

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

From Rav Binny Freedman

We were on our way back, heading south-east from Beirut back down towards Marja'oun when the shelling started, and our jeep driver was in a near-panic. He was not part of our regular unit; he was a reserve duty soldier doing a few weeks of reserve duty in Lebanon and had been assigned to me as a driver. We had just finished escorting a convoy of trucks up to a base on the outskirts of Beirut, and I was counting our blessings that the trip had been un-eventful; obviously I was getting ahead of myself. We had barely gotten out of Beirut when all hell broke loose and the artillery shells started flying literally just over our heads.

Logically, especially as my assumption was that they were trying to hit us from the hills above us, the smart thing to do would have been to pull over and take cover. But the driver panicked and hit the gas trying to outrun the shells. With the trucks safely escorted, we were just two jeeps with one heavy mounted machine gun each, driving on a mountain road full of hairpin turns, and I was much more scared of the drive than the artillery shells.

As it turned out the Druze and Christian Phalangists were shelling each other over our heads and it had nothing to do with us, but our driver did not know that and was not about to slow down to figure it out, and no amount of threats and shouting would slow him down so I just hung on for dear life and clutched the safety bar till my knuckles went white.

At one point, he took a sharp curve heading down a steep incline with such speed, I was sure we were about to go fly off the road and over a cliff, but somehow he kept the jeep on the road, all the while screaming at the top of his lungs : “Elohim Elohim...” “Oh G-d, Oh G-d, Oh G-d...”

This was especially fascinating considering how skeptical he had been towards faith and religion during an interesting discussion we had on the way up. I guess it's really true what they say: there really are no Atheists in a foxhole....

There is an interesting detail alluded to in this week's portion of Bamidbar, in the manner in which each of the different tribes are counted: they are each placed according to their flags. Indeed, each tribe had their own flag, and rabbinic tradition fills in the symbols that were on each flag which are not actually mentioned in the Torah. For example, the symbol of the tribe of *Yehuda* (Judah) from whom the Davidic royal line would come, was the lion, representing royalty (see Bereishit (Genesis) 49:9). And the tribe of Yissachar, who were the Torah scholars, contained the moon and stars (based on *Divrei HaYamim* (Chronicles) I 12:32) because they possessed astronomical knowledge necessary to determine the New Moon.

Interestingly, the Tribe of *Zevulun*, were merchants. And their profits were in part dedicated to supporting the Torah scholars of Yissachar. Indeed, Rashi (*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 33:18) explains that Zevulun had a partnership with Yissachar to support them in their Torah study, and because they were merchants, the symbol on their flag was a merchant ship, which was how they plied their trade.

All of which raises an interesting question: Shipping on the high seas was a dangerous business, especially in ancient times. Indeed, a person who survives a journey across the sea is one of the four people who recite the special '*HaGomel*' blessing upon their safe return (Tractate *Brachot* 54b)

precisely because it is a dangerous thing to do. So why were the members of the tribe of Zevulun, who so selflessly supported their Yissachar brothers to study Torah forced to be in such a dangerous profession? Why didn't Hashem (G-d) set them up to be businessmen, or landowners, who could just as easily have supported their brothers without the requisite danger inherent in trading on the seas?

There is an interesting discussion in the Talmud (Tractate *Niddah* 14a] that suggests that all sailors are righteous. Think about it: when a person is on a ship in a storm, he does not know if he is going to survive, and he recognizes that he is not at all in control of his destiny. Indeed, this is exactly what happens in the story of the prophet Jonah who sets sail for *Tarshish* on a boat full of pagan (read: Idolatrous) sailors. But when a terrible storm hits, they all begin to pray, eventually accepting Hashem (G-d) as the source of the storm and the master of their destiny. In such precarious situations people often recognize that Hashem runs the world, and we are merely small pieces in a much larger puzzle.

Perhaps that is why and how the tribe of *Zevulun* had no qualms in supporting their brothers from *Yissachar*, because they were constantly reminded of the fact that everything in life is part of a bigger plan and Hashem who gives us sustenance can just as easily take it away.

Indeed, the *Sefer ha'Chinuch* makes the point regarding the mitzvah of giving *Tzedakah*:

'Do not think there is a mitzvah to give Tzedakah because the poor person needs the money; if the only reason Hashem commands us to give Tzedakah was to make sure the poor have sustenance, Hashem doesn't need us; he could just as easily have given the funds directly to the poor. The mitzvah of Tzedakah is actually for us; because we need to practice giving'

Maybe that is why the Tribe of Zevulun, who supported the Tribe of Yissachar, were sailors – a job that inevitably leads one to accept that there is a higher power at work in the world....

Perhaps as we navigate the challenges of life, we too can utilize those challenges as an opportunity to realize that only Hashem ultimately decides what the results of all our efforts will be....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman