

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Acharei-Mot)

Some time ago, after a lecture on the ethical challenges of the seventh commandment (“Thou shalt not steal”), I was approached by a fellow from Vienna who was a Holocaust survivor.

*“Why do you assume stealing is always wrong?” asked the fellow,
“Sometimes, it is even an obligation.”*

“I always had a strong desire to take things, and I never understood why,” he continued,

“And it wasn’t that I necessarily needed the things I took, I just loved the prospect of being able to steal things out from under people’s noses. I became quite good at it, though my conscience always bothered me. Often, I was able to resist the temptation to take things that weren’t mine, but it was always a struggle. I often wondered why G-d had burdened me with this particular challenge. I knew it was wrong to steal, and never rationalized theft; I just loved the ‘thrill of the take’. Why did G-d create me with this challenge? It wasn’t my fault I loved to steal, G-d made me that way... it just didn’t seem fair.

“And then the Holocaust came, and with it the beatings and humiliations, the forced labor battalions, and the Gestapo, who would show up at your door in the middle of the night and cart you off to the police station, from whence most people never came out.... My skills at pilfering items kept our family alive, and somehow I was always able, despite the difficult conditions in the ghetto, to find enough for everyone to eat.

“One day, I received orders to report to the police station to have my papers reviewed. I had to make a terrifying decision. Did the Gestapo want me? Had they somehow discovered something I had done? Would I be allowed to leave the premises once I came in? My first thought was to run, and go into hiding. But of course, they knew where the rest of my family was, and the consequences of my not reporting to the police were unthinkable, so I had no choice but to go to the headquarters of the Gestapo.

“I was standing in a waiting hall with many other people, and every few minutes, a person’s name would be called, and a policeman would take him or her off to one of the offices down the hall. You could hear the yelling, and the cries of the person being ‘interviewed’ and sometimes, you would see the person, bloodied and beaten, limping back down the hallway and out of the building. Sometimes, though, you didn’t seem to see the person come out of that hallway....

“After what seemed like hours, my name was called, and a policeman came to escort me to the rear. I found myself in an office with four or five ‘policemen’, all behind small desks ‘interviewing’ different people who were brought in. The fellow ‘interviewing’ (really, it was more like screaming at) me, barked out the questions, and it seemed, even before I could give the answer, he would reach out with his arm and bat me on the head. He asked my name, and when I started to reply, he would hit me before I could finish answering. I wasn’t sure what to do, and then recalled hearing how all the Jews were being made to change their first names to Abraham or Sarah, so I answered ‘Abraham’, and sure enough the beating stopped... Eventually, with a little more beating, and some more questions, I was made to sign something and then told I would be ordered in the future to report for a labor battalion. Meanwhile, I could go home.

“At this point, a strange thing happened: It seemed all of the interviews were ending at around the same time, and as the Jews were each told the same thing and allowed to leave, the officers ‘interviewing’ them also walked out, perhaps for a break, or some coffee. By a strange congruence of circumstances, I found myself alone in the room. And I suddenly had a tremendous urge to steal something.

“I saw, on one of the desks, a large pile of papers, and next to it, an equally large pile of passports and identity papers. Clearly, these were Jews being made to report somewhere, and if this list was on a Gestapo Officer’s desk, it could not bode well for those people. Without thinking, I took the entire pile, and with a skill born of years of practice, walked right out of Gestapo headquarters with all of those papers under my shirt. Not only did I most certainly save seventy lives that day, but also, later in the war, we were able to doctor all those passports to save an additional hundred people....

“From that day, and since the war, I never had the desire to steal again, and I now realize that G-d gave me that desire, not as a curse, but as a blessing.”

So often in life, we struggle with desires and needs that seem to weigh us down. If only we didn’t so crave that chocolate fudge cake, wouldn’t it be easier to diet? How often do you know you have better things to do with your time, only it looks like such a great TV-movie, and suddenly, two hours later, you wonder why you wasted a perfectly good evening on something so unproductive? Wouldn’t it be great if we could somehow remove those desires we know to be so wasteful? And, if we know we would be so much better off without these passions, why were we given these challenges in life to begin with? After all, if G-d hadn’t created people with an inclination for violence, there would be no violent crime....

This week’s portion, *Acharei Mot*, actually begins with a treatment of this topic that most people miss. G-d tells Moshe to instruct Aaron, “*after the death of his sons*”, regarding the service in the tabernacle, the Mishkan. (Leviticus 16:1) One would have expected, therefore, a topic, which directly relates to the trauma Aaron experienced in the loss of his sons.

Strangely, however, the Torah here begins a discussion of the two goat offerings, which form the central part of the service on Yom Kippur. Why is the Torah introducing the Yom Kippur service, something which will occur in the month of Tishrei (the seventh month), immediately after the death of Aaron’s sons (which occurred three portions earlier, in the portion of *Shemini*), which the Torah tells me occurred on the first day of Nissan (the first month)?

Perhaps there is something hidden in the part of the Yom Kippur service described here, which may serve as a reaction or response to the death of Aaron’s sons, or even to death and tragedy in general.

In fact, the sacrifices described here (**Leviticus 16: 5-11**) are perhaps the strangest and most challenging areas of service in all of Judaism, and arguably include the most bizarre sacrifice mentioned in the Bible.

Aaron, as the High priest (the *Kohen Gadol*), is told to take two he-goats as a sin, or *Chatat* offering. In truth, the concept of *Chet*, for which a *Chatat* offering is brought, is not really about sin; at least in the way most people understand it. *Chet* does not mean sin; it means a mistake. As such, when we make mistakes, these offerings are the opportunity to deal with those mistakes.

The *Kohen Gadol* the High Priest, stands before the tent of meeting on Yom Kippur, and picks lots for these two goats. According to Jewish tradition a bag with two notes in it is brought to him, and he reaches with both hands into the bag, choosing one note in each hand, subsequently holding one hand over the head of each goat.

On one of the notes was written the word “*La’Hashem*”, “For G-d”, and this goat was indeed offered as the central sacrifice of Yom Kippur in the Temple.

On the second note, was written the word “*La’Azazel*” and thus the second goat was an offering to *Azazel*. The question of course, is: what or who is *Azazel*? The verse (16:10) suggests, as **Rashi** explains, that this goat was taken into the wilderness, and ultimately cast off the desert cliffs, symbolizing the destruction of our transgressions before G-d. However, this understanding still leaves us with many questions:

Why, in order to attain forgiveness for the Jewish people (v.10) must this second goat be taken off into the desert? Why not offer it up in the temple, like all other sacrifices?

Further, what is the significance of the lots drawn on these goats? What difference which goat is sent to the desert and which to the Temple? Why not just let the *Kohen Gadol* choose the goats? And what, in the end, does all this have to do with this episode being introduced immediately after the death of Aaron’s sons?

The **Ramban** suggests an idea which is so bizarre, and seems to be so at odds with all that Judaism seems to be, that it has been labeled by many as one of the most difficult and puzzling comments by any great commentator on the entire Torah.

The **Ramban** suggests that *Azazel* is really *Samael*, the “*Sar Ha’Moshel Be’mekomot HaChurban*”, “*The Prince who rules in the places of darkness and destruction*”. Indeed, continues the Ramban, on Yom Kippur, when we as a people find favor in G-d’s eyes, we need to appease this dark Prince; hence we offer him a special sacrifice, in the darkness of the wilderness, in the places of destruction!

What is going on? Can the Ramban, one of the greatest rabbis and commentators in Jewish history, be suggesting that we are offering sacrifices to the dark side? Is this Judaism? It actually smacks more of ancient Canaanite paganism! And what does all this have to do with Yom Kippur, much less with the death of the sons of Aaron?

Years ago, in a sermon preceding Yom Kippur, my teacher, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, shared a beautiful way of looking at this Ramban, based on the teachings of **Rav Soleveitchik**, zatz”al.

There is a discussion in the Talmud (*Yoma* 86b) regarding the power of Teshuvah (repentance): “*Gedolah Teshuvah*”, suggests **Rav Shimon Ben Lakish**, “*She’ Zedonot Ne’he’fachot Le’Zechuyot*”.

“*Great is the power of Repentance, which causes pre-meditated transgressions to become merits.*”

A rather challenging statement, which implies that if I purposefully transgress, and subsequently repent and regret my actions, not only is my slate wiped clean, and my past mistakes forgiven, but in fact these transgressions now serve as a merit to me in all of my future activities! How can this

be? Indeed, the conclusion from this Talmudic text would make it worthwhile for all of us to go on a rampage, committing as many transgressions as possible, in order to subsequently repent and gain more merit! Obviously such a suggestion would lead only to chaos. So what is the meaning of this suggestion?

Perhaps what the Talmud in *Yoma* is saying is, if I have desires that serve to pull me down, I can turn those desires into a merit, if I learn to channel them into better things.

The Talmud elsewhere makes a challenging statement: If you have the desire to spill blood, say the Rabbis, become a butcher, and if you have the desire to steal (in other words to take hold of and possess) other people's money, become a collector of charity.

In other words, take the desire you have, and use it for a good purpose.

This is a crucial idea: Everything we are given in this world, however challenging this may sometimes be, is ours for a reason. We all go through life with our own little package, our own suitcase, full of our talents and skills, desires and foibles; all the things that bring us up, and all the things that bring us down. There isn't much we can do about that. Each of us has a suitcase, and whatever we think of it, it is ours to keep. Some are born tall, maybe they will become basketball stars, and some have musical talent, and others, the gift of knowing when and how to smile. Many of these talents we do not really earn, they are ours to develop. The question, however, is what we choose to do with them. And if everything comes to me from G-d, then even my weaknesses can be a gift, if I will only find a way to channel them for the good.

If I have a desire to steal, it must come from somewhere, and therefore there must be a way to make good of it. Our challenge in this world is how to do just that.

This, perhaps, is the offering to *Samael*, the "*The Prince who rules in the places of darkness and destruction*", described by the Ramban. There is a place of darkness inside each one of us, that threatens to destroy us, to bring us down from the places of light we so long to reach. There are those who suggest that the only way to fully combat these desires is to retreat from the physical world so as not to grant them any place. If you have physical desires, live in a monastery, and desist from all contact with that physical world so you can put it out of your head.

Judaism, however, has a different approach entirely: Don't deny these desires, embrace them! But do so in a healthy manner, channeling their energy to a good purpose, in a healthy fashion. This may well be the message behind all the gold used in the tabernacle and the temple, despite the debacle of the Golden calf. 'If you are going to seek to make me tangible in this world, says G-d, you have to do it my way, in the Temple, and channel that energy towards light, instead of darkness.

This is the secret of Yom Kippur, that day when for twenty-four hours we attempt to channel all the love and joy as well as the pain and anguish deep in our hearts, to a higher purpose.

Perhaps this is why this message is given here, to Aaron, so soon after the death of his sons. There is no force in this world with more potential to swallow us whole into the darkest depths of depression, than death. Confronted by the incontrovertible wall of our own mortality, we easily succumb to the idea that there is no purpose, no meaning, only an all too often untimely ending.

But if Hashem, G-d, truly loves us, and only gives us opportunities to grow, then perhaps, however painful, death too, is such an opportunity.

We are living in challenging times. The people of Israel, and with them the entire Jewish world, is fighting a war for survival. Make no mistake about it. With terrorists opening fire on innocent worshippers in Synagogues, and not-so – veiled anti-Semitic statements finding their way into the media from unexpected sources, the crisis today is for the entire Jewish people.

Hidden within the collective pool that is the passions and desires of the entire Jewish people, perhaps Hashem will bless us to at long last, to harness all of that energy for light, instead of darkness. And what an incredible light that would be.

May Hashem bless us, each and every one of us, to get started, one person at a time.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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