

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Of all the experiences I have ever had on Yom Kippur, none have made as indelible an impression on me as the ones I spent in Yeshivat Har Etzion as a young student in Israel.

Har Etzion is a very special type of yeshiva (institute for advanced Jewish studies), known as a Hesder yeshiva, where students choose not only to spend years studying Torah, but serve in the Israeli army as well. Literally with a bible in one hand and a rifle in the other, balancing the desire to grow spiritually with the need to contribute to the community and the country, these young men, veterans of some of Israel's darkest hours were the role models that ended up shaping my life.

And particularly on Yom Kippur, when alumni come from all over the country to pray and study with each other and with their revered teachers, the experience was very powerful; no words could do justice to the feeling one gets in a hall of over a thousand students whose voices, lifted as one from a roar that echoes through the valleys of the Gush Etzion bloc....

I remember the year my wife Doreet was pregnant with our second child and decided to stay home in our small student apartment rather than risk having to break her fast. She was a little sad that she would be missing the special prayers of Yom Kippur in the Synagogue, but ended up following the entire service as the roar of the boys singing from the study hall across the way carried through and could be heard quite clearly in our living room!

All of which is why it was only natural, on that dark Yom Kippur day in 1973, that one of the first places the Israeli army went to gather up troops desperately needed for the reserves, was the Har Etzion yeshiva. After all, if there is ever a day when the entire Yeshiva is present it is Yom Kippur, and in one swoop an entire battalion of soldiers could be recalled to their units....

Sitting late one Yom Kippur night as a second year, nineteen year old student, one of the older boys told me the story of that fateful day.

By early afternoon, even though no one in yeshiva was listening to the news on Yom Kippur, everyone knew something was up; the unmistakable sounds of Israeli Air Force jets flying north could be heard every few minutes or so, and the equally unmistakable background noise of semi-trailers carrying tanks on the main highway could be discerned as well.

At about 4 pm, two trucks pulled up in the yeshiva parking lot, and Israeli officer jumped out and ran into the study hall and up to Rav Yehuda Amital, one of the two heads of the yeshiva, to tell him that all the battle worthy boys had to grab their gear and jump in the trucks. Rav Amital, a legend in his own right who survived the Holocaust and fought in the war of 1948, immediately banged on the lectern, stopping the prayers in mid-sentence and ordered all the boys back to their rooms to grab their gear and go.

It is difficult to describe what that moment must have been like; to interrupt the Yom Kippur prayers was unthinkable, but for the Rosh(head of) yeshiva to order the students to be getting onto trucks on Yom Kippur? That was simply unimaginable.

Of all the details of the story of that day, the one that stands out the most for me was what happened next. Rav Aaron Lichtenstein, our other Rosh yeshiva, who until this point had remained absorbed in his prayers, seemingly oblivious to the events around him, or perhaps simply trying to focus his prayers on the boys obviously fighting and dying at that very moment on Israel's borders, suddenly stood straight, turned, and ran from the room grabbing a few of the remaining boys with him as he ran.

His first stop was the kitchen, where he loaded canned food and can openers, loaves of bread and drinks onto a cart and then wheeled it out to the waiting trucks and began loading them with supplies. He then proceeded to explain to the boys who were now running up to the trucks and climbing aboard with their gear, that even though it was Yom Kippur the most solemn fast day of the year, they were all obligated to eat and drink, as they would be soon be defending the country and needed their strength.

I imagine that if anyone else had told them all to eat, they would probably have waited the couple of hours remaining to the fast, perhaps arriving at the front lines with that much less strength, but this was their Rosh Yeshiva....

The last image these young fighters had of their Rosh Yeshiva as their trucks began to roll was of him running back from the Kitchen with two large packages of toilet paper which he threw on the trucks; who else would have thought how much these boys would need toilet paper on Yom Kippur?

Understand, this was and is no ordinary rabbi; son-in-law of Rav J.B. Soleveitchick, Rav Lichtenstein is the closest approximation to a living Torah scroll you will ever meet, and his students are absolutely in awe of him. He is the teacher (Rav) of my teachers, and his ability to master the entirety of the Jewish Oral tradition (Talmud, Midrashim, and prophets, never mind the Torah itself) is legendary.

Most Rabbis in such a situation, on such a day, would have wrapped themselves in their Tallit (prayer-shawl) and become completely absorbed in prayer, or they might have given an awe-inspiring sermon or lesson. But how humble must a person be to be in such an illustrious position and think about where to go and get the toilet paper...?

How does a person come by such humility, and indeed, what is the nature and even the value of being that humble?

This week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*, contains a rather startling story, a piece of which may allow us a valuable insight into this question.

The beginning of *Chayei Sarah* is perhaps one of Avraham's most painful moments: the death of his beloved wife and life's partner, Sarah. Avraham's reaction to this difficult event is somewhat surprising in that it has never happened before, or at least this is the first recorded instance of such an experience: Avraham decides to bury Sarah... in the ground.

While this may seem quite natural to us, given that this has been our tradition since that moment, it is certainly worth considering the meaning of this rather strange custom.

Why do we bury our loved ones in the ground? Is this how we show respect to the people whom we held so dear in life? We cover them up with dirt? **Dirt?! Would'n't it have been nicer to bury them up high, say, in a tree, or on top of a mountain, demonstrating how highly we held them in esteem?**

What is the significance of this burial?

Equally interesting is the manner in which Avraham acquires the piece of land in which he will bury Sarah, approaching *Efron* of the *Hittite* nation and buying the property. Despite Efron's initial (sincere?) willingness to sell what seems to be a worthless cave, Avraham will ultimately pay an exorbitant amount of money, **four hundred** silver pieces, valued today at approximately a *quarter of a million dollars*, for what amounts to a cave out in a field! And most fascinating of all, is Avraham's willingness to prostrate himself before these Hittites, in the hopes that they will deign to grant his request to pay a fortune for a worthless piece of property.

Remember that this is the same Avraham who had only recently achieved fame as a mighty warrior by defeating in one night, what amounted to the mighty empire of the day. (See *Bereishit* (Genesis) chapter 14: the five kings led by *K'darlaomer*, who had defeated the *Amalekites*, the *Emorites*, and *S'dom* and *Amorah*....)

He was obviously well-known as is made obvious by the Hittites initial obsequious behavior towards him and their referral to him as a "master and Prince of G-d" (23:6).

So why do we read that Avraham prostrates himself before them?

"Va'yishtachu' Avraham lifnei am ha'aretz."
"And Avraham bowed down (to the ground) before the people of the land." (23:12).

Why must Avraham grovel in the dirt? After all, G-d had promised to Avraham at the beginning of his journey that "his name would be great" (*Bereishit* 12: 2). Why the need for Avraham to be so humbled? What did the act of Avraham bowing down to the earth represent, and why specifically in the midst of his attempt to bury his wife Sarah in the ground?

Indeed, Avraham's relationship with the earth runs much deeper. In the midst of his dialogue (nee' struggle) with G-d over the destruction of *S'dom*, perhaps in recognition of the audacity of actually arguing with G-d and attempting to influence G-d's decisions, Avraham says:

"Ve'anochi afar va'efer." *"And I am but dirt (dust) and ash."* (18:27)

Why does Avraham describe himself as being dirt? Isn't there a point beyond which self-effacement becomes self-denigration and is unhealthy if not dangerous? Granted, Avraham may wish to demonstrate that his decision to argue with G-d is not coming from a place of arrogance, presuming to know more than G-d, but rather from a more humble perspective, and yet, if one of our children, in the midst of a discussion described himself as being 'dirt', we would understandably become alarmed, to say the least.

And most interesting of all, is where Avraham gets this idea from: no less than G-d himself!

"Ve'samti et zaracha' ka'afar ha'aretz..."
"And I will make your descendants like the dust (dirt) of the earth...!" (13:16)

Why does G-d tell us we will be like the dirt?! Who wants to be dirt? And of course, all of this must somehow relate to the birth of humanity, when we are created as

“...*Afar min ha'adamah*”

“... *dirt (dust) from the ground.*” (Bereishit 2:7)

And when man is expelled from the Garden of Eden he is told:

“ *Ki' afar atah ve'el afar tashuv.*”

“*For you are dirt (dust) and to the dirt (dust) you will return.*” (3:19).

Why all the dirt? And what are we to learn from the fact that Avraham's decision to bury Sarah in the dirt is a fulfillment of G-d's promise (command? prediction?) to Adam two thousand years earlier?

Recently, while studying the book of *Yehoshua* (Joshua), a piece of the story of Joshua provided an unexpected clue regarding this entire question.

Yehoshua has successfully transitioned from being the ever-present servant/student of Moshe to becoming the leader of the Jewish people and amidst the miraculous stopping of the Jordan River, brings them into the land of Israel.

After receiving the blessing at Mount *Grizim* as promised by G-d (and Moshe) and miraculously conquering the fortified city of Jericho and literally 'bringing down the walls' in only seven days, Yehoshua's name has spread throughout the land (Joshua 6:27), and the Canaanites tremble before the inevitable onslaught of the Jewish people to conquer the land as promised by G-d. Everything seems to be going according to plan, and Yehoshua (Joshua) makes ready for his next mission: the conquest of the town of Ai.

After the splitting of the Jordan River, and the miracles of Jericho, victory seems assured to such an extent that after spying out the city and assessing its strengths and weaknesses it is felt there is no need for the entire 600,000 man army and instead only 3,000 fighters are sent to battle against the much smaller town.

Only this time something goes terribly wrong. Unbeknownst to Yehoshua, one Jew (*Achan* son of *Carmi*) has violated the Divine command to take no benefit from the spoils of Jericho, stealing some of the lot instead of destroying it as mandated. So G-d is not with them on that day, and for the first time in Jewish history, the Israeli army loses a battle, fleeing before the men of Ai, with thirty six men killed.

Yehoshua's reaction is apparently one of shock and despair (indeed, to this very day, the word one utters in Hebrew when experiencing sudden pain and despair, “*ai!*”)

“*Va'yikra Yehoshua simlo'tav, va'yipol al panav artzah' lifnei' Aron Hashem ad ha'arev, hu' ve'ziknei Yisrael, va'ya'alu' afar al rosham.*” (Joshua 7:6)

“*And Yehoshua rent his garments and fell on his face to the ground, before the Ark of G-d until evening; he, and the elders of Israel, and they threw up dirt (dust) on their heads...*”

Why are they putting dirt on their heads? Is this the responsible reaction of the legendary military commander who bested the mighty army of Amalek in the desert, with a rag-tag army of former Jewish

slaves? Where is the military briefing? Why not immediately gather the commanders and renew the attack with a much larger force?

Why is Yehoshua's response to put *dirt* on his head?

It is important to note that at this point, Yehoshua does not know the true reason for their defeat, knowing only that something is wrong and G-d does not seem to be with them. And yet, before he beseeches G-d to help him understand why this is happening (see 7:7: "...*Oh G-d... why have you brought us across the Jordan River just to see us destroyed here by the Emorites (of Ai)...?*") his first reaction is to fall on the *ground* and put *earth* on his head. What must Yehoshua have been thinking in the midst of his despair? What explanation might be the one that immediately makes sense to Yehoshua?

What if Yehoshua's real fear was not their failure, but their success? Maybe, after such an impressive string of miracles, blessings and victories, Yehoshua suddenly realizes: success has gotten to their heads?

One of the most challenging aspects of commanding men on the battle field is that no matter who else is at fault, in the end, you are responsible. There are few ventures as empirically measurable as the battlefield: you either succeed, or you don't, you rarely get second chances, and the parents of the boy who dies under your command will never hear your excuses. It is the ultimate measure of 'the buck stops here'. At the end of the day, even if the mission fails because one of your men deserted the field of battle, that just means you failed as a commander to sufficiently inspire your men....

So imagine how Yehoshua must feel; imagine how the weight of visiting thirty six families (at least in the literal understanding of the text) to explain to them how their sons died must feel? And all this happens only a few verses after we hear how Yehoshua's name has spread throughout the land (Joshua 6:27). Maybe Yehoshua is wondering now the natural thoughts of the Monday morning quarterback: why did I send only three thousand men? After all, we have a standing army of *six hundred thousand!!*

And maybe his natural assumption is that he (and thus the Jewish people) has let success get to their heads. Perhaps they were so confident in G-d's protection, so assured of victory that they figured sending the men to battle was only a formality. Had they become, perhaps, too cocky? Was there a trace of arrogance in their actions? Indeed, maybe this is why the Torah takes the time to tell us of the sending of three thousand men. After all, after the miraculous story of Jericho, why even mention the army?

(And indeed, there was a certain arrogance of spirit hidden in the assumption that no-one could have dared take from the spoils when forbidden to do so. And when the Torah tells us that *Achan* stole from the spoils, it describes it as the entire Jewish people stealing, even though it was only one individual, because if there is one person doing something wrong, then we are all, on a certain level, responsible.)

Which is why Yehoshua puts dirt on his head and throws himself to the ground: if the problem is that maybe you have gotten a little too big for your boots and are a little too intoxicated with your success, then the fact that in the end we are all created from dirt, and will one day lie six feet under the dirt, reminds us that we shouldn't spend too much time thinking how great we are, because it's not really about us anyway.

And that is why Avraham, when arguing with G-d, ever-conscious of the dangers of such an exalted position, reminds himself that in the end, he is a speck of dirt standing next to G-d.

And yet, there is something very powerful about the dirt. First, in Jewish law, the ultimate form of protection for an object is to bury it in the ground, because earth cannot be destroyed by fire nor the sword, and lies hidden from evil.

But even more, dirt is the vehicle by which life blossoms; nothing can grow in the field without the right soil, and dirt becomes the most important ingredient on the farm or vineyard.

You see, dirt alone is nothing, its just dirt with no form. But when I plant, dirt is everything. And so dirt represents the fact that our value on this earth is completely dependant on whether and how we become good soil for the right things to blossom.

Dirt bespeaks purpose, and the belief that there are things worth planting for the future. And it is precisely when I take the time to bury something in the ground that I make a statement that it has true value.

It is no accident that two thousand years after the fall of *Masada*, we discovered the ancient scrolls of our people hidden in the ground. Believing that one day there would still be Jews wanting to partake of that same Torah, long after the Roman Empire had become dust; dirt also represents faith.

Lastly, what is the nature of the humility sought by Avraham and Yehoshua and mastered most of all by Moshe?

To be humble does not mean to think you are nothing; that is not humility; If G-d created me, how could I be nothing? I must really be something!

Rather, humility is about recognizing that however great I am, its not really me, its all a gift from Hashem (G-d); all of it. And whereas arrogance is focusing on what my gifts and skills, my position and wealth can do for *me*, humility is the true understanding that all these gifts are only given to me as an opportunity to see how I can utilize them for everyone else.

Avraham understands that his exalted position before G-d is merely a tool he needs to utilize to help build a better world, based on ethics, and the same is true for Yehoshua who understands that conquering the land of Israel will only be valuable if it is a vehicle for creating an ethical society to make a better world....

Maybe a person becomes a Rav Lichtenstein by being ever aware that we are here to make a difference, in whatever way we can, and that it's never about what we have achieved but why Hashem has allowed us to achieve and what we are going to do with it.

Maybe we can all use a little more dirt under our fingernails these days; we certainly have a lot of planting to do...

Shabbat Shalom,

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