

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

(Portion of Bamidbar)

From Rav Binny Freedman

Three thousand years ago, King Solomon wrote in the book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) that there is a time and a season for everything under the sun.

“A time to sing, and a time to dance, a time to rejoice and a time to mourn, a time to reap and a time to sow.” And, like all things, there is a time to ask questions and a time to remain silent.

In the Israeli army, there is a type of question known as a ‘she’elat kitbag’, or a ‘kitbag’ question. This concept is born of the first day men are inducted into the army, and I remember it like it was yesterday.

When newly drafted soldiers arrive at Bakum (Basis Klitah U’Miyun: The base for receiving and sorting), they enter at one end of a long series of huts as civilians, and emerge a few hours later, Israeli soldiers in full uniform with all their gear thrown into a kitbag.

Vaccinated and examined, with your hair cut and a long series of items thrown at you and ordered to be stuffed pell-mell into your kitbag, wearing boots and uniform that don’t exactly fit because you didn’t know enough to ask for the right size, (and in the three minutes you were given to dress you didn’t have time to notice they didn’t fit before you were on to the next series of invasions of your privacy and your identity) this day lives on in my memory as one of the more harrowing experiences of my life.

It has not yet hit you that you have entered a different world where you will spend the next few years of your life, but you have already learned the hard way that you need to figure out what you are supposed to be doing fast, because there is always a price for getting it wrong. I still remember the guy who thought he’d be smart and threw his boots on without the laces. The sergeant who caught him wanted to know if he thought he was a man or a bird, and promptly made him put the boots on his hands, and, with arms extended like wings, he was made to run around the entire series of huts flapping his arms in unison.

After a few hours that seem like a lifetime, you finally emerge at the end of this experience in a state of near total confusion. And it is at this point that the legend of the kitbag question is born.

You are made to run out of the hut and line up in rows of threes (“shelashot”), something you will become all too familiar with in the coming months. At this point, the sergeant overseeing your ‘education’ looks at his watch and points out another building in the distance.

“It is now 12:15,” he says.

“That building is the dining hall.”

“In the army, seven minutes is a lifetime, and that is all you get to eat. It will take you three minutes to get there, and three minutes to get back, so be back here in ‘threes’ at 12:28.”

Everybody gets it; you do not want to get back at 12:29. But before anyone can move, there is always one guy who raises his hand to ask that incredible ‘kitbag’ question. He means well, and is just trying to do the right thing, but there are some questions you just don’t ask:

“Sir, do we have to take our kitbags?”

The sadistic smile of the sergeant said it all, and off we ran with our overloaded, ill-packed, bulging-at-the-seams kitbags on our shoulders. (To this day, whenever I meet someone going into the army, I tell him to bring some granola bars and sandwiches and offer to watch the kitbags!)

There is a time to ask questions, and a time to remain silent. You don't ask the officer who just stopped you for speeding why he has such shiny sunglasses, and you don't ask the dentist why he said 'oops' as the anesthetic takes effect. There is a time and a place for everything. And often, knowing when and where those times and places are, is what life is all about.

This week, we begin a new book in the Torah, the book of *Bamidbar*, and the first portion (Bamidbar) is case in point.

The Torah seems to deem it important that we not only know *what* G-d is telling Moshe to do, but exactly where he is when receiving the command:

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, (the Ohel Mo'ed)....”
(Bamidbar 1:1)

We already know the Jewish people are in the Sinai desert from the context of the portion we just concluded, so one wonders why it is important to repeat this here? And why, additionally, do we need to know that whatever G-d is about to share with Moshe is being communicated in the tent of meeting?

The **Noam Elimelech** (Rav Elimelech of Lizensk), points out that each of these places represent two very distinct ideas in Judaism.

Sinai, in Jewish tradition, has come to represent the concept of humility. The first Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the fathers), in sharing the history of the oral tradition from generation to generation, begins by stating that:

“Moshe Kibel Torah Mi'Sinai”, which literally means Moshe received the Torah **from** Sinai. The commentaries suggest that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, as opposed to a more magnificent and majestic mountain such as Everest or Kilimanjaro, because a little hill like Sinai teaches us the value of humility. And true acquisition of Torah, and all it represents can only come from a sense of humility.

And if Sinai represents humility, then the desert, in which Sinai is found, represents the best place to acquire that humility.

We get so caught up in all of our achievements and accomplishments; sometimes we need to take a step back and retreat into the desert, in order to acquire a little humility in our lives.

The *Ohel Moed* (tent of meeting), however, was very much a place, but it was not only a place one went to; it was also a place you could take with you. What really, was the tent of *Moed*? We often translate this as the tent of meeting, but the word *Moed* also means time, as in the *Mo'adim*, which are the festivals, or times of rejoicing in our calendar. Even more interesting, the festival, or *Moed*, is also associated with joy, as these are the days on which we are meant to experience joy.

What is the connection between time and joy? Quite simply, happiness is all about purpose. That is why the prophets speak of the day when the Jewish people will rejoice, because that will be the time when we begin to sense that the long journey of exile had some purpose, even if we will never fully comprehend it. And that sense of purpose is what gives us the experience of joy.

Joy is not about what we have; it is about who we are, and the sense that there is a purpose to our being here. We are all put on this earth for a reason, and our challenge to try and discern what that mission is; and that is the joy that we seek.

And of course, this is intricately bound up with the concept of time. Because time is a gift we are given, but what we do with it is up to us. And that is the Ohel Moed, the place that represents our mission to fill the short time we have on this earth with meaning.

And all of this is essentially the theme of the book of Bamidbar, and very clearly the background to all of the topics in this week's portion.

May Hashem bless us soon to connect all of us, each in our own way, to what we are really meant to be doing here, so that we may rediscover that sense of joy that comes from living a meaningful life.

Shabbat Shalom,
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