

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Behar-Bechukotai)

We'll call him Gabi (not his real name); he was a most unlikely recruit, and none of us had any idea how and why he had gotten into our unit. He was overweight, to put it mildly, and was always the last to finish every run and every physical task, and even most of the nonphysical tasks. He was the last to get his gun cleaned and ready for inspection, the last to get out to the parade ground in the morning and the last one on every run. Maybe he was way out of shape, but looking back, I think it was also his motivation; not sure he had a clue why he was there and spent most of his time wishing he wasn't.

But on our masa'ot (forced marches) it became pretty obvious he was in the wrong place, and in a lot of trouble. I could hear his heavy breathing, groaning and agonizing as he struggled to keep up somewhere behind me, until finally I could not bear it any more. We were heading up a difficult hill so I told him he could grab on to the straps of my back pouches and I'd try & help pull him.

Very quickly I realized I was in a lot of trouble. It's not like I had such an easy time myself, and now I was pulling someone else. And then something incredible happened: one of the guys pushed in between us, grabbed 'Gabi' and started pulling him in my stead, and a few minutes later someone else pushed in and repeated the same exercise; all night long through this grueling trek, in what could not have been planned, the entire unit took it upon themselves to give new meaning to the IDF tradition, that 'no man gets left behind'.

Simply put, once a few of us made looking out for our buddy a priority, it became everyone's priority. And the most fascinating thing about it was, despite the fact that it was obviously more difficult physically, psychologically it motivated us to a whole different level. In fact, though it might have appeared we were pulling Gabi, in a way, he was also pulling us; and we were really all pulling each other, which of course is what being part of a unit is all about.

The first of this week's double portion, *Behar*, begins with a fascinating mitzvah:

Every seven years in the land of Israel, we are meant to allow the land to lie fallow. We don't farm, and people are meant to have time off from tilling the soil, to nurture their souls.

And after every seventh Sabbatical year, the fiftieth year is a *Yovel* (Jubilee) year, when once again we allow the land to lie fallow. And at the end of this fiftieth Jubilee year, all lands return to their tribal owners by heritage, and all indentured servants go free. And we are reminded that nothing is really ours, and we do not own the land, it is a gift we are given, with which we are meant to serve a higher purpose.

Interestingly, the Torah tells us (Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:9) that this moment when the lands are restored to their original owners and servants go free, occurs at the end of Yom Kippur, when the shofar is sounded throughout the land. Indeed, even today, we blow the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur recalling this mitzvah.

Why was the shofar blown throughout the land?

The ***Sefer Hachinuch*** makes a fascinating point. Think about it: this must have been an extremely difficult thing to do.

After the seventh *Shemita* (i.e. 49th) year when the land lay fallow, followed by the Jubilee year where again, one did not work the land, all the slaves went free.

And for many people who had purchased land which was worked by indentured servants similarly acquired, the end of Yom Kippur must have been a difficult new reality. Free labor, all gone; the land one had depended on, now restored to its original owners.

Suggests the ***Chinuch***: when the owners heard the blast of the shofar they knew they were not alone; everyone had to free their indentured servants.

But why did that help? Perhaps because we are tremendously influenced by what everyone else is doing.

Think about it: why did we all throw away our wide, fat ties? Fat ties actually make more sense; you are less likely to stain your shirt; but no one is wearing wide ties and we want to be in style....

We are very much influenced by the people around us (think about the difference between watching a ball game on TV and experiencing it at the stadium...), and knowing that we are not alone is no small thing.

As an example, why would anyone ever start smoking?

According to a 2008 study by the American Heart Association, despite the widespread efforts to curb tobacco use, and the fact that it is impossible for a person today not to be aware of the dangers of smoking, nearly fifty million Americans are smokers. Hundreds of thousands of people will start smoking this year, the largest percentage of whom by far are teenagers. And the single most significant reason they will start smoking, is peer pressure. Kids will start smoking because they want to belong. Often, the changes for teens in family roles and social status along with physical changes can lead to much insecurity; simply put, they want to belong, and if smoking a cigarette is the price for being included, then so be it.

And that is exactly what a person would be experiencing as all of a sudden, on the day after Yom Kippur he awakens to a whole new reality where he no longer owns his land, and he has no servants to help him till his fields.

What will people think of him? Will he or she still command the same status and respect?

Isn't it interesting that in the portion of Vayakhel, Moshe gathers the people *together*, the entire congregation of Israel, to build a Tabernacle (the *Mishkan*), on the day after Yom Kippur. (See ***Rashi Shemot*** (Exodus) 35:1) Perhaps this is the day the Jewish people are meant to come together; maybe the piercing sound of the Shofar that stills dissent and bonds us in a single moment of shared experience is the beginning of that new year.

Indeed the ***Rambam*** (Maimonides) in his *Hilchot Deot* (6:1) points out that it is the way of man to be drawn after the behaviors and opinions of his friends and compatriots. As such it behooves us to choose our environment well. And a person who finds him or herself in a negative environment must do everything he or she can to move away from such places, even to the point of leaving a country if evil presides there. (Imagine how different the world might have been if all the Jews of Germany had left in 1933 as soon as Hitler came to power....)

Indeed, this may well be what having a Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel all is about: here we are meant to create an environment where in everything we do, we recall that blast of the Shofar at the end of Yom Kippur, when we are reminded that we don't really own the land or anything else, it is simply given to us on loan in order to create a better world, where no human being is ever left behind....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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