

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

This week's Torah byte is dedicated to the memory of my Auntie Helene (Stalbow; nee' Schiff) a"h

Chaya Gittel bat Shimon Alter Yitzchak and Frumeh Toibeh, who passed away in Ra'anana, Israel.

Auntie Helene was 93 years old. She spent the last twenty years of her life living here in Israel (in Ra'anana) surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. She had an incredible marriage to our uncle Geoffrey who passed away some years ago, raised a deeply Zionist family, and lived to see her dreams come true. This week's Torah Byte is dedicated to her memory; she truly exemplified the ideas we discuss this week in every way. She was a true lady, and we will miss her.

Many years ago I had the privilege of sharing the land of Israel with a birthright group for ten days. One afternoon we took them to Emek Habacha, the valley of tears. And I shared with them one of the most powerful stories I know: the incredible story of Avigdor Kahalani and the 77th battalion, who, with twenty-five tanks, stopped the might of the Syrian army in the Yom Kippur War. For twenty-four critical hours, this battalion held off hundreds of Syrian Tanks in the Golan Heights, until the reserves began to arrive. Many of those soldiers never came back down off those mountains, but with their heroism and selfless sacrifice, they saved the State of Israel.

After we had finished experiencing the intensity of that valley, one of the students approached me with a difficult question.

"I'm having a really hard time relating to this story, because I cannot imagine any piece of land I would be willing to die for. Is it worth it? Is any piece of land really worth it? "

It's a really good question, which seems to be at the forefront of our thoughts yet again, as we seem to be paying such a terrible price for our desire to settle this ancient land. Is it worth it? *Is any piece of land really worth it?*

This week, in the portion of *Chayei Sarah*, the Torah introduces us to the concept of sacred space as Avraham seeks the appropriate burial plot for his beloved wife Sarah. Indeed, the first portion of land any Jew ever owned in Israel is Avraham's purchase of the ***Machpelah*** Cave in Hebron, as a burial plot for Sarah. Legend has it that this was the burial site of Adam and Eve; ultimately, Yitzchak and Rivkah, along with Yaakov and Leah will be buried there as well.

Why does our permanent and tangible connection with the land of Israel begin as the purchase of a burial plot? Why, for thousands of years, did so many Jews who were never able to actually ***live*** in the land of Israel yearn to be buried here, or at least to include some earth from Israel in their burial....

Why is our love of this land so associated with death?

And there is another relationship which seems to be related to the land of Israel. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 2a) in explaining how we know that a transfer of value establishes a state of marriage says that we learn the essence of marriage from the use of the word 'kicha' ; 'to take'.

It says (Devarim 24:1) in reference to marriage: “When a man *takes* a woman”

And again (Bereishit; Genesis 23; 13), when Avraham acquires the field of *Efron* (for Sarah’s burial plot) he says “... I give you the money for the field, **take** it from me . “.

So the very formulation of marriage as an institution is learned from the acquisition of land for a burial plot!

In fact, this entire parsha (portion) seems to intertwine death and marriage; immediately after the burial of Sarah, the quest to find a suitable wife for Yitzchak begins, and at the end of the parsha Avraham himself marries Ketura (Jewish tradition as quoted by Rashi (25:1) suggests he is actually remarrying Hagar). And in addition to beginning with the death of Sarah, Yishmael also dies in this portion, and Avraham himself is finally buried by his sons....

So we need to understand the inexplicable connection between death and marriage, and love and loss. And of course, we still need to understand why the first acquisition in the land of Israel occurs against this backdrop....

In fact, the Torah tells us (Genesis 3:19) that we are created of the earth, and we will return to the earth; which is our ultimate inescapable connection to the land.... And the Torah’s word for ‘human being’ is ‘Adam’ which is the root of the word ‘Adama’ or land. On a certain level, we *are* the land and the land is us! But what does this mean?

Perhaps the Torah is suggesting that to understand the nature of our relationship with the land of Israel we need to understand the essence of a loving marriage.

When Christians ask the groom whether he ‘takes’ this woman to be his lawfully wedded wife, as when the Torah describes the ‘taking’ of a woman to be a wife, it is far from the acquisition of an object that we own. We do not ‘own’ our wives, and we do not ‘have’ them; if anything when we marry we are declaring that we now belong to an ‘other’, and are now invested in the work to become one.

In fact in Judaism the actual declarative statement of marriage is: “*harei at mekudeshet li ...*” ‘*You are sanctified; holy, to me....*’ .

We do not define marriage as ownership or ‘having’. In fact in Hebrew there is no actual word for ‘having’; even in Modern Hebrew we say ‘*yesh li*’ which literally means ‘it is to me’; we are describing the relationship but not ownership, because we don’t really ‘have’ anything in this world; ‘having’ is an illusion. Rather, marriage is the process of sanctifying a relationship; of making it ‘*kadosh*’ or holy. And holiness is all about tapping into our higher and deeper purpose. Holiness (*Kedusha*) is when something is a vehicle for connecting me to Hashem, to a higher purpose, to why we are really here, and what it’s all about. In a healthy marriage two people come together and become vehicles to help each other achieve their purpose in this world. It becomes about connecting to why we are created, why we are here, what we want and why we want it.

I don’t own my wife, but I belong to her, and was always meant to be with her, because she is a gift in my life without whom I could never truly achieve my purpose. (And even if a marriage does not last, there is a *mitzvah* to break that bond, with a *get*, a Jewish divorce document, which means those partners no longer fulfill each other’s purpose, though they once did....)

And that is the secret of our relationship with the land of Israel: We don’t own the land, nor do we ‘have’ it; *we belong to it*. And it is a part of who we are, and who we are meant to be, and how we are meant to get there.

People get confused when it comes to the Jews. Judaism after all, is a religion, which means there is a group who share certain values and ideas, tenets and beliefs which we call Judaism. But many Jews do not adhere to all these beliefs. Because we are also a Nation, and a Nation is not a Nation without a land. A group of people

who speak French could not remain the French nation in Afghanistan; they are Frenchmen regardless of their beliefs because they are all in France. And only in France can they achieve their purpose, for which they exist in this world. And the Jewish people cannot achieve their mission as a nation anywhere else but in the land of Israel. Only in this place can we create a model society that is meant to be a light of what the world could look like, and the world needs that message....

Perhaps Avraham can only fully realize how complete Sarah made him when she physically ended, just as we only fully appreciated the power and beauty and fulfillment of being a Nation in the land of our fathers, when we lost it. And now 2,000 years later we understand that we do not, cannot own this land, we simply belong to it.

When we die, we discover that we do not really own anything, we are put back into the earth which calls into question what this journey we call life was all about; what was the point? And that is when we reach for something beyond the physical limitations; we seek to belong to something greater, higher than ourselves, to a higher purpose. The same higher purpose we sense in a healthy marriage, and which we feel when we finally realize, after two thousand years of wandering the face of the earth, that we are home, at last.

And yes, tapping into that purpose, and sharing it to create a better world, is absolutely worth it....

Shabbat Shalom from Israel

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