

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny Freedman

## **(Portion of Kedoshim)**

*Some years ago, on a Pesach program, an elderly gentleman named Yaakov Gross asked a few of us if he could speak before the Yizkor service. He wanted to share the story of his bar mitzvah in Bergen Belsen. This is the story he shared:*

*In January of 1945 the Nazis were still trying to convince the world that they were treating the Jews well. So, they invited a delegation of the Red Cross to visit the camp. As part of the 'show' that they prepared, they 'invited' a few of the boys from the kinder-lager, the children's' barracks, to celebrate their bar mitzvah in Bergen Belsen; true story. And for the occasion, they erected a platform (read: bimah) in the middle of the square where roll calls and hangings were normally held. And, no less incredible, they secured a Sefer Torah for the event!*

*And so, young Yaakov Gross, who was thirteen, along with five other boys, ascended to receive an Aliyah for his bar mitzvah, in front of thousands of prisoners in Bergen Belsen. The guards gave them a few hours for the ceremony. When they were finished making their blessings and reading from the Torah, there was a line as far as he could see, maybe half a mile long, of prisoners wanting to have an aliyah (to be called up to make a blessing over the Torah scroll). And one by one, in the bitter cold of January 1945 in Bergen Belsen, hundreds upon hundreds of prisoners made a blessing over the Torah, despite everything they had endured, and everything they had lost.*

*Yaakov Gross, pausing for a moment whilst sharing this story, looked out at us, and reflected in his heavy Polish accent: "can you imagine the Kiddush Hashem?" (Can you imagine the sanctification of G-d's name?) But the story does not end there.*

*As a 'reward' for their participation in the ceremony and to celebrate their bar mitzvah, each boy was given half a loaf of bread. Their daily ration was normally a small thin slice of bread, an inch long, and they were of course, all starving, so a half a loaf was an incredible treasure. Pausing again, Mr. Gross reflected: 'people sold apartments in Budapest for a single slice of bread; a full half a loaf was like getting a million dollars; if you were careful it could last a week; it could save your life.*

*But his mother took the half a loaf and bartered it for a smuggled siddur (prayer book) and a masechta (tractate of Talmud) so that young Yaakov could learn and doven (pray) every day; can you imagine? She gave up a half a loaf of bread in Bergen Belsen to daven...*

*Years later (in 1998?) when his mother finally passed away, he shared this story at her funeral, opining that the siddur and masechta were walking her into heaven...*

*And the story does not end there. When Ilan Ramon rocketed into space aboard the fated Columbia spaceship, he took with him that Sefer Torah from Bergen Belsen. Finishing his story, Mr. Gross remarked: the Talmud tells us that G-d Himself also reads from the Torah every day; He has Moshe's Torah scroll; in fact, he can read from every Torah scroll ever written and sacrificed over three thousand painful years of Jewish history. But He wanted to read from that Torah scroll, from Bergen Belsen.*

*In the middle of the second of this week's double portion of Acharei-Mot Kedoshim, which follows the aftermath of the tragic death of Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu, we find a declarative verse:*

*“And you shall guard all my decrees and all my judgements, and you shall do them, and the land which I am bringing you to dwell therein, will not spit you out.”* (Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:22)

Clearly, the Torah tells us that the privilege of remaining in the land of Israel to create a model society of ethics, is dependent upon our living by the code of laws proscribed for us by G-d and given to us at Sinai over three thousand years ago. And the Torah is telling us quite clearly that we don't get to decide what is right, and what is wrong, nor do we have to intuit that; objective laws were given us many millennia ago, which are meant to define the parameters of what we can and cannot do, and how we are meant to build a moral, ethical society.

Some of these *mitzvot* are easily understood: a society which does not honor its elders, care for its poor and destitute and serve G-d (the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong), will not last. It is no coincidence that the weakening of Western society has been accompanied by a generation increasingly focused on getting, rather than giving, and on themselves rather than those less fortunate around them.

But the Torah shares many *mitzvot* that are more difficult for us to understand: What difference does it make what we eat? Why is a community that consumes pork any less ethical and viable than one that consumes beef? What difference does it make whether stores close or continue their business on the Shabbat, our Jewish day of rest? And why is our Jewish society prohibited from marrying the offspring of an adulterous or incestuous relationship? Why should the children of such unethical relationships themselves suffer the consequences for actions which were not their mistakes?

Yet the Torah makes very clear that these are Divine laws given us long ago, and for those of us who believe the Torah, indeed Judaism itself, to be a Divine work, we don't get to decide what to do simply based on what we like; we are challenged to believe in something greater than ourselves, and to accept that even with all our wonderful technological advances, we are still human, and our understanding will always be limited in the face of Divine wisdom.

This is not to say that we are meant to abrogate our responsibility to try and understand all that we do; merely that we accept the limited parameters of capability with regards to human understanding.

We live in challenging times; David has become Goliath, and if enough people believe that right is wrong and black is white then so it will be. But three thousand years ago, a nation was born out of slavery to teach the world that right is right simply because it is right, and we don't get to decide that; G-d does. We may struggle with it, we may not like it, and it may even force us to reconsider the path we take in life. But if right and wrong are subjective, then we are only a step away from the abyss of evil.

Firing at babies is wrong just as firing from behind them is and always will be. And if the Torah says pork is unkosher then so it will remain no matter how much I like it or want it.

Eighty-one years ago, the Nazis turned the world upside down, determined to make wrong right, and in the midst of all that horror a thirteen year old boy read from the Torah the Nazis so longed to destroy as if to say: 'what is right will still be right, long after you are all gone ...'.

Wishing all a Shabbat shalom,

Binny Freedman