

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Rosh Hashana)

More than what he was saying, it was his face that caught my attention. Flicking on the television absent-mindedly as I was getting dressed for a wedding, I came across the middle of a program on what, after a moment, I realized was a story from that summer's war in Lebanon.

A young man, who had clearly been there, was describing some of the events surrounding a particular battle, though I had missed the beginning of the program and do not know exactly where these events took place.

He was sharing what must have been an extremely difficult experience: the house his unit had taken refuge in was hit by a Hezbollah anti-tank missile, a number of his comrades had been killed and wounded, and he himself wasn't sure he would make it. But what made me stop and listen was his face.

The events he was describing must have been extremely painful, and yet there was no pain in his eyes. He had clearly lost comrades, and yet there was no tragic sadness in his voice. If anything, his eyes were animated; alive; and his voice was full of hope and promise. He spoke of his plans for the future and how lucky he was to have made it through and how he had been given a new lease on life, and now was determined to live up to that and make it a life worth living. And nowhere in his words was any hint of despair. I remember thinking how remarkable it was that a young soldier should live through such events and be able, only a year later, to describe them without any bitterness or anger. And I was taken by how at peace his face was, even happy, despite all he had been through.

And then the woman interviewing asked him:

"If you had the chance to do it over again, would you have made the same choices, would you have gone to fight?"

(I had the impression he had been overseas and come back when he heard his unit was called up, though as mentioned I had missed the beginning of the program...)

"Of course I would have." He responded.

At which point the cameraman who had, perhaps for the same reason, been focused on this young man's face, panned back to reveal that the speaker was sitting in a wheelchair... with no legs. His injuries had resulted in a double amputation, from the knee down.

I couldn't stop staring at the incongruity of this image: how could someone so young, who had just lost his legs, be so... happy?

On one level, I was taken by the cameraman's decision to focus for so long on this young man's face. If I had seen the whole picture, I probably would have been focused on the legs that weren't there, instead of the person that was.

But on a deeper level, I was struck by how a person, who had been through so much, could remain so positive.

The woman doing the interview must have been struck by the same question.

"You would do this again?" she asked, "even if you knew you would suffer the same injuries?"

And his face took on a surprised look:

"I had the privilege of serving as a Jewish soldier, in a Jewish army, defending the Jewish people in a Jewish state. After two thousand years of dreaming, I had this privilege. Of course, I would do it again!"

"And my legs? They were my legs, but they are not me. I am much more than my body and the "Ani" (me) that I am is still here and still get to see and hear and hug his loved ones every day...."

Can you imagine? I stood there transfixed, full of emotion, in awe, that we are blessed to have such men defending us; living among us. And I wondered how a person reaches such a level, how a person could live on such a level....

Every year, on *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, we read two different stories: the story of the expulsion of Yishmael (Abraham's first son with his handmaiden Hagar), and the binding of Yitzchak (Isaac). Both are stories of the sons of Abraham, and both involved Abraham's ability to be willing to sacrifice or let go, of a son.

And yet, these stories are very different. In the story of Yishmael, Avraham sends his son away, whereas in the story of Yitzchak, they come together.

From a Jewish perspective, Yishmael seems to be a failure, ultimately departing from Jewish tradition and establishing the Arab dynasty. Yitzchak on the other hand, is one of our forefathers, and the ultimate progenitor of the Jewish people. Why do these two vastly disparate stories comprise the Torah readings in our Rosh Hashanah service, and what common theme is the message of their connection?

The story of Yishmael is all about the here and now. Abraham, against his natural instincts of loving-kindness, is forced by G-d to listen to his wife Sarah and send Yishmael (and his mother Hagar) away. The Torah tells us that this is because Yishmael is "*me'tzachek*", literally: laughing, to Yitzchak. And while the *Midrashim* (Rabbinic legend) and commentators differ as to the exact meaning of this phrase varying from lewd behavior to the taunting of Yitzchak, one thing is clear: Yitzchak, which means literally 'he will laugh', is juxtaposed with Yishmael, the *me'tzachek*, or one who laughs now. Yitzchak's life is about the future, while Yishmael is all about the here and now.

Indeed, as the story continues, when Yishmael is cast beneath the bushes dying of thirst and calling out for water G-d hears him "*ba'asher hu' sham*", where he is.

The *Midrash*, noting this unique phrase, has the angels in an uproar over G-d's decision to save Yishmael. After all, they say, the descendants of this lad will one day slaughter His (Jewish) children, so how can G-d spare him now?

G-d's response? 'I heard his honest remorse and pain **now**, and if **now** he is repentant then he should be saved, whatever might come later on. The story of Yishmael, then, is all about the here and now. And the message is that whatever mistakes we may have made in the past, this moment is the beginning of the rest of our lives, and changing the now, changes everything. Certainly, a fitting message for Rosh Hashanah.

And what of Yitzchak and the binding of (Yitzchak) Isaac? Yitzchak is all about the future.

Indeed, when G-d first 'approaches' Avraham, the Torah tells us:

"Vayehi achar hadevarim ha'eleh', ve'HaElokim nisah et Avraham. Vayomer lo Avraham, vayomer lo Hineni."

"And it was after these things that G-d tested Avraham. And he said to him Avraham, and Avraham said: 'Here I am'." (Bereishit (Genesis) 22)

The word *Hineni*, *Here I am*, is a very significant word that means a lot more than the response to 'knock knock'. This same word, used sparingly, is Moshe's response to G-d's calling at the Burning Bush, as well as Yaakov (Jacob)'s response to Yitzchak's calling for a blessing. Whenever this word is used in the Torah, it is indicative of an individual responding to a calling. *Hineni* means I am here, ready to serve, it is a moment of pure potential, wherein a person rises to the challenge of becoming all they could ever be.

And it is in this moment of '*Hineni*' that Avraham says to G-d: 'I exist because You created me; because You love me; whatever You ask of me, I live to do.' And in truth, this is the essential kernel of what life is all about. If Hashem (G-d) created me, then I must have a purpose, and if Hashem loves me enough to have decided the world is better off with me still in it today, for at least another day, then all I want is to know what Hashem wants of me. How can my being here, today, make the world better?

Indeed, it is within the context of *Hineni* that we respond to life's greatest challenges.

When Israeli soldiers stopped what they were doing and answered a call to battle, however painful and challenging that was, they were essentially saying '*Hineni*'; here I am. And when we stop what we are doing, because the opportunity for a *Mitzvah* (an imperative action that needs to be done), whether it be helping the refugees from Darfur, or rebuilding homes for the poor in Israel's North, we are essentially saying: '*Hineni*'.

And yet, here in the story of the binding of Isaac, Avraham's '*Hineni*' aspires to a whole new level. Because when G-d calls to Avraham, Avraham says '*Hineni*' without even having an inkling of what is coming. After all, when an Israeli reserves soldier is called up to the front lines, his '*Hineni*' comes as a result of understanding that his country needs him; Israel may be going to war. He has taken a look at the situation and recognized that he is needed, and he essentially says 'here I am'. And this is true whenever we say '*Hineni*'. We see refugees from Sudan being beaten to death by Egyptians at the border and we stop what we are doing and say '*Hineni*'. Or we see hundreds of Jews ejected from their homes in Gush Katif, with nowhere to go, having lost their jobs, and in pain, and no matter our political affiliation, we stop what we are doing and say '*Hineni*'...

But in this case, Avraham is responding to G-d before G-d has even told him what he wants. It is enough for Avraham to know he is called, for him to immediately respond '*Hineni*'. This *Hineni* is all about the future: whatever you ask of me, whatever today and tomorrow bring: '*Hineni*'.

And this, incidentally, sets the theme of the story of the binding of Isaac. Where the story of Yishmael was all about the here and now, the story of Yitzchak is all about what lies ahead. Indeed, where Yishmael is the '*metzachek*' the one who laughs now, Yitzchak literally means 'he will laugh' in the future. Yishmael is about being in the present, in the given moment, and Yitzchak is about seeing and being ready to accept and to live up to the moment that is yet to come.

And this incidentally is one of the most essential ingredients of a loving relationship. It's like when your child calls you up on the phone and says '*Aba*' (Dad): that same word has a variety of different tones.

Imagine your daughter calls you up from school and says 'Aba' and you can hear the quiver in her voice; sense the tears that are on the verge of bursting forth, and you instantly know 'Hineni' : here I am, whatever you need. Or when your wife calls down from upstairs; the ability to be in that *Hineni* mode is all about how much trust and love already exists in that moment. If my wife asks something of me, then it must be important, even before I know what it is. And this is the essence of our relationship with Hashem. If I could only know what it is Hashem wants of me, then all I would want is to live up to that challenge.

And these two ideas, the being in the moment of Yishmael and the readiness to serve in the future of Yitzchak, are what *Rosh Hashana* is all about.

On *Rosh Hashana* we have the chance to begin again; to start over. Perhaps the message of these parallel and yet very different Torah readings is to learn to balance our ability to live in the present and appreciate the moment, even learning to be in the moment; every moment, while at the same time, learn the power of being able to change and be accepting of the future. To appreciate the beauty of joy inherent in every given moment, and yet be accepting of and open to whatever life's next moment has to bring.

Indeed, these are the essential components of *Teshuva* (repentance) to which we aspire on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, more than at any other time of the year. Our ability to accomplish *Teshuva*, and change who we are (in order to become the person we were always meant to be), is first about regretting who we have allowed ourselves to become. Jewish tradition calls this *charata*, literally: regret. Just because we know we are doing something wrong does not mean we are ready to change. We need to regret the implications and pain inherent in such mistakes and desire to change.

But then, we need what Jewish tradition calls *Kabbalah le'Atid*: a willingness to change in the future. It is the determination to change forever, and to be a different person in the future (built on that very same regret in the present) which ultimately completes the process and accomplishes *Teshuva*.

Thus, it is only when these two ideas come together, an awareness of the here and now, coupled with a determination to change the future, that we live up to the potential of what Rosh Hashanah is all about.

As we begin the New Year, may we all be blessed to appreciate the beauty inherent in every moment, alongside the challenges, and may we be blessed as well with the strength to change the future, so that the world as it is, becomes the world as it could be.

Wishing you all a sweet, happy, and healthy New Year,

Shanah Tovah,
Binny Freedman