

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Bo)

It had been a really long day, at the end of a really long week. We were in the middle of Infantry officers' training course and we had spent the entire week learning and practicing military maneuvers in the field. Physically and emotionally exhausted, at some points it had seemed the week would never end. But time marches on and Thursday had finally come and gone.

The sun was setting and as we were getting out for Shabbat we knew the routine by now; soon we would be called to assemble in a large U shaped formation with all our gear on our backs and trucks would come to take us back to the main base camp where we could finally get a hot shower and prepare for the weekend pass in the morning I could taste freedom even as the sun set that Thursday night.

Sure enough, our commanders told us to assemble and you could feel as much as see the smiles on all the cadets' faces. Until we heard those dreaded two words: "Shnei Turim!"; "Line up! " This meant we were meant to form into two parallel lines which could only mean one thing: We were not getting on trucks or buses; we were about to start a trek; we would be walking. As it turned out, we would actually be running. I will never forget the feeling of despair and depression that threatened to engulf me as we entered what would be one of the longer nights of my life: an all-night trek and stretcher run through the mountains of the Negev, Israel's southern desert. After about ten kilometers we were commanded to open up stretchers and we had to take turns carrying the heaviest cadets they could find.

As the night became longer and longer, and the dreams of home cooking and a Shabbat at home in a warm dry bed got further and further away, I actually remember the moment that everything turned around for me. There was a fellow named Ofer on whom I had been taking pity all night long. He was not in my squad but as this run was with the entire company it was the first time I was with him in an exercise. He was short and stocky with short stubby legs, and I remember thinking how much harder this must be for him as he had to run almost two steps for every one everyone else took.

*As we were taking turns carrying the stretcher (After a few minutes of the handle digging into your shoulder blade we had learned to switch each other every kilometer or so...) it was his turn to take one side of the front end of the stretcher, but as he was quite short this meant the stretcher would tilt dangerously to the side and make it more difficult for everyone involved. So as I saw him push to take his place under the stretcher I decided I would just take his place very quickly. But he would have none of that; he simply pushed both of the guys in front out of the way, **taking both sides of the front of the stretcher on both of his broad shoulders**, and began to jog! **And he did this, without letting anyone switch him, for about ten kilometers!** None of us had ever seen anything like this. (I later found out he had spent almost a year in the Sea Commandoes until falling out for some medical reason related to being underwater...). Watching him, we could not help but be inspired; it was a demonstration of pure raw unmitigated will, and it set us all on fire.*

I do not know how far we ran that night; only that we finally got back to base at around ten in the morning and did manage to get on to buses that took us home for the weekend about an hour later. Rumor was we trekked and ran about 60 kilometers, but I will never forget how in the middle of one of the

darkest nights of my life one individual's raw display of pure motivation at least for me, turned night into day

There is a fascinating detail often overlooked in this week's portion of Bo. This Shabbat we will read at last, of the Exodus of the Jewish people from two hundred years of Egyptian servitude. But before we could be freed, G-d would bring one last plague upon the Egyptians: the killing of the firstborn. And the commentaries take note that G-d tells Moshe to communicate to Pharaoh the first born will die exactly at the stroke of midnight ("*Bechatzot*"). But when Moshe repeats this message to Pharaoh and his advisors, he says it will happen "*ke'chatzot*": around midnight, which Rashi explains is based on Moshe's assumption that the Egyptians will not be able to calculate the exact time of midnight and will mistakenly assume G-d's timing to be 'off'.

Seriously? With every first born in Egypt dead and dying at the same time in the middle of the night, whilst all the Jews are having a lamb bar BQ safe in their homes, Egypt will be pointing out that its already 12:01! In fact, why the need for an exact time at all? None of the other plagues are given an exact time, so why is this important?

There is an interesting discussion at the beginning of the first tractate of the Talmud (Brachot 3a) in which the rabbis note that if a *Kohein* (priest) becomes *tameh* (impure), even though he has immersed in the *mikveh* (the ritual bath) he cannot eat of the tithes (which are holy and can only be eaten in a state of purity) until night falls. And he can only resume his service in the Temple once he has brought his offering the next day.

Rav Kook, in his *Ein Ayah*, suggests that this is symbolic of the fact that there are different stages to redemption and repentance. When a person errs and falls from the level he is on (akin to tumah which comes as a result of contact with death) there are three stages to his journey back, known as the process of *teshuva* or repentance.

First, he must recognize he has made a mistake (*hakarat hachet*)

Then he must regret it (*charata*).

And lastly, he must make the decision in his heart to change the future.

If he is successful this will lead to the fourth stage: he will change and become the person he was always meant to be, surpassing even the level he was on before his mistake (*chet*).

There is a point in this process, when a person decides to change; he or she has begun the journey back; they are determined to become better and cast off the error of their ways. On the one hand, they are still on a much lower level than where they were before their 'sin'. And yet, they have changed direction and decided to 'get back on track'; so everything has changed.

Imagine a person deciding he has to lose weight and get back in shape. Perhaps it's a look or comment from a loved one or seeing the photos from the Bar Mitzvah and wondering how it got so bad, but he realizes he is seriously overweight and something has to change.

Well in order to achieve real change, you have to know where you are, figure out where you want to get to (what is your goal), and decide how to get there.

So let's say the person weighs himself and discovers he is 215 lbs. and he knows his ideal weight is 165 lbs., so he has to lose fifty pounds. And let's say he decides he is going to lose a pound a week to arrive at his ideal weight a year later. (I'm a big believer in gradual change as being much healthier...)

So he changes his diet, decides to start exercising three times a week and weighs himself after a few days discovering he has lost his first pound. On the one hand, he is still 214 lbs. quite overweight, and no-one around him even knows he has lost any weight, so not much has changed. He is still deep in his state of 'impurity' with a long way to go.

And yet, everything has changed, because *he* knows he has lost a pound; he is no longer in the same place because he has changed direction; he is now headed towards a purer better life.

When the Kohein immerses himself in the mikveh and night falls (representing the partnership between what we are challenged to do, and the help Hashem. G-d, will give us...) he is still far from being ready to enter the Temple; he has not yet acquired the level or state of purity he was on before his mistake, but he has started his journey home ; he can eat his tithes because the process of purification has begun and that itself achieves a certain level of purity .

Deep in the night of the darkest evil they had ever known, with death all around them, the Jewish people take the blood of no less than the god of ancient Egypt, the lamb, and paint it on their door posts, as if to say 'into this home, the gods of Egypt are no longer welcome' . It is to commemorate this moment that we celebrate with the Seder night every year. Technically the Jews were still in Egypt, but spiritually, they had begun their journey home to freedom. And this moment happens specifically at midnight, when the night is darkest and the dawn seems so far away.

When hundreds of thousands of Jews are being shipped to the extermination centers at Auschwitz and Sobibor, yet small groups of Jews in Warsaw and Vilna and Lodz dare to rebel against the Nazi beasts, then a light is lit in the middle of the night. And when Jews being marched to their deaths in the gas chambers begin to sing '*Ani ma'amin*', declaring their faith that one day we will come home and live in the Jewish State of Israel, then hope is born in the midst of despair and that is one part of why, after two thousand years of dreaming, we have finally come home.

And for me, running through that dark seemingly endless night in the Desert Mountains of officer's course one boy named Ofer lit a fire that still burns, so many years later.

The headlines constantly shout out that we live in such dark times, with innocents murdered all over the world, from Paris to San Bernardino and on. Here in Israel on our Northern borders Iran is busy preparing nuclear weapons and aiding Hezbollah to open a front in Syria and stockpile missiles in Lebanon, and Hamas and Muslim brotherhood and their minions are constantly attempting to spread their terror on our southern borders. And the world seems so dark. But after two thousand years of exile, the Jewish people have come home to create a State filled with the light of Jewish study, scientific and medical innovation, and democratic and Torah values. We have turned the corner, and although we have a long way to go, we are headed in the right direction, and that is all the difference.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman