Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Beha'alotcha)

His disarming smile caught me by surprise, as did his baby-faced youthful appearance; he was after all a nineteen or twenty-year old kid; yet my son was clearly in awe of him, and I was curious to understand why.

Our son Yair, after a grueling process, was recently accepted into an elite unit within the paratroopers, and we were invited after two months to visit his base for a special 'Parents' day'. For me it has been no less than fascinating to observe the process whereby the IDF molds these soldiers into elite fighters, but it has been equally interesting to note what sort of men are chosen to command these elite soldiers and to observe albeit from a distance what constitutes elite leadership from the army's perspective.

Some of what we hear from our son is not surprising: grueling physical exercises, uncompromising regulations, and even harsh conditions when the boys were out in the field ('shetach') for two weeks (including Shabbat off base in tents), all designed to break them down as disparate individuals and mold them as a unit; a band of brothers.

And from the tired yet grateful look on his face when he finally gets out for Shabbat and walks in the door to hugs only a Jewish mother can give, they are clearly doing a good job of pushing these boys to their limits. Indeed, aside from having to sign on an extra year of service to be accepted into this unit, they will have a training period of close to a year and a half before they will stand with red berets and unit wings as full-fledged members of this special unit.

So what kind of men are chosen to lead such a special unit? And what does the IDF view as critical in the shaping of such an elite unit, arguably one of the top ten or twenty fighting units in the IDF (read: in the entire world…)?

There is one aspect of their training that has been for me completely unexpected, and that is in the way their commanders have been relating to them.

A number of weeks ago, on a Friday afternoon, Yair told us we would be getting a visit from one of his commanders who would be paying a 'home visit' to meet his soldier's family. This was something that did not even exist when I was in the army; what commander thought of visiting his men's homes? Yet as we were to discover, every single soldier in this unit (And this is apparently now true in many units in the IDF) would receive a visit so that the commander could get to know his soldier's family, and the parents could get to know their son's commander.

Clearly our son was in awe of his commanders, describing how they run faster, sleep less, push harder and are incredibly proficient at all they do. So I was looking forward to seeing what such a hardened rock of a commander in such a tough unit would be like; imagine my surprise when a boy walked into our home with a disarming smile, who looked like he was barely past his bar mitzvah! He was clearly shy, extraordinarily nice and after half an hour we suddenly realized he was giving of his time on a Friday afternoon instead of being home with his family when he had just experienced the same grueling week our son had, so we let him go…. I was somewhat mystified as to how this child was held by my son in such awe…

It came to me a week or two later, when my son shared with me an innocent comment that he happened to include in a conversation and I suddenly got it. Yair had an ingrown toe nail which was quite painful so I had

driven him to the Dr. on the Friday he got out to get it taken care of; a little minor surgery and bandaging was in order, and when he got back to base they immediately had him see a Dr. and would not let him wear boots for a week! And to top it off one of his commanders who saw him heading for some guard duty made sure he knew he should still go without his boots and that if he thought it helpful he ***should sit*** *even though he was on guard duty!*

This was something that would have been unheard of when I was in the army. And a few weeks later when we found ourselves invited to his base down south and had a chance to hear from and meet all of his commanders, I realized they were not just commanders, they were trying to be his Jewish mother as well! And I was left wondering, what did this have to do with forging a group of men into an elite fighting force??

This week, we read the portion of *Be'ha'alotcha*, which contains a rather challenging story. The Jewish people find themselves in the desert and are getting close to their ultimate destination of entering the land of Israel. After witnessing all the miracles of the Exodus, receiving the Torah from G-d Himself, and falling into the terrible debacle of the sin of the Golden calf, they have received the second tablets, built the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) suggesting forgiveness, and seem to be at last headed in the right direction. Clouds of glory protect them, pillars of fire guide their way, and manna falls for them from the heavens every morning, as they draw ever-closer to the land of Israel. Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, they are … hungry?

> "*And the multitude (rabble?) in their midst became desirous, and they sat and wept and the children of Israel along with them, and said 'who will feed us meat?*'"
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> (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 11:4)

Incredibly, the Jews, despite receiving manna daily from heaven (As the Torah points out ibid. v. 5-9) are dis-satisfied and want meat!

But what is even more surprising is Moshe's reaction. After all, we have seen this movie before: the Jewish people have been complaining ever since they left Egypt. They complain when there is no water, when the water is bitter, when the Egyptian army appears, and on and on… And Moshe consistently, hears their pain, listens to their complaints, beseeches G-d and somehow gains them forgiveness. Even when G-d tells Moshe the people have become destructive (And are worshipping the golden calf) which ultimately leads Moshe to break the holy tablets and set the Levites against the perpetrators, he does not pursue this path of action until he has first gained forgiveness for the Jewish people. Yet here, suddenly, Moshe seems to give up!

"*And Moshe hears the nation crying … and G-d is exceedingly angry and it was evil in Moshe's eyes. And Moshe said to Hashem (G-d) why have You … placed the load of this whole nation on me? Have I born this nation? Have I given birth to it that you would say to me carry it in your lap as the nursemaid carries the suckling (baby) …?"* (ibid. v. 10-11)

How can it be that when the Jewish people engage in an orgy of idolatry, worshipping a Golden calf, at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moshe both gains forgiveness for the Jewish people, and disciplines the sinners with no hesitation nor any complaint? Yet here when the people basically want a varied menu, Moshe completely loses it!?! What is really going on here?

Rav Soleveitchik, in a magnificent article (See ***Teaching with clarity and empathy***; Rav Reflections of the Rav pp. 150-158) suggests that there was a fundamental change here that relates both to the role of Moshe as a leader as well as to the nature of the Jewish people's transgression.

Moshe here suggests he does not want to be a nursemaid (an *Omein;* ibid v. 12). Moshe is our ***Rav***, our teacher, hence he is called Moshe ***Rabbeinu***; what is the difference between a teacher and a nursemaid? And why does

Moshe suddenly realize that his previous role of master and teacher is not enough; here he needs to be a nursemaid?

When the Jewish people worship the Golden calf, they are essentially looking for a spiritual outlet; they have not forgotten G-d, they simply are struggling with how one deals with the day after having such a direct revelation with G-d; how do we worship? They are essentially searching for the best path towards meaning in a post-Egypt world which they now think may be without Moshe.

Here, however, they are expressing a hedonistic pagan desire for physical satisfaction; they want meat! And that requires an entirely different model of leadership.

Clearly, the Jewish people are not there yet; they are not the adult (or even the mature teen) looking for existential meaning; they are still the baby needing to nurse; needing physical satisfaction. And that requires a nursemaid…

To help a person too concerned with their own needs, you first have to validate those needs, before you can show them there are better ways to be fulfilled.

When the Jewish people fell to the temptations of the Golden calf there were many mitigating circumstances: they did not know where Moshe was, they were overwhelmed, and they had not yet fully received the Torah. But this was an entirely different challenge. A G-d-filled world and the building of a model society with the Torah as a blueprint implies limits: as we say in the Shema: *ve'lo taturu Acharei levavchem ve'acharei Eineichem:* that we should not follow everything our eyes see and heart's desire; just because we want something does not mean it is good for us. But a pagan society based on the worship of nature suggests that there are no limits; whatever we want we can have. It is a world promulgated on following one's desires because they are 'only natural'.

This type of limitless self-indulgence requires an entirely different type of leadership. The nursemaid, suggests Rav Soleveitchik, negates her own needs and makes them secondary to the needs of the child. She is a constant companion to the child responding to every desire until gradually weaning them from such base needs. She must first nurse and give herself over, before being able to wean and shape. This was completely out of character for Moshe, thus his resistance and struggle. Indeed, both Moshe and the Jewish people will take this journey together for nearly forty years, before the next generation will be ready for a different reality.

Three thousand years later, we are living in a generation markedly different from the ethos of the army when it was created to defend and build the nascent State of Israel. Perhaps today's Jewish leaders need to give themselves over to the needs of their soldiers and students, before they are ready to be weaned and become leaders in their own right.

A true leader must feel and connect with the needs of those he or she leads, just as Moshe himself had to learn to do in the desert, so long ago.

It may take time, but I'm guessing it will be more than worth the effort. And we are privileged to be able to watch such a journey.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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