

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Devarim)

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

This week's byte is based on words delivered this week in 2007 in memory of Major Benji Hillman (***Binyamin Aharon ben Yehudit ve' Daniel*** she'yibadlu' lechaim ) H"YD, a Company commander in Golani's elite Egoz commando unit, who fell in battle, on the 24th of Tammuz 5756 (July 20th 2006). May these words serve to elevate his soul and his memory, and serve as a comfort to his family and loved ones. **Yehi Zichro' Baruch (May his memory be a vehicle for blessing).**

*It was 1939, the Nazis had already invaded Poland, but he was one of the lucky ones. Beloved by his entire generation and revered for his incredible knowledge of Torah he was given the chance to get out; safe passage to America had been secured and a new life was waiting and ready. And not just for himself, his entire family would be able to leave Lithuania as well. Indeed he actually visited America the following winter, and was approached, even implored, by leaders from across the spectrum of the American Jewish community begging him to stay.*

*But Rav Elchanan Wasserman would not hear of staying in America: "How can I stay here in safety while my flock remains under the shadow of the executioner?" he would consistently reply, and, refusing to leave his community alone when they needed him the most, Rav Elchanan, one of the great Torah giants of the last generation returned to Kovno where he was indeed swept up in the Holocaust.*

*Caught teaching a secret underground Talmud class in the Kovno ghetto in 1941, Rav Elchanan was murdered along with most of his students, in the infamous 9th fortress. While being led to his death he was overheard telling his students that just as the Kohanim (priests) had to have the proper intent in order that their sacrifices be accepted by the entire Jewish people, they too should try to fill their hearts and minds with thoughts worthy of being accepted as sacrifices for the entire Jewish people...*

There are so many different emotions and thoughts, questions and struggles that the story of Rav Elchanan evokes. Was he right to return to Europe? Could things have been different if the long list of Torah giants had given their flocks a different message when the storm clouds were gathering over Europe? Of course, those of us born in freedom cannot presume to understand, let alone judge, that generation, be they Torah scholars or simple peasants.

Indeed, one is reminded of the *Midrashic* (rabbinic legend) comment concerning Ya'acov's inability to discern that Joseph (Yosef) was alive in Egypt, due to his loss of *ruach hakodesh*, or divine inspiration. Some believe these great Torah giants were prevented from seeing what should have been obvious by Divine decree, while

others simply see this as a lesson the Jewish people needed to learn - even great Torah scholars can be mistaken....

But whatever one's opinion on the matter, one cannot help but be in awe of a person, who chose nonetheless to return to the Kovno of 1940, knowing full well what awaited him, motivated simply by a love for the Jewish people that rose above all other concerns.

Where does this intense love of Israel come from and what is its place in Judaism?

This week, we begin the fifth book of the Torah: the book of *Devarim*. And hidden amongst the first words of this book is an idea which is often missed, but forms one of the most basic principles of Judaism, as well as the backbone of the Jewish march towards nationhood.

It is interesting that this week's portion is always read the Shabbat prior to the 9th of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple on which Jews all over the world fast & mourn in memory of the destruction of both Temples and all that those destructions represented.

Many suggest that the connection between this week's portion, which is essentially the beginning of a partial review of the Jewish people's journey from Egypt, and the ninth of Av, is a verse which bears a striking resemblance to the first verse of the book of Lamentations (*Eicha*) which we read on Tisha' B'Av.

*"Eicha esah levadi'; tarchachem u'masa'achem, ve'rivchem?"*

*"How can I bear alone (on my own) your trouble, burdens and quarrels?" (Deut. 1:12)*

This verse, describing Moshe's apparent frustration with the Jewish people's constant complaints and contentiousness, begins with the same word that both begins and ultimately names, the book of lamentations: ***Eicha***. A word that cries of how and why, and expresses an inability to come to terms with a painful reality beyond comprehension.

Less noticed however, is the fact that this verse contains another feature in common with the verse of *Eicha* (Lamentations): the pain of being alone: Moshe's pain seems to emanate from the fact that he carries his burden alone, and the unanswerable question posed by Jeremiah (*Yirmiyahu HaNavi*) as well, is

*"How doth she (the city) sit alone (and desolate) who once was filled with people...?"*  
(*Eicha* 1:1)

Why does this one verse ensure this entire portion's placement as the introduction to the saddest and most painful day of the year (Tisha B'Av)?

The ***Kli Yakar*** (**Rav Ephraim of Luntshitz**, 1550-1619; the Rabbi of Lemberg) makes a fascinating point on the opening verse of *Devarim*. Take a close look at this verse:

*"Eileh hadevarim asher diber Moshe el kol YIsrael, be'ever haYarden...."*

*"These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan River...." (1:1)*

This is the first time the phrase "*Kol YIsrael*" appears in the Torah. Indeed, this phrase appears nowhere else in the Torah outside of the book of *Devarim* (in which it appears no less than eleven times!) And, in fact, this phrase, with which we open this book, also forms its conclusion: the last words of the Torah are, again:

*"... Asher asah Moshe, le'einei kol YIsrael."*

*"...that Moshe did (accomplished?) before (in the eyes of) all of Israel" (Devarim 34:12)*

And since this book begins and ends with this phrase (*Kol YIsrael*; All of Israel), one might suggest that just as the introduction of the concept of *Matot* (tribes, as discussed a few weeks ago in the portion of *Matot*) was introduced in and thus part of the purpose (and process) of the Book of *Bamidbar* (Numbers), perhaps this phrase is the essence of the purpose of the entire book of *Devarim*.

In fact, until now the Jewish people are consistently referred to as *B'nei YIsrael* (the children of Israel, which would seem to imply their worth as part of one family, only now are they referred to as *kol YIsrael*: all of Israel, perhaps because this is the final stage in the birth of the nation of Israel. A family is all about unity, but it is also an exclusive group: you are either born into it or you aren't, and most people are not really part of 'the family'.

Every wedding photo album has pages of 'family pictures' just as every once in a while, families get together 'just the family'. But Judaism is not just a family, we are a nation, and of all the principles of Jewish nationhood, none is as important as the fact that we are 'all of Israel' or we are none of us.

Indeed, the essence of the destruction we mourn this coming week was described by Jeremiah as: "*How doth she sit alone ...?*" (*Eicha* 1:1) Loneliness is the root of destruction, because when one of us is alone, we are no longer the Jewish people we were meant to be. Hence, Moshe's reference to the burden he bore 'alone'. It was this loneliness that provided the root of the destruction we are still mourning after two thousand years.

It is interesting that in the entire Torah there is only one thing that is described as 'not good' and that is to be alone:

*"Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado'."*

*"It is not good for man to be alone". ( Bereishit (Genesis) 2:18 )*

In fact, if being alone is 'not good' which would be the opposite of 'good', the essence of all that is good, is being together. Indeed, the first act of creation described as 'good' is the creation of light, because light is the essence of good. And light is all about one-ness. Think about it: imagine being in a great hall with many chandeliers illuminating the hall. While you can clearly point out the many chandeliers in the hall, you cannot differentiate between the different particles of light they each provide. Because light is all about creating one-ness. In fact as the verse suggests:

*"Ner Hashem nishmat Adam"*

*"The candle of G-d is the soul of man." (Mishlei (Proverbs) 20:27 )*

Our soul is compared to a candle for the same reason. Imagine you could visit heaven or reality beyond our physical world. And imagine you could meet up with the souls of all your great-grandparents. How would you be able to differentiate between one soul and another? After all, the 'definition' of a soul is that it is not physical, and just as **Maimonides** points out that G-d cannot be physical because then G-d would be limited (here, and not there) whereas G-d is really everywhere, the same is true of a soul. It is not physical, or limited, hence it is not here or there. So how would you be able to tell the difference between one soul and the next? The truth is you wouldn't, because the reality is all those souls are really one. We live in a physical world, immersed in the illusion that we are all different and other.... But in reality we are all really one. And the challenge is to be able to see that; to see beyond the illusion of otherness and experience one-ness, here, now, even in this physical world.

Interestingly, that is the essence of Shabbat, which is why it is a taste (really a chance to perceive) of the world to come (known in rabbinic literature as *Me'ei olam haba*, a view of the world to come...)

On Shabbat we are able to put aside our 'otherness' and see the reality of our one-ness. Perhaps that is why we begin Shabbat by lighting two separate candles, but end Shabbat with one (havdallah) flame: a torch of many wicks all forming one flame, because Shabbat is all about creating a space where all the different 'wicks' come together as one....

And the image of the candles we use does not end there, because no matter how many candles are lit from one candle, the original candle does not lose any of its flame; any of its light. And when a candle 'gives' to all those other candles, what you end up with is just a lot more light, which of course is what giving is all about, because it taps into the secret of our one-ness and illuminates and thus dispels the illusion of, our otherness.

And this is the essence of the phrase '*Kol Yisrael*', All of Israel, which suggests the goal of all of us, as one, together. Indeed in the story of creation, although the Torah refers to the different stages of creation as good ("Tov") there is no mention of 'good' on the second day, because that was the day when Hashem (G-d) separated the waters, and if good is all about one-ness and togetherness, then even separation with the goal of ultimately re-uniting is not yet 'good'. The third day, on the other hand, is the only day in which the word 'good' ("Tov") is used twice, because the third day is when the waters are brought back together which is the essence of what is good in this world.

And although many stages of creation are described as good, only at the end of creation when seeing all (Kol) that had been created **functioning together**, does G-d describe creation as **very** good:

*"Vayar Elokim et kol asher asah ve'hinei tov me'od."*

*"And G-d saw **all** that He had fashioned and behold it was **very** good." (Bereishit 1:31)*

It is precisely when we are "kol" (as in *Kol Yisrael*...) that we are *very* good. And that may be the purpose of the entire book of *Devarim*, as well as the underlying reason for this week's portion (*Devarim*) being read every year on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av.

This book (*Devarim*) is unique as well, because in this book, Moshe is speaking to the next generation of the Jewish people, born from slaves but born free, in the desert, and about to enter the land of Israel. This generation will witness the loss of the great revealed miracles: the Manna will no longer fall, and the clouds of glory which protected the Jews in the desert will no longer be there for all to see. But this generation born of a great and holy family will have the privilege of transforming that family into a great nation. And in Judaism, the essence of our being a nation is that we are all one, together, all of us.

Tisha B'av, and all the generations of destruction and pain, sorrow and despair, was born in loneliness and otherness. The Talmud tells us the second Temple was destroyed (according to the *Netziv's* understanding) because Jews hated one another for their differences (*sinat chinam*; see the **Netziv's** introduction to his *Ha'Emek Davar* on the book of *Bereishit*). And thus, the third Temple will be rebuilt, as **Rav Kook** suggests, through our love for each other (*ahavat chinam*) because of our differences: because we are able to recognize that really, we are all one.

And this of course, was Benji.

To be a commander is to be the bond that brings together an entire unit. Indeed, in the Israeli army the Hebrew word for unit is '*yechidah*' whose root is '*echad*', 'one'. Because in an army unit all the differences have to be put aside, and everyone has to become 'one'. Indeed, their lives depend on this.

But more than just the strategic challenge of creating one-ness in a unit is the ability to actually be at one with one's men.

*I recall, at one of the many eulogies heard over the year in Benji's memory, hearing about one particular Shabbat when Benji was due to go home on leave.*

*It's difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced it just how valuable a weekend pass is in the army. After weeks spent in the dreary life of olive grey and green, sleeping on cots, or in jeeps or even in sleeping bags on the dirt, eating army food which can sometimes consist of cold army rations grabbed in the darkness, and often going without showers and proper toilets for days at a time, the prospect of a weekend at home with mom's cooking and a soft bed with real pillows is as close to heaven as a person can get in this world.*

*But that particular Shabbat (weekend) Benji found out some of the men under his command who were '*chayalim bodedim*' (lone soldiers who have no home in Israel either because they have volunteered to serve despite the fact that they grew up overseas where their families still remain or because they come from broken homes...) were staying on base for Shabbat because they had nowhere to go. So he came home for a few hours and went back to base for Shabbat, giving up his weekend pass to be with his men so that they would know that in his unit no soldier is ever alone....*

*In all the years I was in the army I never heard of a commander, who ever thought of, let alone did such a thing.... Many people talk about the fact that we are all meant to be one, but occasionally one is privileged to meet someone who actually lives it; such a man was Benji Hillman.*

And that is the goal: that in order to fulfill our mission in the world which is to be a light unto the nations, a beacon of what oneness and togetherness (light) is all about, we must first learn to be one with each other, no matter our differences.

Indeed, when comforting a mourner in Judaism we say:

*"Hamakom yenachem otcha' betoch shaar aveilei tziyon ve'Yerushalayim..." "May Hashem (source of all space) comfort you amongst all the mourners of Zion...."*

Precisely because the only comfort to mourning which is all about loneliness, is oneness when we know we are not alone and indeed we are all one.

And when we stand under the *chuppah*, we recite, as one of the blessings to the new bride and groom:

*"Sos tasis ve'tagel ha'Akara, be'kibbutz baneha' letocha' besimcha...."*  
*"How much will the barren one (Jerusalem) rejoice and be happy, when her sons gather in her once again in joy...."*

The same Jerusalem who sits so lonely and forlorn will one day see her sons come together and be full of joy....

Just a few short weeks after singing that blessing and seeing Benji and his new bride Ayalah come together under their *chuppah*, surrounded by their family and friends, we were searching in vain for the words with which to comfort them in their loneliness.

And yet, if there is any comfort to be found, it is that no Jewish mourner is ever alone, because the essence of the comfort we so desperately yearn for, and the dream hidden in the dark pain of *Tisha B'Av*, is that perhaps this year at long last, we will learn, first as a people, and then as a world how to truly come together as one, so that one day soon:

*"Oloteihem ve'Zivcheihem le'ratzon al mizbechi' ki beiti beit tefillah yikareh le'chol ha'amim."*

"Their whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (*painful as they may be*) will be a desired and received offering on my (G-d's?) altar, and my home (the Temple) will be called a house of tefillah (dreams and desire) for all nations." (*Yishayahu* (Isaiah) 56:7)

Shabbat Shalom,  
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