

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Be'Ha'alotcha')

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

It is a conversation I will remember forever. We were in the midst of basic tank training, enjoying a brief respite from the grueling pace of maneuvers and marches. Having completed basic infantry training followed by tank training school, where we learned the rudimentary skills necessary to function as crew members in a tank, we were now in tank field school, known as "Tza'map" (which stands for 'Tzevet, Machlaka, Pelugah', or Crew, Platoon, and Company training,) where we were learning how to put our newly acquired skills to the test in the field, within the context of a crew and the larger context of a company of tanks.

The tanks were encamped opposite a training area where each tank would practice maneuvers designed to train the crews in the art of tank warfare under different conditions. While each tank, one at a time went through the maneuver, the rest of the company's tanks and crews waited their turn, giving us all a little down time.

Uri Faraj was not actually in the armored corps, he was in the armaments corps (Cheil Chimush) and was part of the 'chulyah', a unit attached to each tank battalion whose job it was to be on call for fixing things in the tanks that went beyond the expertise of a normal tank crew (like the laser or computer in the tank).

The guys in this unit were not exactly the elite of the Israeli army, and were often fellows whose family background was challenging, to say the least. Uri Farraj was one of those guys; responsible for the technical maintenance of the tank unit's 105mm cannons, he used to like hanging out on our tank because one of the guys had a tape radio and Uri loved White Snake, which was our gunner's (Pinny's) favorite band. (To me it was all a lot of noise, but company is company...)

On this particular afternoon, Uri had finally gotten around to a question that had been on his mind for a while:

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"If I had grown up in America, the last place on earth I would be is stuck in the field waiting for a tank maneuver!"

We got into a deep discussion about Zionism and the two-thousand year old dream, Jewish pride, and even the concept of Milchemet Mitzvah, a war which is a mitzvah, representing the mitzvah to be willing to fight for the Jewish people when they are in danger. Somehow, the discussion veered to religion and mitzvoth, and eventually the topic of Shabbat came up.

Uri was fascinated by the fact that we could sit and listen to White Snake, and yet find Shabbat to be a meaningful experience. He had noticed that I never sat with the guys when they got together in the base club to watch TV on Friday night.

My response was that as much as I could try and explain the concept of Shabbat and what I found beautiful about a Friday night Shabbat experience, it was something that could not be explained; it needed to be experienced.

As it happened, my brother and I had an apartment in Jerusalem, and for the first time in a while we were both getting out of the army for Shabbat that weekend. (He was in the Paratroopers and it was rare that we were both out at the same time for Shabbat.)

Whenever we both got out we would always invite a lot of our American-born friends for Shabbat and we always had an incredible time.

“Why don’t you join us for Shabbat and come hang out with us?” I asked.

He wasn’t sure, as he was supposed to be with his girlfriend for Shabbat and hadn’t seen her in a while, but when I told him she was more than welcome to join us as there were a bunch of girls from various Yeshivot and from Bar Ilan who’d be staying next door, he got excited about it.

Our folks were still living in the States, and on our own, we used to have the most wonderful Friday night Onegs, with friends showing up throughout the evening. The singing, stories, and Torah usually lasted well into the wee hours of the morning on Shabbat, and I hoped this would be a transformative experience for Uri, who was clearly thirsty for meaning....

Little did I know that this was the last conversation I would ever have with Uri Faraj. In fact, it was the last conversation Uri ever had.

A few moments later he left our tank and wandered over to take a look at an interesting looking shell on the ground. One of the tank commanders had found a LAU anti-tank missile whose firing pin had been engaged and was missing the safety seal. (This unit had recently come down from Lebanon and this must have been a piece of ordinance they had missed when they were preparing the tanks for training.)

Curious, and unaware of how dangerous such a missile was, Uri picked it up to take a look and accidentally set off the spring mechanism in the trigger, firing the missile which was pointing directly at him. It took off half his skull and only by a miracle did a medic succeed in stabilizing him and saving his life long enough for him to end up in an intensive care unit, hooked up to life support machines.

Mercifully, six month later, he finally died, having never regained consciousness.

While that last conversation offered some measure of comfort to his parents and girlfriend who I got to meet in the hospital, I have long wondered about what that Shabbat might have been for Uri Faraj, and where that conversation might have led.

Uri Faraj may well have been on the verge of a second chance: the opportunity to re-explore the tradition of his family. But that opportunity eluded him. Or did it?

*This week’s portion of *Be’Ha’alotcha’* contains a fascinating *mitzvah* which represents, more than any other part of the Jewish experience, the opportunity for a second chance we so often wish we had: the story of *Pesach Sheni*.*

The Jewish people, celebrating the first anniversary of their Exodus from Egypt, and nearing the point where they are (were it not for the sin of the spies) finally about to enter the land of Israel, are commanded to offer up their first Paschal sacrifice as a free people. (Bamidbar 9:1-5)

A small group of individuals, who are impure by virtue of having been in contact with a corpse (9:6), (therefore being unable to offer up the Paschal sacrifice) come before Moshe with a request:

“And they came near before Moshe... And the men said to him (to Moshe) we are impure by virtue of contact with a corpse. Why should we miss out and not offer up the (Paschal) sacrifice of G-d in its appropriate time amongst the people of Israel?” (9:6-7)

So Moshe tells them to wait while he asks G-d for a response. (9:8)

G-d’s response is not long in coming: from this request is born the *mitzvah* of *Pesach Sheni*, ‘The Second *Pesach*’.

Essentially, any individual who has become impure by virtue of direct contact with a dead body, or who is unavoidably distant from the Temple, thus missing the opportunity to offer up the Paschal lamb, can still make *Pesach*, one month later on the 14th day of *Iyar*, one month after the Eve of *Pesach*, (which is on the fourteenth of Nissan).

There is a beauty to this *mitzvah*, which seems to represent the idea that there is always a second chance. Yet there a number of questions that seem to arise both from the manner in which we received this *mitzvah*, as well as the particulars it involves.

First of all, why does this opportunity for a second chance revolve specifically around *Pesach*, and the *Korban Pesach* (the Paschal lamb)? We do not see a chance to make up a missed Sukkan experience, or for that matter Shabbat, so what is so special about *Pesach*? And more importantly, what is it about the nature of the *Korban Pesach* (the Paschal lamb), which makes it the *mitzvah* of choice to serve as a vehicle for this idea of a second chance?

For that matter, if this is such an important *mitzvah*, why did a group of individuals who were contaminated have to ask, in order for the Jewish people to receive this *mitzvah*? Why didn’t Moshe just receive this *mitzvah* from G-d like all the other *mitzvot*?

It is also interesting to note that although the Torah does not tell us how these people came to be impure, the Talmud does. One of the two possibilities mentioned in the Talmud (*Sukkah* 25a) is that these men were carrying the coffin of Joseph, who before his death made his brothers swear that when the Jewish people left Egypt they would take his bones home with them for burial in Israel.

Is there a connection between the story of Joseph and this particular *mitzvah*?

(G-d ultimately caused this *mitzvah* to come to pass through the *mitzvah* of bringing Joseph’s body home for burial. It could easily have been Jews who became impure by coming into contact with corpses in say, the battle of Amalek, or the sin of the Golden calf...)

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, **Rav Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson**, in his *Sichot Yom Yom* (pg. 53) says that the message of *Pesach Sheni* is that nothing is lost, and that there is always a way to ‘fix’ or make up what seems to have been lost. We always have the opportunity to ‘fix’ the mistakes or missed

opportunities of the past. And yet, aside from the afore-mentioned questions, the specific halachot of *Pesach Sheni* seem to belie this message.

For one thing the Torah specifically mentions (9: 14) that the *mitzvah* of *Pesach Sheni* applies as well to a new convert who ‘missed’ the opportunity to offer the Paschal sacrifice, (not yet converted to Judaism on *Pesach* the month before and therefore not yet obligated.)

But if this is so, then the *mitzvah* cannot merely be the opportunity to fix what has been seemingly missed or lost, as there was no opportunity for the not-yet-Jewish convert on *Pesach* and as such, no opportunity was missed.

And the same may be said for a minor who was not yet of age (*bar mitzvah*) on *Pesach*, and is now obligated (having turned thirteen) to sacrifice the *Korban Pesach* on *Pesach Sheni*. Why is this second chance considered to be the opportunity to make up what was missed, when the boy was not yet obligated on *Pesach*, and thus has nothing to make up?

Perhaps the understanding to this entire question lies in understanding how a convert and a minor who did not actually ‘miss’ an opportunity on *Pesach* (to offer the *Korban Pesach*) are nonetheless considered to be making up a lost opportunity. (See **Maimonides** *Hilchot Korban Pesach* 5:1).

With regards to the minor, the Talmud (*Nedarim* 17a) suggests that the verse describing the initial obligation to offer up the Paschal lamb (*Shemot* 12:3) expresses the *mitzvah* as: “*a lamb for each family*” (“*Seh’ Le’Beit Avot*”) which includes the minors of that family who are part of the Biblical *mitzvah*. Thus, although a minor himself would not yet be obligated in the offering of the paschal; sacrifice, he has, in the event he was unable to participate, nonetheless missed an opportunity, which would mean that *Pesach Sheni* is indeed, even for him, an opportunity to make up for something missed.

And as for a convert, it is interesting to note that the language in the Talmud is “*Ger She’nitgayer*”, “A convert who converted.” (*Pesachim* 93a, and Maimonides *Hilchot Korban Pesach* 5:7) This is a strange usage, as one would expect it to say: ‘*Goy She’Nitgayer*’, ‘*a Non-Jew who converted*’.

Why does it say a convert *who converted*? Before he converted he was not yet a convert, so it should say ‘*a non-Jew who converted*? (As, for example, an “*Eved She’Nishtachrer*”, ‘*a slave who was freed*’ or “*Katan She’Higdil*”, ‘*a minor who grew up*’.) If he has not yet converted why is he already referred to as a convert?

The **Chidah (Rav Chaim David Azulai)** explains that even before his conversion he is already called a convert, because the spark of holiness already burns deep within his soul. His conversion will ultimately be the result of an intense, burning desire that burned within him long before he successfully converted. Indeed, it is this intense desire which allows him to see through his desire to be Jewish, despite all the challenging obstacles that stand in his path.

And this, perhaps, is the essence of what *Pesach Sheni* is all about. It is no accident that this *mitzvah* comes about as a result of the query of a group of people who are technically exempt from the Paschal lamb. This desire to be a part of something bigger, this refusal to accept the given situation, is what creates this *mitzvah* in the first place.

Perhaps this is why this message of a ‘second chance’ is centered around *Pesach*. Because the process leading to the redemption from Egypt, and the entire *Pesach* story, actually begins with the Jewish people, after two hundred years of exile in Egypt, finally crying out to G-d.

Even when Pharaoh decrees (Shemot 1:22) that “*Every boy shall be cast into the Nile*”, it does not say that the Jewish people cried out to G-d.

Only in *Shemot* 2:23 with the death of Pharaoh, do the Jewish people finally cry out to G-d, at which point: “*And G-d heard their anguish, and G-d remembered his covenant with Abraham....*” (2:23-26). It is at this point that Moshe is chosen and the redemption of the Jewish people at long last begins.

Before the Jews can be redeemed, they first have to really *want* to be redeemed.

There is nothing in this world that exists without a will for it to exist. Everything we have built, and everything we receive from Hashem, all comes into being because someone somewhere wants it badly enough. If no one wanted something it simply would not exist. Things come into being through the mysterious power of *Ratzon*: desire, or will.

Conversely, anything that does not yet exist in the world is simply not wanted enough.

The reason we do not yet have a third Temple (*Beit HaMikdash*) is simply because we don't want it enough. If the entire Jewish people (and even the majority of the Jewish people) wanted something badly enough, no force on earth would stand in the way of Hashem's promise to fulfill such a desire. Indeed, this is the secret of the State of Israel.

After ten dark years of Nazi German rule, the Jewish people wanted a homeland so badly, that their desire 'forced' Hashem to fulfill his promise to bring us home.

Conversely, perhaps the reason we seem to be so far from peace on earth, and even from harmony amongst our selves, is that we simply don't want it enough; maybe we would like to have peace, but are we obsessed with achieving it? Does it occupy our every thought?

The convert referred to here with regards to *Pesach Sheni* so wants to be included amongst the Jewish people, that he is already 'missing' an opportunity on *Pesach*, even though not yet obligated to offer the sacrifice.

And this *mitzvah* of *Pesach Sheni*, is brought about by the intense desire of a small group of Jews who so wanted to be a part of the Jewish people's experience, they couldn't bear the thought of not being included in the festivities and offerings of *Pesach* itself.

Indeed, this is perhaps why this message and special day centers on *Pesach* and the Paschal lamb. Ultimately, the message of the *Pesach* offering was that in order for G-d to take the Jewish people out of Egypt, they first had to be willing to take Egypt out of themselves. They had to be willing to tie up a lamb, the god of the Egyptians, who were still their masters, (given that the Jews had not yet left Egypt). In other words, Hashem wasn't giving them freedom on a silver platter, they had to be willing to sacrifice for it; they had to *want it* badly enough.

And, this as well may be the reason this *mitzvah* came about through a group of Jews invalidated for the Paschal lamb by virtue of their having been occupied with bringing home the bones of Joseph (Yosef).

If ever there was an individual who represented the opportunity of a second chance, it was Joseph, who, having been on top of the world, the apple of his father's eye and recipient of the special striped (multi-colored) cloak, suddenly finds himself a slave in the darkest hell on earth at the time, the lowest level of the caste system of ancient Egypt.

But Yosef does not let go of who he is, and never gives up on becoming who he was meant to be.

Perhaps this is the secret of this *mitzvah*. The Paschal lamb was really the first *mitzvah* the Jewish people were given as a people, which involved their choice. Indeed, the *Midrash* suggests that not all the Jews in Egypt chose to put the blood of that ancient Egyptian god on their doorpost, resulting in a significant portion of the Jewish people never leaving Egypt.

Pesach represents the ultimate ‘second chance’ which we experienced as a people so long ago. Two hundred years after throwing their brother into a pit and sitting down to lunch while his screams rang in their ears (*Bereishit* 37:24-25), the Jewish people, having experienced this same slavery first hand, are given a second chance. It is this opportunity, and their desire to be truly free, that changes the destiny of the entire world.

The question of this *mitzvah* is not only about where we are, but also where we really want to be. In fact, where we are really is all about where we want to be.

What do we, as a people, really want? Do we really want a Jewish State? Do we really want a place we can call home? We may pay lip service to an idea, but if we really wanted it so much we would long since have filled the skies with El Al planes going home to the land of Israel.

I will always wonder, whether something changed in Uri Faraj, in his last conscious moments here on earth; perhaps in some small way, a glimmer of what he might want, was enough to change who he really was.

We would do well to listen carefully to the lesson taught us so long ago by a group of individuals who may have technically been immersed in death, (carrying the bones of Joseph), but who so desired to be a part of the living choice of the *Pesach* experience that they ‘forced’ G-d’s hand, as it were, to grant them a second chance at creating the *Pesach* experience, a month later.

It was this same group of people, over three thousand years later, surrounded by the same death: of the mounds of bodies in the liberated camps, and the barbed wire fences of the DP camps, who so desired to be a part of a living choice of the creation of a Jewish State, that they as well ‘forced’ G-d’s hand, as it were, to grant them a second chance at creating a home for the Jewish people, after two thousand years of exile.

And what about us? Where are we, truly? What do we desire, and what will we choose? It is this question, which stands at the heart of the *Pesach Sheni* experience, which will determine the future destiny of each and every one of us, and of the entire Jewish people. Before the ‘what we choose to do’, we must first examine and consider what we really want. In the end, Hashem desperately wants to give to us; the only question is whether we really want what Hashem wants to give.

Shabbat Shalom,

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