

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

From Rav Binny Freedman

Years ago, after a very difficult month in Lebanon, someone higher up decided our unit needed a break. Every unit maintains a daily 'events log' (Yoman Iruim) which logs all the events of the day for any given IDF Combat company. Every patrol, ambush, search and seize, and oversight mission gets logged, and when a unit accrues too many stressful events within a certain period of time, they are, if circumstances allow, pulled off the line for a little rest. So it made sense, given the events our unit had experienced in Lebanon that it was our turn.

After transferring the line to a reserve company, we found ourselves in Netanya, in a heavenly place called Beit Goldmintz, along the Netanya coast. One day I will get a chance to thank the Goldmintz family who must have donated this place, which was previously a small hotel. Our mouths fell open when we walked into the room we had been assigned: carpeted, four to a room each with its own bathroom and shower and a balcony with a view of the sea; we were in heaven!

With the exception of the morning runs (Madasim) along the beach, for an entire week, we were meant to relax and catch our breaths. Interestingly, we were not given leave to go home, which for many of us would have meant a quick bus ride to Tel Aviv or Haifa, perhaps because they wanted us to bond and come together as a unit.

At nights we were free to roam Netanya, go to the movies and chill, while during the day we were broken up into our platoons and attended sessions with Army Psychologists (Kabanim : Ktzinei Briut Nefesh) and social workers and reviewed many of the events of the previous month

Some time after (perhaps because of this story), my wife took me to see a movie with Tom Hanks : Saving Private Ryan , which depicts an army unit's mission to find a young GI named Ryan, during World War II. Hanks plays the Officer and team leader who has obviously been through a lot of combat-induced trauma, and he begins to notice his hand is trembling, and in one scene we see him looking at his hand and then hiding it from his men.

This is a real phenomenon which I actually experienced. After a particularly challenging day in Lebanon, I noticed my hand seemed to have developed some sort of tremor; it would involuntarily begin to shake. It came and went, and I wasn't sure what it was, but chalked it up to stress, or maybe firing the gun too much, or something of the like. I was careful to hide it both because I did not want to get sent for some sort of evaluation and possibly get pulled out of my unit, and also, to be honest, I was a little embarrassed in front of my men.

Which was why, a couple of weeks later, I did not bring it up in any of the sessions we had at Beit Goldmintz. It seemed they were going through the events of the 'events log' when they finally got up to a particularly day we had experienced including an ambush I had commanded.

The social worker who was working with our platoon asked if anyone had any difficulties or feelings they wanted to share about the mission, and of course no one responded. And at one point she looked directly at me and asked me if I had anything to add, so I just shrugged my shoulders, but she would not let it go.

“Are you sure? Perhaps you want to share any struggles you might still be having from that day?”

But the last thing in the world I was going to do, especially in front of my men was to start sharing feelings which I knew I would never live down.

But she still would not let it go: “Are you sure? Nothing still bothers you from that day? Nothing?”

But I just kept shrugging my shoulders and shaking my head, at which point she leaned forward and pointedly asked, in a low voice:

“So why are you sitting on your hands?”

Sometimes, to move forward, you first need to take a step back.

This week we begin to read the book of Numbers, known in Judaism as ***Sefer Bamidbar***; literally: *The Book of the Desert*.

Indeed, the first portion which we read this week is also named Bamidbar; literally: *‘In the Desert’*. Interestingly, this portion is always read the Shabbat before the festival of Shavuot, which among other things, commemorates the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai three thousand years ago.

Why do we receive the Torah in the desert? In fact, why do the Jewish people need to travel through the desert for what amounts to be forty years? Why could G-d not simply transplant us from Egypt directly to the land of Israel which was and has always been our destination?

Truth be told, the desert is not really a place; people do not generally go to the desert to stay, they do so to get away. Even the peoples that wandered the desert and lived there were known as nomadic tribes precisely because they had no ‘one place’ they could call home...

Perhaps the Jewish people, after two hundred years of slavery and suffering in ancient Egypt, needed some time before they could re-enter the world as a healthy people.

Imagine the collective psyche of a people who for generations had watched their baby boys thrown into the Nile, or used as bricks for the pyramids. How much anger and hate must they have had in their hearts for their former masters? Remember that this is a people led by Moses and Joshua who were great warriors, and clearly had the ability to call forth great miracles from G-d. So why not conquer Egypt?

In fact, the Jews suggest returning to Egypt (*Shemot* (Exodus) 16:3) when confronted with a lack of water so why not take over the Egyptian Empire?

The Jewish people were never meant to be just one more nation; they were interested in far more than just controlling territory and living to prosper. They had a promise which dated all the way back to Father Abraham (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 12: 2-3) that they would one day change the world for the better. Through over two hundred years of Egyptian persecution, they never stopped believing that they could build a better world. And when they left Egypt they were on their way to receive a recipe, from no less than G-d Himself that would enable them to do just that.

But first they needed some time in the desert. Because before you can build a world of love you have to let go of hate; before you can spread tolerance, you need to let go of the rage.

The first step was that the Jews had to leave Egypt, and then they had to take some time in the desert, a place without walls, or boundaries or fences; a place that naturally brings people together.

Interestingly, in this same portion of Bamidbar, in a place that represents vast open spaces and expanses, the Jewish people are also taught how to encamp separately, as tribes, each according to his flag, surrounding the *Ohel Moed* (the tent of Meeting), because while the Torah needs to be received in unity, that does not mean uniformity; we had to learn to become one, while nonetheless respecting others' differences, and seeing the value of the 'other'. Indeed this perhaps is what prepared us to be a light unto the Nations as the prophet Isaiah suggests: You can be a model for others if you respect their 'otherness'....

The desert thus, is that place of transition, where we transitioned from being a nation of slaves, possibly full of anger, to a people of love, full of joy, who sing by the sea...

And it is worth noting that this transition process is not only a national phenomenon but an individual one as well. When Maimonides (**Rambam** *Hilchot Deot* 2: 3) describes anger as 'an extremely bad character trait worthy of distancing oneself from...' he follows it in the very next *halacha* (law) with a description of the value of silence. "*A person should always practice much silence and listening ...*" perhaps because the smartest thing to do when a person is angry, is to experience silence; to take a step back; a pause.

No one ever regretted waiting to speak or do anything until after they were no longer angry. Looking back on words spoken or actions taken in anger, one will always realize they could have done so much better if they had simply waited, in silence till the anger dissipated

And one need not look any further than the media to understand how true this is. Our enemies, full of rage, continue to spread hate and evil and darkness, while Israelis continue to celebrate their accomplishments in joy all over the country. Could we have really built this state as an angry people? Who would have blamed us for being full of rage after the ovens of Auschwitz and Treblinka, Chelmno and Maidjanek?

But G-d saw fit to allow us a pause; even a transition as we wallowed for three more years in the DP camps all over Europe...and so when the State of Israel was declared, no Jew went looting or shooting, we danced in the streets....

Perhaps one day soon, all the enemies of peace too will take a pause, reflect on how much better the world could be, and seek a transition to build a better world, together.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach wishing all a Wonderful Shavuot, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman