

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Beshalach)

“Zeh lo nirah li” “This doesn’t look like such a good idea”, said Benjy, commander of an elite company in Golani’s Egoz unit, in the summer of 2006. “I know”, responded his commander, “but orders are orders”.

Their mission was to cross the border into Lebanon, and take the ridgeline some 3 kilometers opposite in an effort to support IDF troops to the East.

I have visited the border by Kibbutz Avivim many times, and it never ceases to amaze me, the fortitude and raw courage it must have taken for Benjy to lead his men over wide open territory in broad daylight, beneath the guns of Hezbollah terrorists in the hills above.

This was the same Benjy Hillman o”bm, subsequently killed in that battle at Maroun Aras , who was cited for bravery some years earlier, when he single handedly charged armed terrorists who had infiltrated one of the settlements in Gush Katif . Alone, in the darkness he saved the lives of those under fire, by choosing to attack armed terrorists, rather than wait for backup forces to come to his aid.

How does a person make such choices? Whence comes the courage and bravery necessary, in the face of what would cause most people to be frozen with fear, to ignore the most basic survival instinct and make what would post facto prove to be the right choice?

This week’s portion, Beshalach, presents us with a fascinating opportunity to explore the nature of our freedom to choose:

“And G-d did not take the Jewish people via the land of the Philistines (i.e. via the Sinai desert north up the coast towards the cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gat...) lest they see war and desire to return to Egypt...”

In other words, G-d knew the Jewish people , straight out of 200 years of Egyptian servitude were not ready to fight, and the inevitable encounter with the warlike tribes of the Philistine Nation (whom some associate with the Vikings) would terrify them and have them wanting to return to Egypt.

So G-d takes them North-east, towards the Red sea, where they encounter... the entire Egyptian army! Indeed, G-d splits the sea to save the Jewish people and subsequently vanquishes the entire Egyptian army! So why couldn’t G-d just do that to the Philistines instead? In fact, G-d could just have caused the Philistines not to want to fight, avoiding the conflict all together; so why the need for such an elaborate detour via the Red Sea and the Egyptian army?

Rav Moshe Feinstein, in his ***Darash Moshe***, suggests that in either case, G-d would have been removing the enemy’s free choice. It was clear that the Philistines would have chosen to fight, such that a miracle preventing the conflict would have necessitated a removal of their free will, and the Philistines did not (yet?) deserve such a consequence.

Of course this implies the Egyptians did deserve such a removal of choice; why?

Interestingly, an integral part of the entire story of the Jewish Exodus is the fact that G-d does indeed 'harden Pharaoh's heart', directly removing his free will and ability to choose to let the Jews go, with all the accompanying theological and existential questions entailed.

The **Ramban** points out that although G-d does indeed promise (at the burning bush) that he will harden Pharaoh's heart, it is noteworthy that in the first five of the ten plagues, the verse actually says that "Pharaoh hardened his heart". Only in the sixth plague does it actually say that G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart. In fact, a person can make choices that remove his ability to choose. Much like a drug addict who initially makes a conscious choice to experiment with a dangerous chemical substance, and eventually loses his ability to resist what has become an addiction; our bad choices can remove our ability to choose.

Egypt chose an evil path, but eventually those choices precluded their ability to choose a logical path of good. Similarly, in modern times, the Nazis chosen evil path eventually precluded their ability to see that the choices they were making were not only illogical but spelled their obvious downfall. In the summer of 1944, with the war hanging in the balance, and their supply lines were in disarray, the Nazis were diverting desperately needed trains to move the 400,000 Jews of Hungary in the opposite direction to Auschwitz in Poland. Hitler and his minions were simply no longer able to choose logically; they were too deeply committed to Evil. (One could make the same case for today's Hamas; shooting missiles into Israel and spending the bear's share of their finances and materials to build tunnels, undermining the need to supply their own people....)

Perhaps the Philistines had not yet sunken, in their pagan idolatry, to the level of evil that precluded their ability to choose? In the end, G-d does not wish to remove our ability to choose; we do a pretty good job of that all on our own.

At the same time, this might explain the need for the Jewish people to witness the destruction of the Egyptian army. After centuries of servitude, their slave mentality was such that they were no longer free or able to choose to leave Egypt on their own; they needed Hashem (G-d)'s help to get out. Before we could choose to truly leave behind the slave mentality and dependence born of two hundred years of slavery, we needed to see Egypt, in all its might destroyed by no less than G-d Himself.

What choices do we make, and how do they take us down a path which eventually removes our ability to choose?

Sometimes, like Major Benjy Hillman o"bm, we grow up making good choices that eventually preclude our ability to make the wrong choices. How many difficult but good, right choices must a person make until it becomes almost natural, to choose a dangerous path out of such a deeply felt belief in the privilege of serving the Jewish people?

The message of the portion of *Beshalach*, is that we need to define the 'Egypt' in our lives, and outline the choices we need to make to set ourselves free. We often make poor choices, whether in terms of what we eat, how we work, or the relationships we cultivate. We don't always realize the implications of those choices, and that they can eventually preclude our ability to make wiser and healthier choices in the future.

May we be so blessed, to find the wisdom and the fortitude, to make the right choices, for the right reasons, at the right time.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman