

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Behar-Bechukotai)

Many years ago, at a parlor meeting of the Coalition for the Israeli Soldiers Missing in Action, someone stood up to share a few words about a close friend of his with whom he had both studied and gone to war: Yehuda Katz.

Yehuda Katz, a soldier who, along with Zack Baumel and Tzvi Feldman, has been missing in action since the battle of Sultan Yaakov in June of 1982, studied in Yeshivat Kerem Be'Yavneh.

At the beginning of the Lebanon War on the first Sunday night in June of 1982, they received word in the Yeshiva that buses would be coming to take the boys up North to fight. Kerem Be'Yavneh is one of a number of very special Yeshivot (Academies for higher Jewish learning) whose boys combine their yeshiva studies with army service in Israeli Combat units. In addition to their regular reserve duty and studies in yeshiva, whenever the army is in a tight spot, this is naturally one of the first places to receive an emergency call-up; where else can you gather together an entire reserve battalion at a moment's notice?

The boys were given only half an hour to get their gear together and be on the buses, time was of the essence as this was an elite tank unit whose services were desperately needed on the front lines.

As they were rushing to get back to the buses with their kits, Yehuda told one of his buddies to make sure the bus didn't leave without him as he had to run to the bathroom.

A few moments later with everyone accounted for and the bus engines idling, they were still waiting for Yehuda Katz to get back from the bathroom. After a few more minutes one of the men decided to go looking for him; it was out of character for him to keep everyone waiting for so long, and especially considering where they were headed, they couldn't imagine what was keeping him.

As his friend approached the men's room, he saw Yehuda Katz coming out of the Beit Midrash (the study hall) and break into a run. Not understanding why Yehuda had made a detour to the Beit Midrash when they were so pressed for time, Yehuda explained he had gone into the Beit Midrash to learn a few minutes' worth of Torah, because as a Jewish soldier in a Jewish army going off to fight a war in defense of the Jewish people, "you don't go to war from the bathroom."

I have often wondered what it was that Yehuda chose to study for those brief moments in the Beit Midrash, and please G-d look forward to being able to ask him one day when he at long last comes home. But the thing that most challenges me about this story, is how, on the brink of war, in the midst of heading off to battle, and with all the thoughts that I unfortunately know rage through your mind and your soul at such a time, Yehuda Katz was able to turn it all off and sit down to learn five minutes of Torah?

This week's portion, *Bechukotai*, contains one of the most difficult and painful sections in the entire Torah. Known as the *Tochacha*, or rebuke, (admonition), in these thirty verses (*VaYikra* (Leviticus) 26:14-43) the Torah describes the series of horrendous calamities that will befall the Jewish people should they fail to live up to their mission as a holy people and a light unto the nations.

Interestingly, before the Torah delineates what will go wrong when we do *not* heed the word of G-d, it first specifies all the blessings we will merit if we *do* live up to our responsibilities as a people.

“If you will follow in the path of my statutes, and safeguard my commandments, and fulfill them, then I will give your rains in their time, and the land will give forth its bounty, and the tree of the field will yield its fruit.” (26:3-4)

In other words, if we do right by G-d, then G-d will do right by us.

It is interesting that **Rashi**, at the beginning of our portion suggests:

“If you will follow in the path of my statutes”: This obviously cannot be speaking about the fulfillment of the commandments, because this is the next part of the verse: *“and safeguard my commandments, and fulfill them,”* rather, this means (quoting the Midrash here) *you shall toil in the study of Torah ...because this will allow you to keep and fulfill the mitzvot.*” (Rashi 26:3)

In other words, the condition upon which the economic prosperity the Torah seems to promise is predicated is not the fulfillment of the commandments, but rather the study of Torah necessary in order to fulfill the mitzvot.

Why is the study of Torah so important? And not just the study of Torah, but **toiling** over the study of Torah.

There is a fascinating discussion regarding the nature of the obligation to study Torah, and develop a deeper relationship with the foundations of what Judaism is all about.

Just as the Jewish people are about to enter the land of Israel, Hashem (G-d) commands Yehoshua (Joshua; 1:8):

“Let the Torah not depart from your mouth, and you shall learn (meditate on) it day and night, so that you may fulfill all that is written therein, and have success ...”

The **Ran** (Rabbeinu Nissim Gerondi, in Tractate *Nedarim* 8a) understands this to mean that a person should always be learning Torah: day and night and every minute.

Maimonides (**Rambam** *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:8) however, understands this to mean a person should set times to study Torah, day and night. Even the saying of the Shema morning and evening allows one to fulfill this obligation.

The question is asked: Why is this mitzvah, which seems so central to Jewish living only given us in the book of Yehoshua after the Torah (the five books of Moses) is complete? Why are we not given this Mitzvah at Sinai?

In truth, it actually makes sense according to the **Ran**. Think about it: for forty years in the desert what else did the Jews have to do besides learn Torah all day? According to Rabbinic legend, they received manna from heaven and water from the magic well of Miriam; they had no work to speak of, so after receiving the Torah they had forty years with which to immerse themselves in study.

But now, as they were about to enter the land of Israel it would no longer be so simple. They had to fight and conquer the Canaanite nations, and then they had to conquer, divide, and harvest the land. So it makes sense that now Hashem warns Yehoshua to take care, lest Torah be forgotten in the shuffle. If the mitzvah is constant study that is actually what they were doing, but now, with special dispensation to desist from constant study in order to conquer the land of Israel, Hashem reminds Joshua not to forget that one must always be studying, whenever the special dispensation of conquest does not apply.

However, according to **Maimonides**, who suggests the study of Torah is fulfilled in a few moments morning and evening, why is this mitzvah given here and not much earlier, at Sinai?

Perhaps because the Torah wants us to understand that leaving the house of study to fulfill a mitzvah is not desisting from Torah, it is actually living it. The real challenge is not to learn Torah in a study hall, it's to live Torah everywhere, in the boardroom and the bedroom, and even on the battlefield.

Hence, if we want to live a life of meaning and purpose, joy and reward, we must, as **Rashi** suggests, toil in Torah. We are challenged to infuse everything we do with the study of Torah, so that whether we are playing basketball or conducting business, 'the Torah never departs from our lips' and we are still learning Torah.

Indeed, this is what has kept the Jewish people true to the path we set out on so long ago, and the reason we are finally back home, in the land of Israel, tilling the soil, patrolling the borders, and yes, studying the same Torah our ancestors did all those years ago....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman