

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Bo)

The sport of ‘rapelling’ or ‘sneppling’ as it is known in Israel, is the art of descending from a cliff by sliding down a rope which is sunken into the mountain above with stakes.

Years ago, I had the dubious pleasure of watching all four of our children undertake this ‘sport’ down in the Negev desert over Chanukah. It is one thing to be doing this in the army, or even to tackle an adventure for the thrill of it. But to watch your children lower themselves over a cliff while risking a few hundred foot drop, is not exactly my idea of ‘fun’. And yet, there is something to be said for allowing our children to overcome their fears, and certainly for the tremendous sense of self-esteem that comes with such an experience.

And make no mistake about it: we are speaking of pure, raw fear. Not so much in the actual descent as in the initial instant of lowering oneself over the side of a cliff. There is a moment, when you are still at the top, and it is all ahead of you, that you have to trust in the ropes, and the equipment, and the instructors directing you, and you have to lean way back over the abyss relying on a single rope to save you from falling over the cliff to the rocks far below.

And it was nothing short of inspiring to watch the look of sheer terror on the kids’ faces as they leaned back and battled their fears, determined to overcome them and take this leap of faith on a rope into emptiness....

What is it about beginnings that fill them with so much challenge and yet at the same time, so much reward? And why are they so often so difficult?

This week’s portion, *Bo*, ends with a well-known section known as ‘*Peter rechem*’: the first issue of a womb.

It is a well-known section because it is one of the four sections that we store inside the *Tefillin* worn every day, and one wonders exactly what it is doing here, smack in the middle of the story of the Exodus from Egypt?

At the end of the portion, after the plague of the first born (the tenth plague) and in the midst of the last night in Egypt, after the description of the mitzvah of the Paschal lamb, the Torah shares with us one more mitzvah:

“Va’yedaber Hashem el Moshe leimor: Kadesh Li kol bechor peter kol rechem bi’vnei Yisrael ba’adam u’va’be’heimah’: Li hu’.”

“And Hashem (G-d) spoke to Moshe saying: Sanctify to me very first born, the first issuance of every womb, amongst the children of Israel: amongst man and animal: it is to me.” (*Shemot* (Exodus) 12: 1-2)

The **Rambam** (Maimonides; *Hilchot Bechorot* 1:1) explains:

“It is a positive mitzvah to set aside (separate) the first male issue of the womb whether of man or animal, and even of a donkey, for the Kohanim (Priests).”

And the Rambam goes on to delineate that these first born or *bechorot*, are set aside to be holy. Indeed, when one actually sets aside a *bechor* (firstborn), he begins by saying: *“Harei zeh kodesh...”* *“Behold, this is holy...”* (*Hilchot Bechorot* 1:4). Ultimately, these *bechorot* belong to the Kohen, though the obligation to set aside *bechorot* applies equally to kohanim.

All of which leaves us wondering why this mitzvah appears here, while the Jewish people are still in Egypt, on the night of Pesach, just as they are about to leave Egyptian servitude forever. What is the message we are meant to glean from this strange juxtaposition?

And why is this particular portion, (along with the first two sections of the *Shema* and the following paragraph concerning the eventual entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel) so critical that it is placed inside the *tefillin*?

Perhaps in order to understand the nature of this special mitzvah we need to understand the essence of the *bechor*, the first born.

Our rabbis teach us: *“Kol Ha’hatchalot kashot”*; *“Beginnings are always difficult”*. Precisely because at the point of beginning everything lies ahead, and there is not even any accomplishment on which to lean on, the point of beginning is the most challenging of any process, requiring the most energy, fortitude, strength of purpose, and determination.

Ask yourself who was the first *bechor* (first-born)? You might think it was Adam, but in fact, he was not the first-born. Adam, according to our tradition, was created; he was not born. He/ she never went through the challenges of growing up, and of being relative to others. And even so, Adam did receive the first mitzvah: not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge; and we all know how that ended up. No, Adam was not the first *bechor*; that dubious distinction belongs to Cain (*Kayin*), who struggles almost immediately with his relationship with Abel (*Hevel*). It’s hard to know how to get it right when you are the first one trying. Perhaps this is why in Jewish tradition the first-born receives a double portion (as indeed Joseph, considered the first-born on many levels, has two sons who become tribes (Menashe and Ephraim), essentially giving to Joseph the double portion....)

At the same time, Judaism also teaches us the concept of first fruits (*bikkurim*) which are essentially offered to G-d (See *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) chap. 25), because in our beginnings lie our greatest moments of potential, and precisely when everything lies ahead, and we are first tasting the beginnings of the results or rewards of any process (new fruits or new births) we have the opportunity to remember that we are never really alone, and Hashem (G-d) is always our silent partner; the accomplishments are never ours alone.

This may be why this special mitzvah appears here, just as the Jewish people are about to leave Egypt, and just as they are about to be born, as a Nation. At that moment, everything lies ahead; it is a night of pure potential, and it must be, even with all things considered, rather a daunting thought for a nation, really still just a multitude of slaves trying to forge their way into a new world. And at this moment we have the opportunity to remember that no less important than what we are about to do, is why we are doing it.

At the moment of pure beginnings we take an extra moment to consider that they are truly 'kadosh'; that we have the opportunity to dedicate all that we do, to a higher purpose.

It is interesting to note that perhaps for this reason, in describing this mitzvah G-d tells Moshe: "**Li hu'.**" "**It (he) is to me.**" (12:2). It seems as though this phrase is incomplete: li hu' mah? What exactly is it/ he to Me? Maybe this phrase remains incomplete because we need to fill in the missing word; hidden in every beginning is our opportunity to decide what it and we will ultimately become.

And maybe this is why this mitzvah, written on a scroll, is placed inside our tefillin.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha'Kohen Kook (in his *Olat Ha're'iyah* commentary on the *siddur*) points out that the words of the blessing we make when putting on tefillin are "Le'haniach tefillin" "*To place (to rest) tefillin*", rather than the phrase 'Likshor' or 'to tie on the tefillin' one might have expected. (Indeed, the mitzvah, clearly delineated in the verse is "*U'keshartem*" "and you shall *tie* them (the tefillin) on your hand...")

Even though when placing the tefillin on our arms we have not yet fulfilled the mitzvah, because we have not yet bound them to our bodies, nonetheless, it is in this moment that we have the opportunity to pause, and to appreciate both the challenge as well as the gift of pure beginnings.

Indeed, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggests women were not traditionally obligated to wear the tefillin because they carry the message of beginnings in their very essence, in the womb they bear, every day....

And of course, we do this in the morning, at the beginning of our day, because every day is whole new beginning.

May Hashem bless us all with the power, excitement and joy of beginnings, every day.

Shabbat Shalom from Efrat,

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