

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Bereishit)

He was a tough kid, with obvious ‘stuff’ going on inside; always getting into fights, spending a fair amount of time in the hallway, and always with that sad, lost look.

Many years ago, when I was first exploring the world of education and teaching, I decided to try my hand at different types of teaching to see who and what I would most enjoy teaching, and what really spoke to me. Formal and informal, in schools and summer camps, for a few years I taught just about every type of audience I could find, with an eye towards discovering the type of teaching I truly loved and could spend the rest of my life with. One year, I took a job teaching first graders; to see what it would be like.

As part of that experience, I underwent a one-day seminar designed to train young inexperienced teachers how to look for tell-tale signs of abuse at home

This was probably why I became suspicious when Gilad (not his real name) missed yet another day of school due to an accident at home. This time he had fallen down and hurt his wrist, but when he came in a couple days later with a note from home, I noticed a couple of bruises that did not seem to match his story and decided to report the case to the school principal as well as the social worker. Once I shared my concerns I was pretty much taken out of the loop and would never have known the parents had been called in for an interview but for the father’s accosting me in a school hallway upon realizing I was the teacher who had made the initial report.

That incident confirmed my suspicion that poor little Gilad had been a victim of abuse for some time, and it obviously caused me to review all of my experiences with this sad five-year-old boy in a different light. Can you blame a kid for getting into fights when he learns such violence at home? Is there even a point to trying to teach him book smarts when he is experiencing such life pain? It became clear that my goals for this student were completely misplaced. Rather than attempting to see him walk away from first grade with a love of Torah, he first needed to discover a love for himself.... It’s hard to focus on the appropriate end goal, if you are missing the beginning

Endings and beginnings; where did it begin, and where will it end? On Simchat Torah, Judaism celebrates the conclusion of the weekly reading of the entire Torah (the five books of Moses) with the reading of the last portion, *Ve’zot Ha’Beracha*. And then, just when we have finally finished, before leaving our synagogues, we start all over again. Interestingly, rather than celebrate a beginning, we celebrate an ending and then a beginning, which seems almost to deny the beginning its rightful celebratory place.

Then, the following Shabbat, we indeed do begin again and read the entire first portion of Bereishit, to actually give the beginning of the Torah its due. All of this seems to imply there is a deep connection between the end of the Torah, *Ve’zot Ha’Beracha*, and its beginning portion *Bereishit*. But a closer look at the content of these two portions, despite being the ‘bookends’ of the Torah, seems to bely this assumption.

Ve’zot Ha’Beracha shares the final blessings of Moshe to the tribes as they are about to enter the land of Israel, as well as the passing of leadership to Joshua (Yehoshua) who will assume the mantle of leadership after Moshe’s death, also poignantly described here.

Bereishit, on the other hand, shares the creation story including the creation of Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit, the story of the first murder (Cain and Abel), the debacle of the Tower of Babel,

and the descent of mankind into violence and pagan idolatry leading to the destruction of the world in the following portion of *Noach* .

Is there a thematic connection hidden here? One interesting connection does exist, at least in some of the commentaries:

Rashi (France; 1040-1105) asks an interesting question regarding the nature of the book we call the Torah. Clearly, the Torah is not a history book, as there are major parts of history missing from its pages, and small amounts of time take up far too disproportionate a part of its space for it to be focused on history. Rather suggests Rashi (Genesis 1:1), this is a book of laws (*mitzvot*) given to the Jewish people; the recipe for how we are meant to live the life Hashem (G-d) created us to live. In that event, however, one wonders why the Torah begins with the creation of the world rather than with the first *mitzvot* (laws) given to the Jewish people in the story of the Exodus from Egypt?

Rashi's solution is that the Torah is telling us that Hashem created everything and thus has the right to give it to whomever he chooses. And one day (recall Rashi is writing in Medieval Christendom in the period of the Crusades ...) when the Jewish people retake possession of the land of Israel, the nations will say we are thieves who have stolen the land, at which point we will respond that Hashem created the land and can give it to whomever he so chooses.

Putting aside for the moment how incredible it is that Rashi, nearly a thousand years ago, is describing *exactly* what is happening today, why is this the answer to his question? Why, at the beginning of the Torah, is it important to know that the land of Israel is ours because G-d gave it to us?

And at the other end of the Torah, it seems there is also an unexpected focus on the land of Israel: many of the blessing Moshe gives to the tribes all seem to be focused on land:

Beginning with Moshe's last experience seeing the entire borders of Israel (Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) 34:1-6)

"Dan... springs from the Bashan..." (33: 22)

"Naftali ... shall inherit sea and south ..." (33: 23)

"Blessed is he who elongates Gad (to the East...)" (33:20)

And somehow what seems most important to Moshe at the end of his life is to see the land and remind the Jewish people of their covenant to inherit it (34:1-6)

Why the focuses on the land of Israel from the beginning of the Torah till its end?

There is a detail in the portion of *Bereishit* which may serve to enlighten us.

After murdering his brother Abel (*Hevel*), and being sentenced by G-d to wander the land, Cain (*Kayin*) has a son whom he names Hanoch (*Chanoch*) , and he actually builds a city and names it as well, Hanoch. (4:17). Strange; though forced to wander, he builds a city? And why name it after his son?

The word *Chanoch* in the Torah also means education (as in *"Chanoch la'naaar al pi darko"*)

"Educate a child according to what best suits him..." Proverbs (*Mishlei*) 22:6).

Perhaps Kayin, after murdering his brother did not necessarily wander in the physical sense, but rather deep inside.... How does a man come to murder his own brother? The Torah does not actually specify the reason, but one imagines Kayin must have spent the rest of his life struggling with this question. Perhaps Kayin names

his son, and even builds a city to promote the idea, that at the root of all our mistakes is the education we receive. It all begins and ends with education.

In fact, the reason the Jewish people need to exist in their own land in the first place is because we are meant to educate the world; to be a role model of how society can be; something which cannot happen unless we are in our own land, living according to our own system of behavioral norms and ethics. In order to be a role model for the world, we have to be visible; to be seen. Part of a healthy education is the environment in which it takes place and the ability to create healthy educational goals. And three thousand years ago, as the family of Yaakov was transformed into the nation of Israel it needed to establish a society of ethics in the land G-d intended for us: the land of Israel. Because that is part of accomplishing the educational and transformational goal of the entire Torah.

Think about it: all the problems in the world today are rooted in education. ISIS, the Iranians, Jewish assimilation, gun control, environmental challenges, crime; they are all simply symptoms of educational challenges.

The United Nations and the Europeans can preach the need for us to sit down and discuss peace with the Arabs from here to eternity; as long as the Arab schools are teaching their children to hate there is almost no point. Imagine a garden full of beautiful flowers that blossom and grow, only to die after a short time, because someone keeps watering them with acid. It does not matter how beautiful the flowers (or ideas for peace) are, unless someone changes the liquid (or education of their children) in the watering can.

Arabs are killing people and blowing themselves up all over the world because they are being educated to hate and to murder; they are learning intolerance as children, something which is very difficult to undo.

Incidentally this is something the Allies seemed to understand at the end of World War II: they refused to accept anything less than unconditional surrender, because there was no one to talk to. And after the war both in Germany and in Japan, *they took over the schools* and excised hatred and intolerance and Aryan supremacy from the educational system. This is why, almost eighty years later, with all the challenges we face we are still at peace with Germany and Japan. Nazi ideology and Japan's imperial dictatorship needed to be obliterated, and only when children started learning tolerance and peace were they ready to live it.

Perhaps this year as we celebrate this incredible recipe we call the Torah and engage again in its magnificent messages and goals, it is time to consider whether the battles on the battlefield need to be accompanied by a 'takeover' in the classrooms as well....

Wishing a Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman