

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Bereishit)

His steely eyes should have given him away, but over twenty years ago, I was a new immigrant, only four months into my Israeli army service, and I had no idea who this Lieutenant General really was.

We were finishing our second stage of tank training at the Israeli Armored Corps school, and, graduating as a tank driver, I was being awarded my first rank: private first class (Turai'-Rishon) by someone whom I would later learn was and still is an Israeli legend.

This particular rank has almost no value (I wore it on my arm for one day, only so that I could outrank my older brother, who was a few days away from completing his sergeant's course in the paratroopers and demand that he "get off his feet for a soldier who outranked him!"), and was awarded to a few of us who represented the battalion as outstanding cadets at the final ceremonies of the course.

Looking back, the true value of that award ceremony was really the opportunity to meet this living legend firsthand, though it was not something I appreciated at the time.

I remember what he said to me as he pinned my new, almost laughable rank on my uniform: "You are part of a special family (the tank crews of the armored corps), whose task it is to defend the people of Israel. Aleh' Ve'Hatzleach (arise and succeed)."

To be honest, it was not his words that motivated me to find out this man's story; it was his eyes. They looked vaguely familiar, and there was a determined strength about them; you could tell, looking at his face, that in saying those words to this new tank driver, part of him was somewhere else, in a different place, and a different time.

That face first became famous in the six-day war, in a photograph that made the front cover of Life magazine. A face full of the dust and strain of combat, but carrying a grin that burst through the weariness like the sun's rays bursting through an afternoon thundershower, Yossi, with his grease-stained tanker's overalls, and the AK-47 assault rifle clutched in his hand, was smiling straight into the camera lens.

What gave the picture, and thus the face, its lasting fame, was the fact that he was an Israeli soldier cooling off from the heat of battle in the refreshing waters of the Suez Canal, which until that day had been, to quote Howard Blum in his "The Eve of Destruction", "As Egyptian as the Nile".

That picture represented for the entire world the story of a people who had traveled a two-thousand-year journey across every country and Empire in Western civilization, and who had finally come home. And on this day, on the brink of destruction, they had fought against what had been thought to be overwhelming odds, and they had won.

If you would have asked any Israeli on the street who Yossi Ben Chanan was in July of 1967, they would have told you he was the boy who represented Israel; the boy whose story was the long hard road of battle, and the inner satisfaction of the fruits well-earned and well deserved. And they would have been right, only it would take six more years for the true meaning of that representation to be realized; sometimes when you think you have arrived, you are still only beginning the journey.

Yom Kippur, 1973... in Katmandu, Nepal; A most unlikely place to celebrate this most solemn of days in the Jewish calendar; But Yossi Ben Chanan and his new bride, Nati, were on their honeymoon.

Six years after the Six-day war, Yossi was now a lieutenant colonel, commander of an armored battalion, and he had finally gotten away to experience the fruits of his labor.

They were a couple that represented all that was Israel in the early fall of 1973: young, brimming with enthusiasm and adventure, with the whole world before them and no mountain that could not be conquered, they were traveling the mountain passes of the Himalayas by motorcycle, and through a series of events had ended up in Katmandu in time for Yom Kippur.

After eight long years of patrols and scrambles, firing ranges and midnight alerts, he could finally look forward to a few weeks of tranquil sunset strolls and uninterrupted evenings, against the backdrop of the magnificent carpet of stars that formed the nights over the Himalayas.

Two days later, having heard the horrible news of the surprise attack on Yom Kippur afternoon, minus their backpacks, which had been thrown off in a mad rush to make a plane from Delhi to Bombay, they boarded an El Al plane headed home to Israel, and an uncertain future.

Most men in Yossi's situation might well have stayed in Nepal, listening anxiously to the news reports, but on October 9th, instead of climbing mountain trails with his new wife, he was climbing into the turret of a Centurion tank to command what was left of the 188th Brigade.

When Yossi finally arrived at the front lines, the seventh brigade, commanded by Yanosh Ben Gal, one of Yossi's closest friends, was fighting a desperate last stand at the Northern tip of the Golan Heights, fighting to hold off the seemingly endless onslaught of hundreds of Syrian tanks which filled the valley, from breaking through to the Galil and the unprotected belly of Israel behind them.

The 75 tanks of Yossi's 188th Brigade had been completely obliterated in the first days of the war, and its entire senior staff, including Brigade commander Yitzchak Ben Shoham, another close friend of Yossi's, lay dead on the field of battle.

The last seven tanks of the seventh were all that remained to stop four Syrian Divisions, now re-enforced with Rifat Assad's elite Syrian Presidential Guard, from breaking through and raising Syrian flags over Tel Aviv and Haifa, when Yossi finally arrived at Brigade Headquarters in Nafach on the Golan.

Shmuel Askarov, Yossi's deputy, working through the night, had, by hook and by crook, managed to salvage enough parts and crews to ready eleven tanks for the field, and on that fateful afternoon, as the war was about to be lost, the 188th was reborn.

Wounded in his first few hours of combat, Yossi Ben Hanan and Shmuel Askarov, coming to the aid of their beleaguered comrades, succeeded in stemming and eventually turning the tide of battle. The stories and the names of that fateful day in the battle for the valley of tears are now the stuff of legends, best summed up by the tired words full of awe, broadcast by General Rafal Eitan, commander of the Northern Front, over the radio net:

"You have saved the people of Israel."

A week later, with Israeli forces on the outskirts of Damascus, the guns would finally go silent. leaving Yossi, rescued by Israeli Commandos after being blown out of his turret, and lying in the same Tzfat hospital as Shmuel, who was now in a coma from a Syrian bullet, to contemplate what the fruits of war really are.

In 1967 and 1973, and ever since, every Israeli soldier, and every Israeli and really every Jew for whom Israel is important, has asked him or herself at one time or another the same question: Are the fruits we are fighting for really worth all the hardship and pain that seem inevitably to be the price of the harvest?

This week we read the portion of *Bereishit*. Just when we seem to have concluded the Torah, we start all over again, and recall anew the stories and the accounting of the creation of the world, and the beginnings of humanity.

In six ‘days’, G-d creates the world, and lays the blueprint for what the world is really meant to be. There is an interesting detail within this creation story, that perhaps contains a response to this most unanswerable of questions.

*“And G-d said: “Let the earth sprout vegetation, herbage yielding seed, fruit trees (**Eitz Pri**) yielding fruit each after its kind, (**Oseh Pri**) containing its own seed on the earth, and it was so.*

*“And the earth brought forth vegetation: herbage yielding seed after its kind, and trees yielding fruit, (**Eitz Oseh Pri**) each containing its seed after its kind.”*

(Bereishit 1:11-12)

Hashem (in verse 11) ‘tells’ the earth, so it seems, to produce what it calls fruit trees (**Eitz Pri**), and adds that they should also yield fruit (**Oseh Pri**). Yet, when the Torah describes (in verse 12) what actually happens, it describes the creation of trees that yield fruit (**Eitz Oseh Pri**) and leaves out the fact that the trees themselves are supposed to be fruit trees (**Eitz Pri**).

This discrepancy in the verses is noticed by the commentaries, and **Rashi**, quoting the Midrash (rabbinic Legend and oral tradition) suggests that initially, the fruit trees were not only supposed to produce sweet tasting fruit; they themselves were supposed to have that same sweet taste. In other words, originally, (*Bereishit Rabbah* 5:9) according to the Midrash, the bark of an apple tree was supposed to taste like apples. (In fact, had this indeed occurred, we would have said the fruit tastes like the tree, and not the other way around...)

However, suggests the Midrash, the earth did not do this, instead bringing forth trees which ultimately produce sweet tasting fruit, without tasting sweet themselves.

As a result, says the Midrash, when Adam is cursed for his sins (3:17-19), the earth is remembered for its ‘sins’ as well, and is also cursed.

What is going on here? Do clumps of earth get into conversations, much less rebel against the purpose of their creation? Do trees get to choose how they will spend their time? This is what the Torah needs to tell us? Are we meant to take this literally?

Additionally, on whatever level we choose to explore this story, what does this have to do with the mistakes that Adam and Eve made? Why is the land ‘cursed’ only once Adam himself is ‘punished’ for his mistakes?

And, as long as we are on the topic of trees, why does the entire initial story of Adam and Eve seem to revolve around trees?

The first thing G-d tells Adam, essentially (2:17), is *not* to eat from the tree of knowledge, of good and evil. Putting aside for the moment, why the first communication between G-d and humanity is *not* to do something, why the fascination with trees? Indeed, in the initial description of Adam’s creation, Hashem says:

“Behold, I have given to you all the herbage yielding seed that is on the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed-yielding fruit; it shall be yours for food.” (1:29)

So it seems that these fruit trees were created for the purpose of being our food and sustenance in this world, in which case one wonders why the trees needed to taste sweet as well. Certainly, the fruit itself would have been more than enough to sustain us?

In fact, **Rav Chizkiah Ben Manoach** in his *Chizkuni* commentary suggests that the earth’s ‘motives’ were noble, assuming that sweet tasting trees would quickly be eaten, whereas if the bark tasted bitter, people would only eat the fruit, allowing the trees to survive and continue to produce more fruit, which makes a lot of sense, leaving us to ponder the need for sweet tasting fruit trees in the first place.

Although there is much discussion in general regarding the beginning of the Torah as to what must be taken literally and, especially in the Midrash, what is meant to be understood allegorically, **Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook**, in his *Orot HaTeshuvah* shares a comment on this particular passage which may help us not only to understand all of the questions elucidated above, but perhaps as well gain insight into the challenging journeys we often travel in this world:

Ultimately, the fruit are the purpose of the tree, and all our efforts to grow, irrigate and sustain the tree are in order to benefit from its fruit. The fruit then, represent the goal, the purpose of our existence, and the yield we seek. And the trees represent the means by which we seek to produce those fruit.

Without the tree, fruit cannot grow, yet we often forget that G-d could easily have created a world where fruit, like Manna in the desert, simply fell from the heavens. We sometimes look at the world through the lens of nature and assume that G-d created trees in order to give us fruit. But in truth, it is not G-d who needs the trees; we do. G-d could have given us fruit without trees, but, for some reason, we need to eat fruit that comes from trees.

Sometimes, people spend so much time working to produce the fruit, they forget about the beauty and importance of the trees from which they grow. And sometimes, we become so immersed in the trees we are straining to cultivate, we lose sight of the fruit that are the reason for all the hard work.

We have already mentioned that the first ‘mitzvah’ or imperative Hashem gives human beings is to tell them what *not* to do. It is challenging to realize that the first time Hashem shares expectations for our purpose in this world, it is to let us know what we are *not* supposed to do. Imagine coming home from your wedding the first time you are alone in your new home, with your new wife, and giving her a list of rules: all the things you expect her *not* to do, so that your marriage together can begin! Is this the way to begin a relationship? Imagine hiring a new employee, and rather than sharing your expectations with him or her, presenting instead a long list of what you expect him or her not to do. Not exactly an auspicious beginning.

But in truth, although the commentaries discuss this issue at length (suggesting that once there is something I am not supposed to do, I have essentially been given the freedom to choose whether to do it or not.), this really is not the first thing Hashem tells us. Before telling Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil, Hashem first tells Adam:

“*Mi’Kol Etz Ha’Gan Achol Tochel.*”

“*You can eat from all the trees of the Garden.*”(2:16)

In other words, you have many different fruit trees to choose from; now you have to decide what to eat. On one level, Hashem begins our journey by empowering us with the ability to make difficult and often challenging choices.

But on a deeper level, we have to decide what our fruit will be. What is the fruit we are trying to grow? What is our purpose in this world? If I don't know why I am here, and if I haven't concluded what I am meant to achieve, and what my goals on this journey of life really are, then how can I possibly hope to achieve them?

In fact, this is why Hashem cannot tell us which fruit to eat, or more to the point, what our goals are exactly meant to be, because part of what we are meant to be doing here in this world, is figuring that out on our own. It is precisely the struggle to come to grips with all the possibilities that lie before us, which allows us to grow into the people we are meant to be.

Maybe this is what the Midrash is trying to tell us. We are used to seeing the fruit as sweet, because it is what we are trying to accomplish in this world, and accomplishments are always sweet. Anything that allows us to connect to our purpose in this world, indeed to see that there is purpose to this world, has a sweet taste, because taste is all about purpose, and when the taste is sweet, it means that we want to eat of the fruit and immediately value it as well.

But the trees in our lives are not always so sweet, and we do not always realize, much less appreciate, how they connect to the fruit we are trying to grow. In fact, sometimes the trees seem bitter, and it appears that they are doing anything but producing the fruit that we want. Which is, in the end, the difference between the way the world was meant to be, and the way the world is.

Perhaps we were supposed to live in a world where the trees were as sweet as the fruit; where the challenges that lie before us in achieving our goals, are every bit as sweet and meaningful to us, as what it is we are trying to accomplish.

Perhaps there was a time when the hard work of planting the trees and pruning the branches were as dripping with the sweet juice of meaningful accomplishment as the fruit itself. And maybe that is really the way the world was meant to be, yet today, while we value the fruit, we often struggle with the necessary toil and pruning involved in cultivating the orchard.

There is a story they tell of Rav A.Y. HaKohen Kook, who was invited to a tree-planting ceremony connected with the dedication of Hebrew University.

Given a small sapling and a hoe, he was shown where to dig a hole to plant the tree. With a huge smile on his face he promptly dropped down on his knees and began digging and moving earth aside with his hands, in an attempt to make a hole large enough to accommodate the small sapling.

Some of the onlookers, assuming this robed and bearded rabbi simply did not know what a hoe was, tried to explain to him that he did not need to dig with his hands, the hoe being a much more effective tool to accomplish the task at hand.

Rav Kook responded: "You want me to waste this tremendous mitzvah, the opportunity to participate in the rebuilding of the land of Israel which we Jews have been dreaming of for two thousand years, on a hoe? This mitzvah I want to do with my own two hands!"

At which point the onlookers dropped their hoes and began as well, to lovingly move the clumps of the Israeli soil with their hands.

Sometimes, we are so focused on the tree we want, and the fruit it will bear, we lose sight of the joy and the meaning of digging the hole.

And what happened to the world as it was meant to be? Perhaps that world is always here, hidden from the naked eye, waiting only for us to grasp it. Ultimately, which world we choose to live in is entirely up to us; what do we choose to see?

Maybe this is the connection between the taste of the tree that was lost, and the mistake Adam & Eve made in choosing to eat from the only tree they were not (yet) meant to eat.

Indeed, it is interesting that, contrary to popular belief, a careful look at the verse shows that Hashem does not tell Adam & Eve not to eat from the *fruit* of the tree, but rather from the tree (of knowledge of good and evil) itself. (See 2:17)

Perhaps on that fateful sixth day of creation, they were not ready to taste the tree (meaning the journey of life) in all its sweetness; they were not ready to see that even the toil of the tree is part of the sweet fruits of the garden.

This would explain why tradition teaches that they were ultimately meant to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, (after all, why would Hashem create a tree with fruit not meant to be eaten?) - just not until after Shabbat. Shabbat, after all, is called a '*Taste of the world to come*' or *Me'Ein Olam Ha'Bah*', which really means the eye (or the way we see) of the world to come.

Shabbat allows us to see the world in a completely different way, and connect with the reality that everything in this world is, ultimately, part of the purpose of our being here, and hence has the sweet taste of the fruit of the tree.

And all of this may be why the 'earth' seemingly decides to 'change the plan' for creation. Earth is the ultimate tool for building; it cannot be created nor destroyed, which is why in Jewish legal texts (Tractate *Baba Kamma*) burying something in the earth reduces one's liability.

And if earth is the ultimate tool, then like the choice to see and taste things as they are meant to be, the question is what we choose to build with it. So perhaps the earth was and still is waiting for us to determine whether the trees will be as sweet as the fruit they bear. And this may explain why the earth's 'curse' is only 'remembered' once Adam & Eve make their mistake, because that is how the taste of the tree is truly 'lost', and the reason we still struggle, on a daily basis to recapture it.

Colonel Yanosh Ben Gal, the battle-weary commander of what remained of the seventh Brigade had seventeen tanks left on the morning of October 9th, three days after the war had begun. Facing yet another attack by over four hundred Syrian tanks, he was finally ordered by Northern Command to pull back so they could blow the bridges over the Jordan and try to make a last stand over the Jordan river.

But Yanosh would later recount that it was then that he realized he had arrived at the moment for which he was created; he told command to get off the radio and "stop bothering him".

Many years later, quoting (unknowingly?) a Talmudic source, he would say: "*Le'Kach Notzarti*", "For this was I formed". In fact, he would later relate that after four days of non-stop combat he was totally unafraid of death, even prepared to die, and that he had, in fact, discovered that he liked war. To quote Howard Blum in his book, *The Eve of Destruction*:

"The excitement of fighting alongside men he loved for the country that had taken him in as an orphan charged his being with a gleeful energized passion. He cherished his opportunity, even the threat of impending death, as if it were a gift...."

“They will not pass through, he vowed to his men.

“The fate of Israel rests on your shoulders.

“They will not pass.”

Thirty years ago, on a mountain top in the Himalayas, a young Israeli commander decided that the view he was seeing was not the one he was created to see, and ultimately, traveling half way across the world, would come home to the battle he was created to fight. And there he would reunite with the veteran Brigade commander who recognized, deep in the midst of his struggle with the orchard of trees that was the battle for the northern border, that even the bark of the tree can be that sweet.

May we all merit this year, to reunite at long last the taste of the tree with the sweetness of the fruit, may we embrace our struggles and come to see they are often one with the fruit we yearn to at long last taste, and may we soon walk together in the peaceful orchards of Israel caught up in the sweet fruits of the peace we have dreamed of for so long.

Shabbat Shalom,

R. Binny Freedman