

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Behar)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Having only recently completed their basic training, they'd been in the army for only eight months, but on the books they were paratroopers, members of the elite 202nd battalion, and this night, finally was their time to be tested.

The youngest of the units sent in to clean out one of the toughest neighborhoods of Beirut, they were supposed to be the back-up unit, there to reinforce the more experienced combat veterans moving in ahead of them.

Sabra and Shatila, as yet two relatively unknown refugee camps in Lebanon, had become infested with units of the PLO, and the mission of the 202nd on this night was to take the battle to the enemy, and root out terrorist enclaves, preventing further infiltrations into Israel against Israeli civilians in the North.

They weren't supposed to be involved in any heavy fighting, as they were still too new to this deadly game; there were more experienced troops ahead of them who were far more prepared for what would obviously be no easy task. But in Beirut, no one ever plays by the rules.

The tanks sent in to support the infantry units could not maneuver through the narrow alleyways; someone had miscalculated the width of the tank bodies in relation to the streets, and the decision was made to move on without them.

Unbeknownst to the young paratroopers, a unit of the PLO had broken out of the trap over the rooftops and circled around behind the rear echelon, catching them off guard in a classic ambush.

In an instant, night turned into day, and the sounds of gunfire and explosions filled the air. There were not enough commanders to man all the A.P.C.s (Armored Personnel Carriers), and my brother, not eight months in the army, was in the command turret of one of the middle A.P.C.s when all hell broke loose.

The vehicle in front of him was hit by an R.P.G. (Rocket propelled Grenade), and without the benefit of Tank armor, exploded into the night. The lieutenant in charge of the unit, Nitzan, was killed instantly, and the men watched in horror as his torso was thrown into the air. Almost immediately, the A.P.C. in the rear was also hit, and the column was now trapped, deep in the heart of enemy territory, with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

Men spilled out of the personnel carriers taking cover where they could and confusion reigned as screams and the sounds of shooting filled the air. In the alley where my

brother took cover with some of his fellow soldiers, there were no commanders as they had all either been killed or wounded in the initial attack or been somehow separated from these men, (the turret of an A.P.C. is the most exposed part of the vehicle, and in the Israeli army, commanders are always in the most vulnerable spots).

Most frightening of all, given their inexperience, the men were not well enough versed in map coordinates and their own position, such that they could not give brigade headquarters their exact position. For four very long hours, the paratroopers held off overwhelming odds until support units could finally reach them and get them out.

Three months later, long after this story was behind him, I found my brother, who had outwardly seemed nonplussed by the whole affair, lying under his bed in the middle of the night (we were together for Shabbat while he was on leave for the weekend) moaning...

Incredibly, despite this and other experiences, my brother, like all the other Israeli soldiers who fill the bus depots all over Israel every Sunday morning, spent two more years in the army, much of it back in Lebanon, because that was what needed to be done.

One of the men wounded that night, who lost part of his foot, causing him eventually to be honorably discharged, was an ex-ski patrol instructor from the States named Bill.

Bill, who, like us had volunteered to serve in the Israeli army, leaving behind a comfortable life in America, had very little good to say about the army or his experiences in Lebanon, (in fact every-other word in Bill's lexicon cannot be printed here...). I had occasion once to meet up with him while seeing my brother off at Yad Eliahu stadium in Tel Aviv one Sunday morning and asked him why on earth he had volunteered, and whether he regretted it.

His answer, in a rare moment of sober reflection, belongs in a movie:

"Some things are worth dying for, man."

Are they? Is anything on this earth really worth dying for? Especially a piece of land so small most people can't even find it on a world map?

If the greatest gift we are given in this world is life itself, how can we be so attached to something as material as a plot of earth, however large or small, to be willing to die for it? Is this really what Judaism wants of us?

After all, even Shabbat, a mitzvah so essential to Jewish life that it is described in the Talmud as being equal to all the *mitzvot* (commandments), is nonetheless waived aside in favor of life itself. Indeed, not only is one allowed to violate the sanctity of Shabbat in the event someone's life is in danger, but this is true even if there is doubt as to whether a life is indeed in danger ("Sa'fek Pi'kuach Nefesh"), and in fact even if there is a doubt regarding the doubt (*Sfek Sfekah*, or double doubt!).

So how do we justify the fact that despite everything that has transpired in Israel these past sixty-three years, the Jewish people remains in Israel, and continues to send the best of her young men into the army, in fulfillment of a mitzvah straight out of the Torah: *Milchemet Mitzvah*, or the mitzvah to wage war against those that would destroy us.

Hidden between the lines of this week's portion *Behar*, is perhaps an idea that may shed some light on this most challenging issue.

The portion of Behar deals mostly with the mitzvot of *Shemittah*, the sabbatical year, which falls every seven years in the land of Israel, and Yovel, the Jubilee year, which occurs after seven cycles of *Shemittah*, in the fiftieth year.

Every seven years, the Jewish people in the land of Israel, cease from working the land, and take the time to rediscover what all that work was really about. Just as Shabbat gives us the chance on a personal level to take stock of what we are really accomplishing all week long, and prevents us from getting too wrapped up in life as to forget what life is really all about, *Shemittah* gives us a chance to do the same thing on a national level, allowing for a year of spiritual rejuvenation and exploration.

Every seventh year, the ploughs stand still and the fields grow wild, while the Jewish people ideally fill the study halls in an attempt to reconnect with why they were given the land in the first place. An agricultural life can be an intoxicating thing, and after all the effort involved in producing the harvest, it is all too easy to forget that the harvest is not the goal, and the crops we own were never really ours to begin with. They are a gift from the One who is truly the producer of all crops. And gifts are only as valuable as what we choose to do with them.

In this seventh year, all the indentured servants, forced into servitude as a way of paying off their debts or thefts, are reminded that however little they may own, they nonetheless have value as human beings, and ultimately serve no man, and are set free.

And after seven cycles of *Shemittah*, the Yovel or Jubilee year arrives, during which, in addition to again letting the land lie fallow, causes all indentured servants (even those who do not want to leave their masters) to go free, as well as causing all plots of land inherited in the initial division of the land by tribe in the time of Joshua, to revert to their original owners.

This brings us to a fascinating halachah (law) quoted in this week's portion.

"If your brother becomes impoverished, and sells part of his ancestral heritage, his redeemer who is closest to him shall come and redeem his brother's sale." (VaYikra 25:25)

In other words, if a person is so poor that he has no way to live other than to sell the portion of land he received as an ancestral inheritance (in a direct line from the generation of his ancestors that were given this portion of land when the Jewish people

first entered the land of Israel in the time of Joshua), his relatives have a special mitzvah to buy this land back for their relative, in order that this ancestral plot be returned to its rightful original owners.

Rashi (25:25) points out that this verse teaches that a person is only allowed to sell his ancestral plot in the event of dire poverty, and then, only as much of a portion as is needed to live off of. Additionally, as soon as a person has accrued enough money to buy back the land, he is obligated to do so. And most fascinating of all, as soon as he or a relative is able to redeem the property, the buyer is forbidden to prevent the sale; he has to sell back the land! (Though not in the first two years, so as to prevent people from selling the land as an easy solution to financial challenges...).

Clearly, the Torah is taking issue with anyone who wishes to sell the land they have inherited; why? After all, what meaning is there to inheriting land if it's not yours to sell and trade as an investment?

Indeed, why is it so important to own land at all? Why not have everyone, like the Levites and Priests (Kohanim) do, live off the land without actually owning it? Clearly, given that the land of Israel is allocated according to tribes, every Jew is meant to have his own portion of the land of Israel; why is this so important?

Indeed, in contrast to the normal process of exchange (where a person is not allowed to influence a person to sell something they don't really want to sell), here a person can force a buyer to sell back his land, (see **Rashi**) and in fact, he can do this at the original price of the land, without taking into account any rise in the real estate market!

(**Note** that these *halachot* or laws for the most part only apply technically when we are in Israel and there is indeed a fifty-year cycle (*Yovel*), something that we do not have today, having lost count of the cycles when the Temple was destroyed.)

Why is it so important for a person to hang on to a piece of land? Isn't what's really important in this world who you are, and not what you have?

Indeed, this question is at the root of the one of the most challenging and prescient issues facing the Jewish people today: do we really need the land of Israel? And do we really need it to be a Jewish State?

Even more fascinating is that while these restrictions on the buyer exist regarding land, the same is not true for homes in the land of Israel.

“If a man shall sell a residence house in a walled city, its redemption can take place until the end of the year of its sale, but if it is not redeemed until its first year has elapsed, then the home that is in a city (with walls from the time of Joshua) shall pass in perpetuity to the one who purchased it, for his generations...” (VaYikra 25:29)

In other words, if you buy an apartment inside a city, you have one year to buy it back, after which it belongs to the buyer forever. So why is a house different from a piece of land?

And why do all of these laws apply only in the land of Israel? After all, if it is a healthy thing to take a year 'off' every seven years, then we should be doing this even (and maybe especially!) in New York?

What does all this have to do with the sabbatical and jubilee years, which form the theme of this week's portion?

There is one thing that is unique about land. Land, in and of itself, has no value; its value is completely dependant on what we choose to do with it.

A home has a certain intrinsic value, but the true value of land is its ability to produce, or its value as property wherein one can choose to build.

And most important of all, as one toils over the land, it is readily obvious to anyone who will take note that we are, ultimately, not in control. In the end, however much we will plough or sow or reap, the success of the harvest is not really in our hands, and depends rather on the rain and whether Hashem chooses to give it to us. Indeed, this is a reflection of the essence of our purpose in this world: to enter in to a partnership with G-d.

Indeed, it is easy to assume from the Torah that the goal is the land of Israel. For seven weeks the Jewish people journey from Egypt to Sinai, to receive the Torah. But the Torah is not the goal; hence we do not remain at Sinai, nor do we even know exactly where Mount Sinai is even located. (In fact, we gave it back as part of a peace agreement with Egypt, and no one considered that fact to be all that important!)

It seems, then that the entire purpose of the journey was to reach the land of Israel. But that is not because Israel is the goal; Israel in fact is itself only a vehicle for the Jewish people to become who they are meant to be as a Nation.

On a mystical level, every nation has its place, the source of its character and its strength. In fact, a nation cannot be a nation if it does not have a land, and no nation would be who it is, anywhere else but in the land it was given to inhabit.

The Greeks were meant to become all that they were, and fulfill their role in the annals of history, in the land of Greece. And they would never, in fact could never have achieved all that they did if they were the same group of individuals living in Kansas.

This is because we are very much influenced by the environment we find ourselves in and we tap into the energy of the places we inhabit, which very much affects who we become, and how we use who we have become to make the world a better place.

The Talmud suggests that a person who is struggling with improper impulses should bring those desires into the study hall, or Beit Midrash. Because just being in a room filled with the study of Torah and the efforts of many individuals to come closer to their creator and achieve higher ethical levels, has to make you, on some level, a more ethical person.

And we are impacted not just by what people are doing in our environment, but even by the history of what they have done in their past.

Science is just starting to come around to this idea, but many different cultures have embraced the idea that everything that happens in a building, for example, is 'recorded' in the walls, furniture, and objects in that space.

If you move into a home whose previous tenants were unhappy, you will actually pick up unhappy energy. And if you are spending time in a place where people have done many spiritual things (like a house of study, or *Beit Midrash*, where spiritual giants have been) you will actually have an easier time tapping into your own spiritual path.

This is the secret of the land of Israel. Judaism suggests that every nation was created for a purpose, and that is the mission for which they were chosen. The mission of the Jewish people, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, is to be "*A Light unto the Nations*", which means that on some level, we are meant to be an ethical role model for what the world could be.

Indeed, it is no accident that the world seems to hold us up to a higher standard, devoting anywhere from three to seven times as much front page coverage as any other nation, (and on a per-capita basis, as much as *two hundred* times as much media space!); this, you see, is the reason we are here.

So, if Hashem wants us to become such an ethical people, He must give us a land whose historical ethical imprint is unique. And this is the essence of the land of Israel. Whether one chooses to accept this literally, or attempts to read it allegorically, Jewish tradition teaches that the world was created from matter that first formed the Mountain of Moriah (on which both Temples stood). As such, the land of Israel represents the place of beginnings.

According to tradition, Adam and Eve came from this place, which means this land has the taste of the Garden of Eden, the closest human beings have ever come to G-d, before there were any transgressions to get in the way. So this land began with the energy of spiritual consciousness.

And it was here that our ancestors, giants of ethical behavior, walked the land. When we are in Israel, we are tapping into the loving kindness of Abraham and the power of Yaakov. Here we are reconnecting, after two thousand years to the burial place of Rachel, whose inhuman sensitivity allowed her to give up the love of her life for seven years rather than risk embarrassing her sister.

And this place is the place of miracles, which is why miracles like the birth of the State of Israel against all odds, or the thirty nine scuds that fell in the most densely populated area in Israel during the Gulf war without one direct fatality, seem so commonplace.

If we are meant to be a people who rise to a unique level of ethical behavior, then we have to be in a uniquely ethical place.

It is interesting that on an individual level, the accepted psychology is that we are very much a product of our past. Knowing who we are and from whence we come is an immensely valuable tool to understanding how we behave, and achieving growth in our personal lives.

Conversely, a person who ignores his past has great difficulty figuring out who he or she really is. And as this is true for individuals, it is doubly true for the Nations of the world, and we are no exception.

Only in Israel are we connecting to our past and rediscovering who we really are, and only in this land where we came of age as a people can we tap into the enormous ethical and spiritual wellspring that is our birthright.

Which leads us to one last point: just as every Nation has its place, so too, every individual within that Nation has its special place in that land. Indeed, the Talmud suggests that every Jew has four cubits of land somewhere in Israel (see *Baba Batra*44b, and the **Tosafot** there), which means that each of us, as part of who we are, is meant to tap into a specific historical story which forms the essence of all that we can be. And this is why the Torah is saying a person's ancestral land cannot and should not be sold except under dire circumstances, because it is a part of who you are. In this world, there are some things that just should not be for sale.

Indeed, this is the meaning of the phrase of the daughters of *Tz'lafchad* who want to inherit the land promised their father:

"Why should the name (Shem) of our father be removed (or left out)?" (Bamidbar 27:4)

This means that their father's land was a part of who he was, because hidden in that land were the ethical and spiritual paths of those who crossed that piece of land, all of which were a part of what needed to be passed on and imprinted to the next generation.

And of course, this is why an apartment is so different from a piece of land: the apartment just does not have the history of the land, and ultimately, unlike Hashem's promise to us of the land, the homes on that land are not at all guaranteed; and they are not forever. Indeed, if the entire purpose of connecting to the land is to empower ourselves to become a light unto the nations, it becomes understandable why the Torah ultimately does not see us living behind the walls of the cities, where we are not a light, but rather, (allegorically) simply hidden.

Ultimately, if after two thousand years of dreaming we are finally home, then the challenge of our generation is to succeed in reconnecting with our mission as a people, hidden under the cobwebs of exile for so long.

May Hashem grant us soon the wisdom to come home and rediscover who we are really meant to be.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman