

Portion of Bamidbar - Jerusalem Day
Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

A windswept hill, where the leaves rustle on the olive trees, and the ground lies silent... almost in silent memorial, to the sounds that echoed here forty-two years ago....

The view today is mostly obscured; where once the hill overlooked the Northern side of Jewish Jerusalem, from across the Jordanian border, today the homes and streets of Ramat Eshkol, a neighborhood that sprouted up after the Six Day War fill the landscape. And where once Jordanian guns trained on Israel, forcing civilians to seek refuge behind makeshift protection, today children play soccer in a new school that sits just below the ridge.

But take a walk below the old Jordanian police academy, along the rows of trenches that snake their way across the hill, and close your eyes, and you can still hear the echoes of gunfire, and the cries of the soldiers that rang out here, on Ammunition Hill, in June of 1967.

In May of 1967, with Arab armies massed on her borders, and the entire Israeli army reserves mobilized, Israel was in a desperate situation. With all the able-bodied men called up to the front lines, Israel's economy ground to a halt, as the Arab radio-waves filled with the calls for the young State's destruction.

Outnumbered on all fronts, the pundits were predicting an imminent end to the experiment that saw the birth of a Jewish homeland after 2000 years of waiting.

Plans had actually been prepared in certain Western countries to absorb the expected, mass influx of Jewish refugees fleeing the imminent Arab-spawned Holocaust just twenty years after the world had seen six million Jews disappear in the ovens of Auschwitz and Treblinka.

With her back against the wall, this time Israel vowed it would be different. No longer a ragged band of fighters begging for a few guns to be smuggled through the sewers of Warsaw in 1942, this time Israel had an army with which to fight back. In the early dawn of June 5th, 1967, Israeli Air Force jets flew South, below enemy radar, in two waves, taking out 85% of Egypt's air force on the ground in less than three hours.

In similar operations later that morning, the IAF achieved similar success with the Syrian Air Force, thus achieving total control of the skies, and essentially winning the war before it had even begun.

In the prelude to the war, a secret telegram (now public in recently released documents) was sent to by Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to then-young Crown-Prince Hussein of Jordan, begging him to refrain from getting involved in the brewing conflict.

But, whether due to Arab pressure or to insure his own position, Jordan ignored the request, instead unleashing a series of savage artillery barrages on Western civilian Jerusalem from six-inch guns positioned on that very same Ammunition hill.

By the second day of the war, after its lightning successes, Israel set its sites on the ultimate prize; the Old City of Jerusalem. For two thousand years, ever since the Romans had put torch to the Temple, the Jewish people had dreamed of coming home. Here at last, the day was finally at hand.

But the Old City of Jerusalem was a difficult nut to crack. It was decided by the Israeli High command that there would be no air or artillery support, due to the close quartered civilian population, as well as the holy places of three religions. For the same reason tanks would only be used to protect infantry but not to offer fire support.

It was therefore obvious that the only way such an infantry attack could hope to succeed was if the surrounding ridges which held the strategic high ground overlooking the Old city were first captured. A single battery of Jordanian guns from atop the Mount of Olives, Mount Scopus, Armon Hanatziv, and especially Ammunition Hill would rip the Israeli soldiers below to shreds, ending what might be Israel's only chance to re-take the Old City before it even got out of the gate.

The most difficult nut to crack was Ammunition Hill; heavily fortified and manned by elite Jordanian troops, Israel knew this hill was the key to unlocking the way home to Jerusalem, the Jewish people's long lost city of gold...

The operation began at 10pm, as an entire Battalion of paratroopers, supported by a full company of tanks set out to take the hill.

The hope was that the hill could be in Israeli hands by dawn so that the Israeli forces could continue from there along the eastern ridge line, allowing them to be at the gates of the Old City that evening.

Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell the Jordanian army about the plan.

The Israelis came under murderous fire at the bottom of the hill, and the tanks quickly became stuck in the heavily mined approach. Almost immediately, unable to negotiate the tank obstacles and barbed wire, the tanks were left behind and the paratroopers had to proceed alone.

Under murderous fire, they advanced into the trenches at the top of the hill, only to discover that the Jordanians had built special trenches wide enough for only one man at a time, which meant no one soldier could cover his comrade as they advanced.

On the spot, without hesitation, the soldiers in the front of the line in the trenches simply threw themselves to the ground when their ammo ran out, allowing the rest of the unit to run on top of them in order to advance.

And when heavy fire pinned them down from the police station, preventing them from moving forward, one by one, soldier after soldier understood that the only way to support the advance of the men in the trenches was to roll out of the trench into open ground and draw the enemy fire covering the rest of the unit's advance and as each Israeli soldier was eventually cut down, another rose to take his place.

Incredibly, when the army picked apart the battle after the war it was determined that no orders had been given to these men, they simply understood the calling and made this decision all on their own.

But of all the stories on that day, (and books could be filled with the stories of heroism from that one battle), none stands out like the story of Yoav Tsur.

At one point in the battle the bulk of what was left of the unit was caught in a murderous cross-fire (later dubbed the 'Triangle of Fire') from Jordanian machine gunners on one end, and a heavily fortified bunker on the other. As the Israelis were being cut to pieces, Tsur, without any regard to his own well being simply charged the bunker on his own, jumping up on the roof of the bunker and taking it out with his grenades. On three separate occasions, Tsur's determination and complete lack of concern for his own safety, saved the day, until at last he was killed in his third such action.

Of the 260 men who took part in this battle, one of the costliest in Israeli Military history, 182 men fell that day, and when the guns finally fell silent at evening of the following day there were only eleven soldiers who remained standing without being killed or wounded.

If you walk across the silent battle-field of Ammunition Hill, you can see the glint of the sun off the golden walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, through the branches of the olive trees, 182 in all, each planted by the family of a boy who fell that day. And it hits you that in this place the Jewish people carried on the backs and shoulders of the paratroopers who died there, unlocked the gates to the city of Jerusalem.

So what do you do with this, some forty years later? What is so important about Jerusalem, that it has been called the heart of the Jewish people, and that would motivate so many, for so long to be willing to give up so much, to be able to come home to this city?

It is interesting to note that this week we celebrate 'Yom Yerushalayim', Jerusalem Day, which marks the Hebrew anniversary (the 28th day of Iyar) of the day the Israeli army re-took the old city of Jerusalem in 1967. And given that this Hebrew date is exactly nine days before the festival of *Shavuot*, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is worth noting that it always falls on the week before *Shavuot*. It is no accident that the celebration of Jerusalem Day has become a prelude to the celebration of receiving the Torah, and we need to understand this connection, as well as trying to understand how this is connected to the weekly Torah portion which also is always read the week before *Shavuot*.

The fourth book of the Torah, **Bamidbar** (Numbers), which we begin this week, is a book that begins with enormous potential. Having received the Torah at Sinai, and recovered from the debacle over the Golden calf, the Jewish people have successfully built a tabernacle (*mishkan*), (predecessor to the Temple) and the Kohanim or priestly class have received the basics of what they will need to do in the Temple (tabernacle or *mishkan*),

Now, finally, the Jews are ready to receive their marching orders: after two hundred years of slavery, it is time for the family of Israel to return home, to the land of their ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'acov. In fact, given their position in the desert of Sinai they are but a few short days' journey to the border of Israel.

And so G-d (Hashem) speaks to Moshe:

“Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe be’midbar Sinai, be’Ohel Moed, leimor...” “And G-d spoke to Moshe, in the desert of Sinai, at the Tent of Meeting saying:”

“Seu’ et rosh B’nei Yisrael...” “Count the heads of the children of Israel...” (Bamidbar (Numbers) 1:1-2)

What is this about? Why is G-d counting the Jewish people now? Why not just get them moving? And why is it so important to note exactly where they are? After all, we already know they are still in the desert, right? So why does the Torah have to repeat that fact? And why is it important to note that G-d is speaking to Moshe in the desert, specifically in the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting? Isn't G-d everywhere? And even if this is all about where *Moshe* is, why is that so important?

It is interesting to note that these two places, the desert and the tent of meeting, are almost diametrically opposed to each other. The desert is, in fact, the place that is really no-place. It is not somewhere one normally goes to, but rather the place one usually tries to get through. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, there is a special blessing one makes (the *birkat HaGomel...*) when successfully navigating (read: surviving or getting through) the desert. Indeed, it is no accident that the Torah is given to the Jewish people in the desert, the point being to realize that Torah is not about where you are, but rather about who you are. In fact, we don't even know exactly where Mount Sinai is, and most probably gave it back to Egypt in 1982 without so much as a whimper.

Often, people go to the desert to get away, perhaps precisely because it is a place that is not really anyplace, free from the distractions places usually carry with them. The desert is a place that allows us to get back to who we really are; a place where we can escape the limitations and parameters that surround us and focus on who we always meant to be. Indeed, it may well be precisely for this reason that we receive the Torah in the desert; it requires a little 'desert' in your life to be able to receive Torah. And there is something to be said for the need to retreat into the desert in order to make time and room for Torah and to evaluate one's focus and what one really wants to accomplish in life, and each and every day.

The past **Lubavitcher Rebbe** in his *Likkutei Sichot*, actually points out that the act of tefillah, praying every day is an opportunity to retreat a little bit from the world, and capture a little bit of desert before beginning the day.

The tent of meeting, on the other hand is not only *a* place; it is *the* place. It is the focus of all places and as a prelude to the temple, the Beit HaMikdash, it represents that holiest of places that will one day be for Judaism the focus of all places.

And if Mount Sinai is the mountain we do not really know, the Temple sits on Mount Moriah, the Mountain everybody knows.

According to Jewish tradition it was on this mountain that Abraham brought his son, Isaac (Yitzchak) for the binding of Isaac, and according to Mystical tradition on this spot lays the rock known as the *even yetzirah*, from which the earth was formed.

And it is to this mountain, the Temple Mount that every Jew faces when praying from all over the world. It is, indeed, on this Mountain that Judaism really began as an idea: in this place the first Jew was willing to give everything he held dear back to G-d. And the Tent of Meeting which represents this idea was still in the desert, where we really came of age as a people; in the desert we were willing as a new nation to *receive* what G-d wanted to give us.

And with these two juxtaposed backgrounds, the desert of Sinai and the Tent of Meeting, G-d wishes us to be counted as we set out to continue our journey to the land of Israel.

There are two details regarding this counting that are worth noting:

First, the word used here is “*se’u*” which while meaning to count (as in “*Ki tissah*” when you will count the people in the book of Exodus (*Shemot*), also means to carry. (As in “*Lo’ tissah et shem Hashem la’shav*: “Do not take (or carry) the name of G-d in vain, in the Ten Commandments.) There is another word which could have been used here, the word ‘*lispor*’ (as in “*u’sfartem lachem*” in the portion of **Emor**, which refers to the counting of the days of the *Omer*.) This is no accident. The counting of *sefirah* may well refer to a counting process where each unit (in the case of the Omer, each day) is an equal piece in a process; a day, after all, is a day; what makes each day special is what we do with it, and what context it fits into. But the counting of *seu’* or carrying, may well relate to a process where each ‘unit’ or item counted is unique, and in infinity unto itself, whether it be the name of G-d each of us carries within us (the idea there being the mitzvah to be sure we know we carry Hashem’s name in all that we do and all that we are...) or each individual being counted who of course is a world unto him or her self.

Maybe this counting is really an opportunity to take stock of where and why we are going, and how we take with us the lessons of the desert and the goal of the Tent of Meeting on our journey to becoming a Nation in its own land.

Equally interesting however, is the fact that the Torah continues by telling us that this counting is of each male above the age of twenty, who is 'going out to serve in the army'. Why is the counting here apparently only of the army?

The **Malbim** suggests this is for practical reasons; after all, the Jewish people are about to conquer a land, so they need to take stock of the army.

But **Rashi** seems to be saying something entirely different, pointing out here that this counting is a demonstration of Hashem's love for us (and indeed this is consistent with Rashi's comments in other occasions where we are counted such as at the beginning of the book of Exodus...). And if indeed being counted, and the opportunity to be counted is an indication that each of us makes a difference and each of us has a role to play, then why are only the soldiers being counted?

Perhaps there is a deeper idea here. An army is only valuable if it has a mission, and the success of any military mission, as with all missions in life is ultimately dependant on how much each and every soldier understands and believes in that same mission. And this, of course, is all about purpose. After all, why do the Jewish people even need an army? Couldn't G-d just split a few seas, or mountains, and conquer the land before the Jews even get there?

The truth is, the entire process of conquering the land of Israel is less about the need for the land to be conquered, than it is about the need for us to be willing to conquer it.

And this is one of the great secrets of life. We only truly value that which we earn. When the Jewish people are in the desert, they receive everything: manna from heaven, Water by miracles, even clouds of glory that protect them, and the unwavering knowledge that Hashem is with them every minute of every day.

But when Hashem is so present, it is hard to find room for anyone else; if Hashem is there, then where am I? Ultimately we are created and put in this world for a purpose, and life is all about the search to discover what that purpose is, and how to live up to it. So the Jews have to leave the desert, and when they do, the miracles will (gradually) stop, and they will have to be willing to fight, because things that are worth while are worth fighting for. Maybe that is why it is the army being counted here, because up until now the mission has been an idea; now the Jewish people have to be willing to make it a reality.

All of which bring us back to our original question: why the need for a particular hill in a particular city, in a specific land?

The idea of connecting to an actual place is all about translating purpose into reality. Ultimately, the reason we are all here, is to make this world a better place, and the way in which we are supposed to do that is by becoming a light; a model of what human beings can achieve when the world they create is funneled by truth and justice, ethics and a desire for peace, with all men.

And to be that role model, to be seen and known we need a land; a nation is not a nation unless it has a land.

But when a people becomes connected to a land, there is a danger; because they can become so immersed in conquering that land, and so caught up in building it, that they forget what it was all about. Which is why at the center of that land, there has to be a city; a very special city. And in the center of that city there is a hilltop; not really a mountain, just a hilltop. It is not even the tallest hill in the area, and it would certainly stretch the imagination to call it a mountain, because the point of it all is to realize that the message is not because it is the tallest mountain; it simply represents an idea that needs to be heard and a message that needs to be seen.

And in the center of that hilltop, where long ago a father was willing to give his son, his only beloved son, stood a Temple meant to remind us that while we are so busy building and giving we need to remember what all that building is for.

Much like the Shabbat is our anchor in time, where one day a week we pause and remember what the week's work is really all about, the Temple, or *Beit HaMikdash*, is our anchor in space where we remember what all that we do is really about.

Forty-two years ago, a lone battalion of paratroopers understood they were not just fighting a battle as part of an army; they were willing to give everything for a mission four thousand years in the making, for the entire world.

May we be blessed soon, to enjoy the shade and the fruit of the olive trees without any more of the terrible price we had to pay to plant them.

Shabbat Shalom, and looking forward to seeing you all one day soon, in Yerushalayim,

Rav Binny Freedman