

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **(Portion of Bamidbar)**

From Rav Binny

'Kakash': Tank Officer's course; known as one of the most difficult courses in the Israeli army. Four and a half grueling months of misery deep in the desert, with little or no sleep, at best on or in the tanks, with no showers all week long; just an endless misery of dust, grease, scorching desert sun, and endless tank maneuvers.

The pinnacle of this course, which came all the way at the end, was the 'Ringo' maneuver.

After four months of training, each cadet was given a platoon of tanks to command, in deep desert and mountain terrain, with a host of unexpected dilemmas and targets thrown at him one after another. Designed to test his ability to react and make difficult decisions under intense pressure, it was the tank officer's ultimate nightmare, and we all knew it was waiting for us at the end of the course. Failing this test meant failing Officer's course. For me, repeating the entire course a second time after having failed in my first attempt five months earlier, I had been dreading this maneuver for months, as I could still recall how painful the experience had been when I failed this test nearly half a year earlier. And here I was trying to pass it on the second time around.

Standing in the turret of my tank, as ready as I would ever be, with the tanks now under my command all waiting for the signal to begin, I could feel the pit deep in my stomach; the maneuver had yet to begin, and I felt like throwing up.

The Officer overseeing me that day, Yuval Azulai, was a legend, and after watching me fail a few months earlier, was absolutely determined to see me through that course. I guess he could sense my nervousness because just as we were about to start he leaned forward and whispered in my ear: 'clear your mind; let it all go, just flow with it ('tizrom') hear the commands and do what you know how to do, and you'll be fine.'

Thirty years later, I can still hear his voice, still smell his breath, and still feel myself take in his words and let go. I still can't explain it but a calm came over me and somehow I was able to let go of all the stress and uncertainties clouding my mind and focus on the task at hand. It was as though he had somehow enabled me to experience the entire maneuver in slow motion. And from that moment it was like I was on autopilot; whatever new threats and challenges they threw my way were met with the exact responses until we emerged flawlessly on the other end over an hour later, with a near perfect score.

I can still vividly remember at one point in the test maneuver, when a 'bazooka' anti-tank target popped up in the corner of my field of vision, a challenge I had struggled with through the entire course, and all the different pieces just came together: without even thinking, one hand on my machine gun firing at the bazooka on my right, while giving the orders to the gunner and traversing the main gun to the enemy tank that had simultaneously popped up on the left and ordering the tank in the rear of the column to take out the second enemy tank target that had popped up on the ridge... it had somehow become like slow motion.... because there was nothing else clouding my mind.

Sometimes to get it right, you have to let go....

This Shabbat we will begin the book of Numbers, so named for the census with which it opens. But its more traditional name, gleaned from the words contained in the opening verse, is ***Bamidbar***: literally: ‘*in the desert*’, referring to the fact that this book is the story of the Jewish people’s journey through the desert prior to entering the land of Israel.

Interestingly, this portion of *Bamidbar* is always read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, the festival on which we celebrate the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, in the desert.

But of course this raises the obvious question: why did we receive the Torah in the desert? In fact, given that receiving the Torah (the five books of Moses) is such a critical part of the Jewish journey and represents the essence of who we are as a people, why did G-d wait until we were deep in the Sinai desert? Why weren’t we given the Torah in Egypt? Would it not have made more sense to receive the Torah on Pesach, as we embarked on our journey as a Nation?

No less interesting is the fact that on the night of Shavuot we read the story of Ruth who left everything behind to embrace the Jewish people and, like the Jewish people receiving the Torah, embraced Judaism as the first recorded convert ultimately leading to the birth of no less than King David.

Naomi along with her husband Elimelech and their sons Machlon and Kilyon, leave Israel in time of famine and make their new home in Midian where life seems more prosperous. Eventually one of the sons marries Ruth who according to tradition was a Midianite princess.

Tragically Elimelech and both their sons die and Naomi, realizing there is nothing left for her in Midian, decides it is time to return home to the land of Israel. It is at this point that Ruth refuses to abandon her mother-in-law, and, leaving everything behind, becomes the paradigmatic convert as she refuses to turn back, giving up everything to embrace Judaism and accompany Naomi to an uncertain future.

However, it is worth noting that Ruth has a sister Orpah, who also loses her husband, the second of Naomi’s sons, and is equally insistent on remaining with Naomi. But unlike her sister Ruth, she eventually acquiesces and parting ways with Naomi and Ruth, turns back and returns to Midian.

The Midrash (*Rut Rabbah* 2:22) suggests that when Orpah returned to her people (Midian) she also returned to her idolatry. Two sisters, both from the same origins on the same paths who end up in completely divergent lifestyles; the one embracing Judaism and a spiritual journey to accept G-d in her life and the other returning to the pagan morass of idolatry and all its accompanying abominations. But why did the fact that Orpah chose not to follow Naomi and embrace Judaism cause her to sink back into idolatry and abomination? After all, she was on a spiritual path just like Ruth and had initially insisted on accompanying Naomi back to Israel just like her sister Ruth, so what caused her to fail?

Indeed, this divergence recalls a similar parting of the ways from no less than Lot, Avraham’s nephew, who parts ways with Avraham and chooses instead the wicked life of Sodom. And the Rabbis suggest (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 13:11 and Rashi there) that he too left the G-d of Abraham and sank back as well into the pagan idolatrous practices of Sodom.

What caused Lot to abandon his journey? After all, he accompanied Avraham when he left everything behind to journey towards an uncertain future to Canaan, and it certainly had appeared he was on a similar trajectory, so why did Lot, like Orpah, leave such a promising future only to fall back into paganism?

Perhaps it was because Lot simply could not let go. Indeed when Lot is told to leave Sodom, he hesitates (Bereishit 19:16) and the messengers need to take hold of his hand to lead him out of Sodom. Simply put, Lot never really leaves Babylon. It is true that he accompanied Avraham on his journey to leave the corruption of pagan society, but unlike Avraham he never really leaves it behind. It is not accidental that the same Midrash paints the famous story of Avraham breaking all the idols in his father's idol store; before Avraham can fully embrace G-d, he must break his idols. Lot, though physically accompanying Avraham never really broke his idols. And that was precisely why Orpah was not able to follow Naomi; she had not completely broken with her pagan past; she had not broken her idols.

Perhaps this is also why we receive the Torah in the desert, because we could not receive the Torah until we had left Egypt behind. Before we can accept truth and embrace life we have to break and let go of our idols. And of course, that is what being in the desert is all about. It's the place that is 'no place'. Where the vast spaces allow a person to feel he or she is no longer limited by the narrow confines of life. No one really owns the desert, and one does not journey to stay there; one passes through. It is not the destination; it is the journey, just like the Torah which is not the goal but rather the recipe of how we are meant to get there.

Thus the Talmud (*Nedarim* 55b) tells us that to receive the Torah a person must make himself like the desert, which means letting go of all the influences and desires that bring us down; to 'get away from it all'.

Just like on the Ringo maneuver: sometimes we need to let go and make room for a healthier reality to come into our lives.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat shalom and a wonderful Shavuot!

Chag Sameach from Jerusalem,

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