

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Beha'alotcha)

A few months ago, when we were in Poland, we heard an incredible story regarding the Mozhitzer Rebbe's student, Azriel David Fastag, who was in a cattle car on the way to Treblinka. It was Reb Azriel who composed many of the magnificent melodies the Chasidim of Mozhitza are famous for, and in the cattle car, the clickety clack of the wheels inspired one last tune.

On the spot, he composed the haunting melody of Ani Maamin (one of Maimonides' 13 principles of faith: that we believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Moshiach (the redeemer or anointed one) even though he may tarry...) and began to sing.

The powerful tune inspired those around him to sing along and soon Jews in the neighboring cattle cars picked up the tune and began to sing as well.

It must have been an incredible sight to behold: hundreds of Jews in cattle cars on the way to their deaths in Treblinka singing aloud their faith in G-d and believing in redemption against all the odds.

Realizing the power of this niggun (tune) Reb Azriel begged for volunteers to jump from the train and bring the niggun back to the Mozhitzer rebbe .

Two students volunteered, one of whom survived the jump and succeeded in his mission.

How does one maintain such a level of faith against such seemingly insurmountable odds?

There is an intriguing story in this week's portion of Be'Ha'alotcha:

And the people became as Mitonenim (complainers), (speaking) evil in the ears of Hashem... (Bamidbar (Numbers) 11:1)

Rashi explains that the word "Mitonenim" refers to those who are looking for an excuse to complain; the people were really looking for a way to distance themselves from Hashem.

Interestingly, Rashi suggests they were complaining about their difficult journey - "we have traveled three days without a respite!" And yet Rashi previously understands (ibid. 10:33) that they completed a three day journey in one day because Hashem wanted to bring them into the land of Israel immediately. So... why were they complaining?

And how could a people that witnessed the splitting of the sea and the Exodus from Egypt, (not to mention the receiving of the Torah and a direct encounter with G-d at Sinai) complain about anything?

Truth be told, the reason people have a hard time saying thank you, is because when you thank someone it means, on a certain level, that you owe them. And we don't like to be indebted to anyone, because it is difficult for us to feel we are no longer in control.

Generally, people who complain need an attitude adjustment; they look at the cup as half empty, and see the clouds rather than the silver linings. And worst of all, the target of their complaints is often the source that should have earned their trust and gratitude. Why do people do this?

The Ramban (ibid. 10:35) quotes the Midrash (Rabbinic legend) which suggests that when the Jewish people left Mount Sinai they were like "a child running away from school." But why would they run from Sinai, the place where we received the Torah and experienced the presence of G-d on such a high level?

Kids struggle with school because they have to give up their freedom, and the receiving of the Law at Sinai was the epitome of realizing we are no longer in control. Knowing that Hashem (G-d) runs the world means accepting that we don't, which is difficult for some people to accept.

In fact, this is true in our personal lives as well. Most arguments begin with complaints and revolve around our desire to be in control. Whatever the symptoms of the argument, most arguments stem from a perception that someone else is imposing a different perspective or reality on us, and we struggle with this because then maybe we are no longer in control.

But if we really understood that we never were in control because only G-d (Hashem) is in control, then there would be nothing to complain about.

If we really understood that Hashem runs the world we would never complain, because whatever the situation, it would by definition be a situation presented to us as a gift, by no less than Hashem!

According to Rashi, the people were looking to distance themselves from Hashem. But it wasn't about the journey (especially as the three-day journey only took a day), nor was it about any reasonable issue. Rather, it was about the fact that they simply did not like being told what to do.

Accepting that we are not in control and learning to let go, is the best way to let go of all the complaints and stresses that hold us back from living a meaningful G-d-filled life.

And once you know that Hashem runs the world, then even in a cattle car headed for Treblinka, you can still sing, and believe, with perfect faith

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
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