

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **(Portion of Behar)**

From Rav Binny

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

They were the youngest of the units sent in to clean out one of the toughest neighborhoods of Beirut, and they were supposed to be the back-up unit, there to re-enforce 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, rooting out terrorist enclaves and 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 of the A.P.C.s (Armored Personnel Carriers), and Chaim, 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 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 Chaim 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. (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 to 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.

Incredibly, despite this and other experiences, Chaim, 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 who had volunteered to serve in the Israeli army leaving behind a cushy life in America.

I ran into him one Sunday morning near the Tel Aviv stadium, when he was headed back up to Lebanon after a weekend pass, 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, as to be willing to die for it? And is this really what Judaism wants of us?

After all, even Shabbat, described in the Talmud as being equal to all the *mitzvot* (commandments), is nonetheless waived aside in favor of life itself. (One can certainly violate the laws of Shabbat to save a life ...)

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

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.

Which brings us to a fascinating *halacha* (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 (ibid. 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?

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?

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?

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.

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 also even by the history of what they have done there in the 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 studied) you will actually have an easier time tapping into your own spiritual path.

And 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.

It was here that our ancestors, giants of ethical behavior, walked the land. So 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 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.

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 we, each of us, are meant to tap into a specific historical story with which we are connected. 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 we are. In this world, there are some things that just should not be for sale.

Perhaps this is why an apartment is so different from a piece of land: it is land which lasts forever.

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

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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