

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Rosh Hashana)

I hadn't planned on stopping to watch, but something about him caught my attention. Maybe it was his eyes, which was where his smile began; before it spread to the rest of his face; you could see it coming in the twinkle in his eyes.

Or maybe it was the fact that, knowing his history as a Holocaust Survivor, it seemed so powerful that on a day such as this, he could tell his story, with such a smile.

It was Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, the anniversary of the day our Temples were destroyed, the city of Jerusalem ransacked and hundreds of thousands of Jews murdered or sold into slavery, and he was being interviewed on Israeli television. A day full of painful memories for the Jewish people and yet here he was, smiling; so I stopped to hear his story. He began...

"How old are you?"

The question hung in the air as the Kapo in concentration camp uniform with the authority over life and death stared down at the frail little boy in front of him.

Normally, an innocent question, yet in the camps, it was a question which could get you killed.

"Fifteen", answered the boy, who could not have been more than seven or eight. There was no room for little Jewish boys in the Nazi world of death camps, and his older brother Naftali had warned little Srulli to lie....

The Kapo glanced down at little Srulli with a skeptical look and asked again: "How old are you?!"

And again, little Srulli answered: "Fifteen".

At which point he asked the fellow behind the boy: "Is he your son or your brother?"

"My brother" answered Naftali.

"Well, how old is he?" asked the Kapo again.

"He already told you, he's fifteen", answered Naftali trying to stay calm.

At which point the Kapo looked around and, lowering his voice and motioning towards the syringe in his left hand, said:

"Look, this is a typhus vaccine, and it's based on weight which I figure out according to age. If he's really eight years old and I give him the vaccine of a fifteen year old, it will kill him. But if he's really fifteen and I give him the vaccine of a ten year old, he'll probably get typhus and die, so I ask you again: how old is he?"

Naftali thought for a moment and, in a voice barely above a whisper answered:

"He is seven."

At which point, the Kapo looked around and squirted half of the injection onto the ground before giving young Yisrael (Srulli) Lau the typhus injection which ultimately saved his life....

*And sixty years later, on Israeli national Television the young child, saved from the Holocaust, now famous around the world as **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau**, the Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, smiled his signature broad smile and commented: 'there were many angels that conspired to allow me to sit here today, and that Kapo was one of them...*

So what do you do with a story like that?

It's true there are many angels in life and they can often take the most mundane forms, from the simple traffic light that keeps you from being in the wrong place at the wrong time; to the little girl whose temper tantrum sends you to the back of a pizza store saving your life from a suicide bomber....

But there are just as many angels who don't seem to make it, and there are no shortage of families this year that were torn apart this summer – in fact all of us were – whether by the seemingly incessant rockets that rained down on our communities, or by the incomprehensible loss of so many of the best of our boys, on the field of battle or simply hitchhiking home from school.

So what do we do with this?

There are those who will say that we must repent; that there are lessons to be learned; and that the books of life and death, sickness and health, joy and sadness will once again be open and we must return from our evil ways in order to hope for a good and even a safe year. They will preach it from their pulpits, write it in their newsletters and even tuck their children to sleep at night secure in the knowledge that if we fast on Yom Kippur and give *tzedakah* (charity), pray every day with our *tefillin* and even learn to love one another and be more tolerant towards one another, that we will, please G-d, have a better year.

And yet, deep down, that theory just does not seem to hold a lot of water does it?

Do we really think that everyone who fasts and prays with all their heart is guaranteed a good year? Are we convinced that any person who truly loves his fellow human being and can somehow succeed in removing judgment and hatred of others from his, is guaranteed a good year?

And on a more global level, was all the pain and heartache, the love lost and people broken this year, as it is with every year, simply because some people didn't *pray* hard enough?

Is there a recipe for ensuring there will be peace and no more bloodshed this year at last?

That prospect is certainly not looking too good as a glance at the front page headlines of any recent newspaper will demonstrate....

So what is it we are trying to do?

These past weeks, as we do every year in the weeks and *Shabbatot* leading up to Rosh Hashanah, (the Jewish new Year) we read the portions of *Ki- Tavoh*, *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*, which seem to repeat again and again the idea that the day will come when tremendous calamities will surely befall the Jewish

people. Indeed one need not be a scholar to see in Jewish history a pattern of exile and pain that seems to follow us wherever we go.

Witness as an example the end of this past week's portion *Vayelech*:

"Ki yadati' acharei moti' ki' hashchet tashchitun, ve'sartem min haderech... ve'karat' etchem ha'ra'ah be'acharit hayamim...."

*"And I **know** (says Moshe just before his death) after my death you will become destructive and stray from the path and evil shall befall you in the end of days"* (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 31:29)

It seems that the endless cycle of pain and suffering exile and redemption is almost built in as an inevitable part of life.

And G-d Himself tells us:

"This Nation shall stray after the alien gods of the land into which they are coming. They will abandon me and violate the covenant that I have made with them,... and I will hide my face from them..." (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 31:16-17)

But then what is the point of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur which seem to suggest that we are not doomed by the inevitable? Judaism believes we can change things; but how?

Interestingly enough, these portions (*Nitzavim* and *Vayelech*) are meant to be a comfort to the Jewish people after the difficult (*Devarim* 28) chapter of the *Tochacha*, or reprove, wherein Moshe delineates all the painful things that will come their way... Indeed, **Rashi** (29:12) points out that Moshe was trying to *reassure* the Jewish people!

How is the inevitable promise of pain and suffering to come, a reassurance?!

Indeed, **Maimonides** reflects this question in his *Laws of Repentance* (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 9:1):

"This is the point of the curses...that if you turn aside from G-d, and lose yourself... He will bring upon you all these curses and withdraw all the blessings so that your lives will be wasted in insecurity and terror. You will have neither a clear mind nor a healthy body to be able to refer to the mitzvot, and will thus lose everything: this world and the next. For when a person is absorbed in this world to survive illness, war, and need for food, he cannot afford to bother with mitzvot or with wisdom...."

In other words, when we leave the path of enlightenment, our suffering will cause us to struggle to such an extent that we will no longer be capable of exploring such enlightenment!

This seems like a self-perpetuating descent into endless pain! What is the point?

There is however, one detail that perhaps, changes everything.

It seems that this last week's portion contains a new covenant:

"Atem Nitzavim hayom... le'ovrecha' bebrit Hashem Elokecha', asher Hashem Elokecha' koret imcha hayom."

“You are standing here today ... to pass into the covenant of (with) Hashem your G-d... which Hashem your G-d seals with you today.” (29: 11)

But what exactly is this covenant all about? Forty years after the covenant the Jewish people entered into at Sinai (which the **Ramban** in *Vayikra* 25:1 explains was renewed in the desert of *Chorev* after the sin of the Golden calf), what covenant is necessary on the last day of Moshe’s life?

Indeed, there is a second covenant which involved every Jew taking responsibility (*areivut*) for every other Jew, a covenant the Jewish people were to fulfill when they entered the land of Israel (see *Devarim* 28:69), but as that was already mentioned in the portion of Ki Tavo, and as **Rashi** here (29: 12) points out took place when they entered the land and this cannot be the covenant being entered into ‘today’. So what is this new covenant, and why is it the last step before the Jewish people enter the land of Israel, as well as the last portion before Rosh Hashanah?

And most of all, why does this covenant seem to destroy the very environment that one would think we need in order to correct the mistakes that led to the horrific realization of its frightening promise?

A careful look at these portions actually makes clear what his new and final covenant is all about: this is the covenant of teshuvah.

The day will come says the Torah, when all the blessings and curses have come to pass when *“Ve’shavta’ ad Hashem Elokecha”*: when we will return. (See *Devarim* 30:1-6)

We will return from all the far flung places where we have wandered and from all the lost paths to which we have strayed.

This covenant is all about *teshuva*. And it is worth noting that many translate *teshuva* as ‘repentance’, but that is not really what *teshuva* is all about.

Repentance in the dictionary means regret or feeling sorry. But that is not at all what *teshuva* is about, because regret alone is simply about guilt, and that is not what Judaism wants, despite all the jokes to the contrary.

This does not mean to say regret is necessarily a bad thing, because regret is the first stage towards *teshuva*, and involves recognizing the fact that there is something wrong I would like to fix.

But in the end, such regret on its own leaves us with the constant of realizing that we cannot undo the past; we can only hope to change the present.

Teshuva, however, from the word ‘shuv’ or ‘return’ is to attempt to go back to who I could have been *before* all the mistakes I have made.

Teshuva actually allows me to change the past, because the ‘me’ that struggles with that past no longer exists; I have been born anew. *Teshuva* is about creating a whole new reality, by tracing history back to the precise point where the present reality we struggle with began to go astray. That is why *teshuva* can allow me to say I will never do this again, unlike character refinement which says I only know that right *now* I am not making that same mistake.

Regret and repentance is what feeds programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, wherein a person needs to accept they will always be an alcoholic, so that they can begin the long road to modifying how they respond to that need and behave in its presence. *Teshuva* however, is the ability to create a whole new person who is not and never was and never could be an alcoholic.

This of course, is a very challenging, and even a dangerous idea, which is why it comes to us a covenant, *brit* - which on some levels is really a gift.

It should not be possible to recreate ourselves, yet we are given that gift, and every year on Rosh Hashanah we have the capacity yet again, to redefine who we are and who we choose to be. (Interestingly this may be why we do not say the *viduy* or confessional prayers on Rosh Hashanah: because on this day there is no sin, for we are reborn...but that is another discussion...)

And amazingly, it is precisely our struggle with more and more challenges that is the source of the energy with which we can create *teshuva*.*

In a sense, we are further away from Sinai than we have ever been. Is it any wonder then that we are more fractured now as a people than even two thousand years ago when the internecine hatred and rivalries destroyed the Temple? And yet, while we are further away from Sinai, we are coming closer and closer to *teshuva*, because the repository of all of our life experiences is what gives us, if only we can find the strength to recreate today, who we choose to be.

May Hashem bless us this year; at long last, to find the strength to recreate who we are as a people and as individuals and to succeed in creating a better world, one day at a time.

And one last thought: How do you say *Shana Tovah* (best wishes for a good year) to so many special people who are ending a year that seems to have ended as anything but good? Maybe we cannot make it 'good' but in being there for each other in our sadness and our joy; in peace as in war, perhaps we can help to make it just that little bit better...?

Best wishes for a Shanah Tovah full of love and joy, purpose and peace,

Ktivah ve'Chatimah Tovah,

Rav Binny Freedman

*(To be honest this for me is a struggle, and I too, am still processing the question. I would not be so bold as to think I have the answers to this question...)