

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Beha'alotcha)

It was a beautiful Sunday morning in June 1983, and I can still remember everything about that day. Most of us get excited at the prospect of travel to new places, imagining unforetold adventures and magical moments that lie ahead. After a long period of time studying in Israel I was finally leaving the country on a trip, so one would have expected me to feel excited, and in a glorious mood of anticipation. But this was a different type of trip; Israel was in the midst of the first Lebanon war, and, five months into my Israeli army service, we were headed into Lebanon for the first time; and I was anything but excited.

After catching a public bus from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and walking to Yad Eliyahu stadium, we had traveled by army bus up north to Kiryat Shmonah, where we got up on our gear: flak vests, helmets with webbing and gear....

Standing in a 'U' formation, our commanders had the dubious job of trying to snap us from our weekend back in civilian life back into army reality. We were about to board safari trucks, so named because their benches in the middle with soldiers facing out were a copy of the trucks used on African safaris enabling participants to face out and see the wildlife....

Sentences like "do not fire unless fired upon" ; "in the event we are attacked from either side , front row fires back ; rear row disembarks and gathers behind the truck... "Seemed to be coming from a distance, as if in a haze.....

I had not slept much the night before and the thought of sitting in those trucks with no armor (we were after all, really trained as tank crews...) was making me nauseous. How would I react if forced into combat? Would I know what to do? Would I ever see Israel, family and friends again? The movies always made it seem so easy, but there was no music in the background, and all I wanted to do was throw up. And the worst of it was I could not let on how nervous I was, and I kept wondering how the heck I had gotten myself into this mess; after all, I had actually volunteered for this madness!

And then a small detail which changed everything. We had just finished three months of basic infantry training followed by ten weeks of tank school where we trained as tank crews, and for some reason the army had cancelled our expected week of leave so that we could switch with an infantry unit in Lebanon desperately in need of a break from the front lines. (I heard later that our Battalion Commander was actually reprimanded for volunteering our company to such dangerous duty with so little training) Our sergeant, known to us as '*Samal Eli*' (Sergeant Eli) who had seen our squad of six through the last few months of training, actually seemed to us a pretty good Commander, and had earned our respect. So when he called us around him just before we were meant to get on the trucks and cross the border, we all listened intently to whatever sage advice he intended to share with us. He had been in combat in Lebanon the previous summer and, personally, I was desperate for any sage advice I could cling to that would get me through this.

Which was why his words took me by surprise;

“From now on, I’m not *Samal Eli* (Sergeant Eli), I’m Eli; and we are in this together”. And with those words we all got on the truck. He had a quiet but serious voice, and somehow, those words, so full of confidence and so unexpected, really calmed me down.

The Israeli army has a tradition that we call our Commanders by their first name; years later when I became an Officer, my men would never call me ‘Sir’; just ‘Binny’. And I think the reason those words really impacted me, was because I suddenly realized this seasoned Commander, along with all the other Commanders, were not on a power trip to send us into battle, they wanted to make a difference, and were with us; there for us, in battle. And that difference is everything.

This week, in the portion of Be’haalotcha, there is a fascinating story about Moshe’s need for help in his leadership of the people. After leading the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and past the debacle of the Golden Calf, with the miracles of the clouds of glory and the Manna from heaven all around them, Moshe seems appalled that the people are still complaining, this time for meat.

It seems Moshe has finally hit his breaking point preferring to die rather than lead such a stubborn ungrateful bunch as the Jewish people in the desert. (Bamidbar 11:15)

So G-d tells Moshe he can appoint seventy elders to help him, but does not tell him who they will be. After drawing lots amongst the tribes six men of stature from each tribe are chosen to receive prophecy at the entrance of the tent of meeting which is two men too many, so Eldad and Meidad remain in the camp, and the seventy elders gather by the tent of meeting.

Yet, the unexpected happens: as Moshe lays his hands (semicha) on the elders and, with G-d’s help, grants them prophecy, Eldad and Meidad begin to prophesize as well, in the camp! Yet, while this might easily have constituted an act of rebellion on their part, Moshe magnanimously responds:

“Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all G-d’s people were prophets!” (Bamidbar 11:29)

Impressively, it seems Moshe is not averse to sharing the reins of power with as many others as are willing to step forward.

And yet, in just two weeks, after the debacle of the leadership of the ten spies in next week’s portion of *Shelach*, we will read of *Korach*’s quest for a ‘power share’ arrangement which is summarily dismissed by Moshe as completely unacceptable, to the extent that Moshe prays for Korach and all of his followers to be swallowed up by the earth which is exactly what transpires! (ibid. 16:28-30)

Why two such different responses?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his *Covenant and Conversation*, suggests a beautiful idea: Perhaps we are discussing two entirely different roles here, which makes all the difference. The seventy elders are granted prophecy, but Korach is not interested in prophecy; Korach wants power.

You see Moshe was the greatest prophet the Jewish people ever had, but he also functioned as their King, and was the undisputed leader and arbiter of all decisions, whether military, political or strategic. Indeed, at the end of his life, Moshe passes both these roles on to Yehoshua, laying his hands upon him at G-d’s command (ibid. 27:18-20) which represents the gift of prophecy, as well as bestowing his honor, which was the mantle of Kingship.

The King has a position of power, whereas the prophet has a position of influence, and these are two very different ideas. Indeed, when one's leadership is based on power, the more you share it, the less you have. For power to really work it must be absolute; a ship cannot have two captains; someone must make the final decision.

But the prophet's mission is to influence, and the more you share influence the more you have. An airplane has only one pilot because one person needs to decide which way to turn in an emergency. But a classroom can have many teachers; and the more we share our influence, the more influence we will have, because education is not about power; it's about influence.

Korach wanted to usurp Moshe's power, and there can only be one ruler. And G-d decides who that will be. But Eldad and Meidad just wanted to make a difference and influence the people; and in this respect, G-d shares a recipe that allows any and all of us to have influence. And the more we share this, the greater we will be.

It is interesting that Judaism does not seem so enthusiastic about a Monarchy, allowing us a King when we so desire one, but not viewing it as an ideal (See Deuteronomy 17:15-20, and I Samuel 8). Judaism's mission in the world is much more about influence; about sharing a vision that will make a difference in the world.

Maybe that was why Samal Eli's words were so impactful; Israeli Commanders, like Israeli soldiers, are not on a power trip, they are in it to make a difference, willing to put their lives on the line to be part of making the world a little bit better, and in that mission we are all in it together .

The Jewish people have never wanted to rule over anyone; all we have ever dreamed of is to share a vision of a world where nation does not lift up sword against nation and we all learn to live together, in peace. And while it seems we are still a ways off from achieving that goal, we can, each of us, decide to be a good influence on bringing us closer to that dream, one day at a time.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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