

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

Quiet; the sweet serene quiet of deep sleep; and exhaustion; exhaustion that is so deep you don't even realize you are sleeping; you are away, somewhere, in your dream world experiencing life as you would perhaps love it to be. You are comfortably warm and snugly under your blankets or in your sleeping-bag; and then all that peace and serenity comes to an abrupt halt.

Shouting and yelling; darkness turning into abrupt harsh light; sleeping bags and blankets thrown off and the bitter cold immediately pervading every aspect of your being.

Worst of all, you have exactly seven minutes from the time the guard is told to wake everyone up, to be standing in rows in your uniform on the parade ground with boots laced and buttons closed, ready for anything; for a new day of hell.

We were perhaps a few weeks into basic infantry training in the IDF, and of all the horrible, sadistic systems they employed to break us and build us, this was the one I hated the most. Going on as little as 3-4 hours' sleep, after exhausting days full of running, marching, shouting and yelling, we would fall into an exhausted sleep in our tents, only to be roused in the pre-dawn freezing cold darkness to start all over again. Anyone caught trying to sleep in uniform would instantly lose their weekend pass, and the process of waking up trying to get out of your sleeping bag in the freezing cold and get dressed and outside on time was so intensely depressing I can still recall that feeling, so many years later.

On this particular morning the sergeant had apparently unscrewed the light bulb in the tent, so we had to do all this in the dark which made it even worse. Years later I would understand, as an officer, the value of being able to wake and be ready for battle in a matter of moments, but at the time, it simply filled me with an intense depression unlike any I had ever experienced.

And I still remember the feeling on that particular morning, standing on the parade ground shivering in the cold as our sadistic sergeant eyed us all, and realizing with horror, ***I had forgotten my gun in the tent.*** A feeling of pure terror and depression gripped me; every soldier is told at the beginning of basic: 'your gun is like your wife; sleep with it shower with it; never leave it'; I was in a lot of trouble. Never had I wanted anything as much as I wanted that sergeant to finish our roll call and dismiss us so I could get back into my tent and get my gun without being seen....

By some miracle, I got away with it, but years later I still remember that moment, and it is intriguing to me to consider how something which seems so unimportant now, could fill me with such intent focus of will as wanting to get back to my tent and get my gun. Indeed, I recall many a morning struggling with what it was that was driving me to go through such torture as those horrific early morning wake-ups, day after day, to get through army training which I was never obligated to do; after all, having been born in the U.S., I was never obligated to go to the army in the first place. Clearly, the secret to all our accomplishments in life is willpower.

And hidden in this week's portion, *Chayei Sarah* is a central piece of the Jewish system for acquiring and developing one's will power.

After the death and burial of Sarah, Avraham sends his servant back to the household of his cousins in Mesopotamia to seek a wife for his son Yitzchak.

Accomplishing his mission, the servant (whom Jewish tradition identifies as Eliezer) returns with Rivkah and they encounter Yitzchak in the field where he is engaged in what seems to be meditation in nature.

Seeing him from afar, Rivkah literally falls from her camel, and thus begins the next chapter in the history of the Jewish people. Yitzchak and Rivkah marry, and their son Yaakov will be the father of the tribes of Israel. But what exactly is this initial encounter between Yitzchak and Rivkah?

People mistakenly assume that Rivkah is so overwhelmed by the sight of Yitzchak meditating in the field that she falls off her camel. But a careful look at the verse shows that she first asks who the meditative fellow is, and only when she is told this is Yitzchak who will be her husband, does she decide to fall off her camel. Perhaps falling off her camel, an act of submission and fealty is part of her decision to marry into the way of life Yitzchak's communion represents. So, what is that? What exactly is the nature of Yitzchak's meditation?

The Talmud in Berachot shares one opinion that our three forefathers established the three prayers by which we guide our day in Judaism. And here, Yitzchak establishes the afternoon *mincha* prayers, when he goes out into the field to meditate.

In order to understand this story though, we first need to understand the nature of prayer, which in Judaism we call *Tefilah*.

Tefilah is actually not prayer. The word prayer is defined in dictionaries as 'to entreat, or to beg'; hence the name for a particular insect, the praying mantis, which seems to be begging. This implies that in prayer we throw ourselves before the mercy of the judge in an attempt to change the verdict, and change the judge's mind or influence his or her thinking. But G-d does not change and we do not influence G-d; if anything, G-d influences us.

When Yaakov is on his death-bed, Yosef, his long-lost son with whom he has been reunited at the end of his life, comes to see him. And Yaakov says: (Genesis 48) "*raah' fanecha' lo pilalti*" which Rashi interprets to mean: 'I never filled my heart with imagining or even dreaming I would ever see you again.' Yaakov could not imagine seeing Yosef again because he thought he was dead. *Palel* then, the root of our word *Tefillah*, is to wish for, or want; even to dream. And *le'hitpalel*, the reflexive which is the term we use for praying, is to struggle with what we want.

Indeed, what do we want? Do we really want what we want? Is what we want what we could, or should want? In life, what you want is who you are. How often have we so wanted a child or someone we love to want something we want them to want; but you can't give someone *ratzon*, or will; they have to develop that wanting themselves....

Thus, the *Amidah* or silent prayer we call the *shemoneh esrei*, contains a list of the things we as Jews and even as human beings could and should want. We should want peace, and we should want that all the sick should be healed, and we should want to be home, and we should want that all people should prosper....

So, what did Yitzchak want? Interestingly, we know very little about Yitzchak, and most often the Torah does not share with us what he is thinking and what he wants.

When his brother Yishmael taunts him, Yitzchak is silent, and when he, along with his stepmother Hagar, is forced out of the house by Sarah his mother, he is silent. Most telling, when Yitzchak is bound on the altar by his father Avraham, (save a brief question on the journey) he is silent. And when Avraham cries and mourns for Sarah, Yitzchak is again silent, and even absent.

And now, when it is time for Yitzchak to find a wife, it is Avraham through his servant who goes out to find her, while Yitzchak remains at home!

And yet, the beginning of Rivkah's relationship with Yitzchak, is that she encounters him in the field.

The verse describes this as "**sichah**": "*Va'yetzeh Yitzchak la'suach ba'sadeh*" Yitzchak goes out to literally converse, in the field. So silent Yitzchak is actually in dialogue.

Yitzchak represents the ultimate passive personality; wanting only to receive, and if *Tefillah* is all about wanting, then perhaps Yitzchak is struggling with what he wants, and more critically, what he feels Hashem wants of him. Yitzchak is dialoguing with himself.

Rav Kook suggests there are three questions *tefillah* enjoins us to ask of ourselves every day:

1. What do we want? (And often what do we know we do **not** want...)
2. Why do we want it? (If I want to earn a lot of money, why is that important to me? Do I want it for the right reasons?)
3. Do I think Hashem (G-d) wants me to want this? (Obviously, figuring out what Hashem wants of us is no simple task, and certainly a recipe from Hashem, which we believe is the Torah, helps. But at the very least we need to be asking this question ...)

And this may well be what Yitzchak is struggling with. Rav Kook suggests that one does not have a soul; one is a soul. And the essence of the soul is *ratzon*; wanting. What we want is the ultimate gift that Hashem, G-d, gives us. Jewish tradition suggests Yitzchak is at least 37 years old, his mother has passed away, he is estranged from his brother, and all he wants is to know what it is Hashem wants of him. Rav Kook, (in his *Ein Ayah on Brachot*) points out that the word used here for prayer, **Sicha**, which also means dialogue, is the same word, **Siach**, used in the creation story in Genesis for plants. Perhaps because this aspect of *tefillah* allows one to see G-d in nature and realize that everything has a purpose and is part of a larger plan. And if even a simple leaf is part of Hashem's plan for the tree it grows on, then obviously every human being is certainly part of a larger plan and destined for a great purpose.

And this is true not only for individuals but for peoples and nations as well. The groundswell of hatred and fanatical religious fundamentalism is growing, and the battle grounds between East and West, and between

Judaism's vision which dreams of peace by and for all human beings, and Islamic fundamentalism which dreams of conquest and domination, in a world full of violence are becoming clearer every day.

Today, more than ever, we as a people need to ask ourselves what we really want and why we want it. For more than a hundred years we, as a people have only wanted to live peacefully with our Arab neighbors, and for the same hundred and more years many of our Arab neighbors have wanted to live peacefully without us as their neighbors. Here too, we need to pay attention to what our neighbors really want.

And yet, at the same time there is a thirst that is growing for what we all really could want and for the opportunity to reconnect with the source of all that wanting.

May Hashem bless us all to want good things and find the wisdom to transform such good dreams into reality, soon.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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