer's bars on my shoulders and stationed in Lebanon's lush, beautiful mountain region in the Beqaa valley and over a year of desert and a year and a half of training finally behind me, I was actually looking forward to dealing with 'big picture' issues.

With days full of ambushes, border patrols, search-and-seizures in Arab villages looking for terrorists, not to mention learning to command men under fire, we were constantly dealing with the 'larger than life' questions we had been trained for. When to fire and when to suppress, the need for near-instantaneous decisions that were life and death, strategic questions such as making sure to change up your routes to avoid being tracked, learning how to spot explosive devices on patrol, or recognize a dangerous situation such as a seemingly innocent civilian car passing a bit too quickly, all these and more kept the adrenaline flowing on a pretty regular basis.

Perhaps that was why the little things were starting to get to me. After spending so long dealing with the minutiae of life in an IDF course such as making sure your blanket was properly tucked for morning inspection, or your boots sufficiently polished, or even all your pouches properly attended to and canteen completely filled so it made no 'slosh sound' on night marches, here was finally the chance to do the things being a soldier was really all about.

But the little details still kept annoying me. The best example I can think of all these years later, is the men's trigger fingers.

One detail that starkly contrasted life in the field from life in a training course was how soldiers relate to their guns. In a course you never have a cartridge in your gun unless you are actually on a shooting range or engaged in a live-fire exercise. And even then, every firing exercise is preceded by and punctuated throughout with endless commands and dry runs.

You will never see, as an example, an IDF soldier on leave walking around with a cartridge in his gun even if a round is not chambered and the safety switch is on, such that accidentally firing would be impossible. This entire system is designed to ensure that IDF soldiers take the prospect of firing their guns very seriously; it actually makes you nervous to chamber a round in your gun, raising your

adrenaline (and stress) level even if you are lying on a range with your gun pointed at an inanimate target.

But in Lebanon, as soon as you finished your last mission briefing even before leaving the base gate, everyone put their cartridge in their gun. And, as we left the base on foot (most of the missions were infantry patrols and our position was a few hundred yards from the border area we had to patrol...) we immediately chambered a round and orders were to keep the safety off; we were in a hot zone.

And half the time I found myself reminding the men to keep their trigger fingers off the triggers; to avoid accidentally discharging one's gun.

At first the knowledge that we were all walking with fully loaded weapons that could be fired without even having to open a safety switch, was enormously stressful. And I was constantly reminding the men to mind where their guns were pointed and keep their fingers on the trigger-guard and not on the trigger to avoid accidental discharges.

I started noticing that the men, while well-disciplined in the field-craft necessary for successful missions were struggling with the smaller seemingly insignificant details.

It was difficult getting men to keep their pouches properly closed, their water canteens properly filled and even their flak vests properly closed when on guard duty in our position during the extremely hot days of summer. Not to mention reminding them to oil and clean their guns every night....

For many of the soldiers in the unit I had been assigned to, this was their second or even third tour in Lebanon and many of them had even been in the army way longer than me, so 'sweating the small stuff' was becoming a problem, and I was starting to wonder if it was worth the hassle. Maybe I was better off relying on their significant experience and trusting that they would get the job done regardless of whether their fingers were on or simply near the trigger....

Until one day when everything changed, and we all discovered the significant value of 'the small stuff'.

Due to the long journey from Lebanon back to central Israel when going on leave, the army had a 17-4 system, which basically meant after seventeen days in Lebanon you got four days off. This generally meant you got out Thursday morning getting down to central Israel Thursday afternoon and did not have to leave back for Lebanon till Sunday morning which got you back on base Sunday afternoon; four days.

Cell phones did not exist so unless you got an emergency call and they managed to get you on the phone they could not really call you back (every lone soldier immediately learned you never picked up the phone if it rang when you were on leave unless it was Sunday morning right before you were due to head back anyway...). As such, when you did get back from leave you inevitably spent the first half an hour catching up on what had been happening while you were away.

On one such leave there had been an accident while I was away which only narrowly averted being a full-blown tragedy. One of the men accidentally discharged his M-16 rifle as they were leaving base on patrol, narrowly missing one soldier and hitting another in the arm.

Luckily, the bullet had barely grazed the fellow's arm and he actually spent more time being interrogated by the Military Police who investigated the incident, than the time it took the medic to

bandage him up and declare him fit for duty. But the guys got the point: it's the 'small stuff' that makes the big stuff work.

What is the value of 'the small stuff'?

This week's portion *Eikev* contains a fascinating contribution to this topic.

"And it shall come to be if you fulfill these laws and keep and do them (fully), then Hashem your G-d will fulfill His covenant ... which He promised to your fathers." (*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 7:12)

This verse begins with an interesting phrase:

"Ve'haya EIKEV tishme'un..."

*"And it shall come to be **if** you fulfill..."*

Rashi (ibid.), noting the unique word *Eikev* which has the same letters as the word *Akev*, meaning *heel*, suggest that this refers to the mitzvot that one normally does not take seriously; these are the mitzvot one normally crushes under his heel, or trample underfoot.

But why is Rashi limiting our fulfillment of mitzvot (commandments or laws) to the less significant ones? It does not even fit so easily into the context of the verse.

This week's portion seems to be about the bigger picture containing as it does one of the most famous chapters in the Torah, the second paragraph of the *Shema*, which is all about the consequences (reward and punishment?) of living a Torah life in a G-d-filled word. So why does it start with the mitzvot we barely notice?

Imagine that you are standing under the wedding *chuppah* (canopy) on your wedding day. The music pauses, the guests have taken their seats and the Rabbi conducting the ceremony takes the microphone. There is an air of anticipation mixed with pure joy that fills the air and the Rabbi has a couple of brief moments (having learned from my wife that less is more, I try never to speak at a chuppah for more than 3-4 minutes tops; it's about creating a mood and starting a young couple's journey, not giving a lecture ...) to speak.

So imagine if he starts off by looking at the groom and saying:

"You should take out the garbage every day!"

He might be right, but it would certainly not be remembered as one of the great moments of the wedding! So what gives? Why is Rashi suggesting the covenant depends on those small details we normally barely pay attention to?

Perhaps because that is precisely the critical point of departure from romance to ... true love.

We do indeed start with the bigger picture, receiving the Torah in a magnificent display of G-dly glory and, after forty years of manna from heaven and clouds of glory, the wedding ceremony is over and the couple (read: the second generation of the Jewish people) are ready to enter the land.

And Moshe here decides to give them pause. And before expressing how much the consequences will depend on our getting the bigger picture, he first reminds them not to forget the small details.

Because no matter how magnificent the wedding or how beautiful the romance, if the garbage does not get taken out and the dishes pile up in the sink, eventually, no one can eat in the house, and it all falls apart.

We love the big picture and are easily ‘pumped’ by the big issues and events. The question is, are we committed to the details?

I don’t ever recall getting talk-back from soldiers about closing up their flak vests as we headed into a firefight in Lebanon or into a riot in Gaza. And when the enemy opened fire on our safari truck the men responded within seconds of commands being issued. It was on the long hours of patrol when nothing was happening, day after day, that keeping the flak vest zipped up in the heat took more energy to enforce.

And no one struggles with focusing on prayer during the Kol Nidrei prayers, especially up on the roof of *Orayta* overlooking the Temple Mount on Yom Kippur eve. But do we focus equally when we finish using the toilet, at the opportunity to appreciate through blessing the fact that our systems are working properly?

No-one forgets or struggles with wearing the tallit the Shabbat morning before their wedding, but do we ascribe the same level of meaning to wearing the tzitzit fringes every morning? And everyone takes a pause as we are about to eat the matzah at the Seder, but do we value equally the simple drink of water from the water fountain walking through the halls in school?

Eikev teaches us that the big picture is built by valuing the small details, in all that we do, and with all those we love...

Something worth considering as we leave the mourning of the Temple destroyed on Tisha B’Av and head closer to the month of Elul and the days of Awe beginning with Rosh Hashanah in just a few weeks ...

Yes, we absolutely *should sweat the small stuff!*

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman