

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Devarim)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

The bus comes careening down the narrow street, and the few pedestrians hug the walls as the thirty feet of Egged bus hurtles by with inches to spare. Years ago, this was all a lot of fun, and we used to describe the experience, unique to this neighborhood, as a new sport, eligible for the Olympics. It doesn't seem possible that there is enough room for both the bus and the pedestrians (not to mention baby carriages, wheelchairs, etc.) along these narrow streets which are more like alleys, but somehow everyone always emerges unscathed; one more miracle in the city of Jerusalem.

Students used to delight in the 'thrill' of an Egged bus hurtling along at breakneck speed, without even seeming to slow, and feeling the wind rush by as the thirty tons of bus rushed by, inches from their faces.

But the groups don't really come to this Jerusalem neighborhood anymore. And not because of the fears of terrorism, or the concerns of being out in public areas with everything going on today; no, the neighborhood of Meah She'arim has become persona non-gratis to tourists for a whole different reason.

On a beautiful Friday morning in Jerusalem, we took a group of thirty-five birthright students on our Isralight trip, for a walk through Meah She'arim.

The residents of this neighborhood who define themselves as 'ultra-orthodox' Jews, (not to be confused with the 'super double secret orthodox' of the next neighborhood over....), are very sensitive to outsiders who come in to their neighborhood, and with good reason.

I have seen tourists walk up to people with cameras and photograph their faces at distances of two or three inches; I have seen large buses disgorge huge groups of two and three hundred tourists at a time who practically stampeded through this otherwise quiet neighborhood on a Shabbat afternoon, and I can understand how the people who live here have gotten tired of being Amish-like tourist attractions.

Add to that the fact that this is a neighborhood which values a certain inner and outer modesty, in an effort to view people for their spiritual essence, and not as physical objects, and one understands that some of the people here have a very low tolerance for foreign, and especially Western visitors.

Nonetheless, there is much to be learned from a visit to this traditional community, especially on a Friday morning when the entire neighborhood is seen preparing for Shabbat, and a walk through the inner courtyards is like a visit to the shtet'l of our great- great grandparents. So, we went for a walk.

There are few things more important in human relations than the opportunity to be sensitive to those around us, and, truth be told, a walk through Meah She'arim is actually an opportunity to practice heightened sensitivity to an entire community. So we asked everyone to take this into account and adjust their normal mode of dress and so we left the tank tops and shorts behind in favor of long sleeves, skirts and button- down shirts.

We split up with the men walking on one side of the street and women on the other (I felt like Moses in the middle....) and I asked the students to keep the volume down and experience the neighborhood as visitors, rather than as the normal deafening horde of tourists in search of oddities and curiosities.

It is actually amazing to see how people react to these efforts. I cannot tell you how many times Meah She'arim residents have made it a point to come over and say 'Todah', thank you, for making the effort to take our sensitivities into account.

All of this allows people to see the beauty around them. To be sure, this is not an aesthetically beautiful neighborhood, and the wealth of the people here is not measured in dollars and cents, but there are beautiful messages hidden between the cobblestones.

As an example, the next time you take a walk in Meah' She'arim, take a good look at the store windows and you will notice something missing.... there are no window displays. For the most part, if you pass a women's clothing store, there is simply a rod with some dresses hanging in the window. A shoe store simply has a pile of shoes, and a paper goods store will have a shelf with some paper plates and plastic cutlery.

Noticing this phenomenon years ago, I once asked a shopkeeper why he didn't utilize his store window to advertise his wares with more than just a pile, and he explained this to me: there is a verse in the Torah "Mi'De'var Sheker Tirchak", "Distance yourself from falsehood". (VaYikra 19)

Notice, he pointed out, that it does not say "Don't Lie". It is not enough merely to avoid the lie; one has to distance oneself completely from lying. And that is why the Meah She'arim shop windows are so different. When you walk by a store you should go in to buy a dress because you need a dress, not because you are enticed by a display. Advertising is often about encouraging people to want what they really don't need, and if a woman, as an example, is buying a dress because she thinks she will look like the model in the store window, then that is just not honest. And, added the storeowner, 'I want to know that no one enters my store because of anything I have done which is dishonest'. What a refreshing way to look at life!

All of which makes some of the other types of stories and experiences one can have in Meah' She'arim so much more challenging, and this stroll was no exception.

Standing in front of the Breslau Yeshiva and taking in the smells and sounds of Jerusalem preparing for Shabbat, we were confronted by a fellow with a mission.

He had a knapsack on his back, and a megaphone perched on his shoulder, (taped to one of the backpack's straps) and he was speaking into a hand-held mike at the top of his voice, essentially intent on reminding us all that most of the present day ills of society could be traced to the immodest dress prevalent in the West. And that all Jews who dressed immodestly bore the responsibility for the consequences being meted out today on the Jewish people.

This fellow was actually somewhat representative of a few other individuals who made it their business to come over to us and take us to task for whatever perceived or real infraction of Jewish tradition we were visiting on their Jewish community.

Now, to be fair, there were also people who approached our group and invited students home for Shabbat (and this in a very poor neighborhood by Western fiscal standards, and with only a few hours left till Shabbat), so the issue we are raising should not be taken to represent this entire community, and in fact the overwhelming majority of Jews who live here are very hospitable and welcoming, especially when you meet them outside of the glaring tourist lights of the cameras. (As an example, dress appropriately, and walk through Meah She'arim with a friend or two on a Shabbat afternoon without the cameras, walkmans and cell phones....)

However, what is interesting here is the issue this incident raises: Here was a fellow, whom none of us had ever met before, who devoted his entire Friday to the mission of telling anyone venturing into his neighborhood where their behavior, in his opinion, was lacking according to Jewish tradition. What on earth would possess a person to spend his time going to all this effort? In fact, one seems to encounter a significant number of people who seem to see it as their obligation to point out to others whatever they are doing wrong and even how they are supposed to go about fixing it!

So what ever happened to 'live and let live'?

Now, this particular arena of human behavior is actually addressed in the Torah and even given a name:

"Hocheach Tochiach Et Amitecha", And you shall rebuke (or give reproof to) your colleague (or friend)." (VaYikra 19)

If you see someone doing something, which is a violation of Jewish tradition, there is actually a mitzvah to rebuke that person and it appears to be incumbent upon any one of us to tell this person off and somehow 'bring them back' to the path of Jewish tradition!

This mitzvah, called Tochachah, is challenging to say the least. Does telling someone off for what I may perceive to be misguided behavior, really cause him or her to mend the error of his or her ways? Does anyone really believe that yelling at someone to 'cease his or her sinning' will have the desired effect and actually cause a significant change in human behavior?

And with what arrogance to I presume to be the source of all wisdom and the paragon of virtue who can tell everyone else how to behave? Who am I to tell someone else what they are doing wrong? And yet, the Torah clearly states that this is, after all, a mitzvah....

This week's Torah portion, *Devarim*, which opens the fifth book of the Torah of the same name, raises this question to a new level.

"Eileh Ha'Devarim Asher Diber Moshe El Kol Yisrael Be'Ever Ha'Yarden...." "These are the words which Moshe spoke to the entire Jewish people on the other side of the Jordan...." (Devarim 1:1)

Forty years after leaving Egypt, the Jewish people, gathered together on the East bank of the Jordan River, are finally ready to enter the land of Israel.

But Moshe will not be going with them, and this is his chance to say goodbye. One can only imagine what must have been going through Moshe's mind. A lifetime's effort was finally about to bear fruit: after all the trials and tribulations of transforming a nation of slaves into a people with a mission, the Jews were about to come home. And it was time for Moshe to say goodbye. In fact, pretty much the entire book of Deuteronomy is Moshe's farewell speech; for thirty- six days, from the first of Shevat until the sixth day of Adar, Moshe bids farewell to the people he loves so much.

So what do you say when this is the last opportunity to teach the second generation of Jews, who for the most part did not grow up under the whips of Egyptian servitude, instead coming of age as a free independent people?

These are the Jews who neither saw Sinai, nor experienced the splitting of the sea and the ten plagues, so perhaps this is an opportunity to review for them how they arrived at this auspicious day, and, more importantly, why they are here.

Indeed, this fifth book of the Torah is also known as the "Mishneh Torah", literally: 'a review of the Torah', which makes sense, because this is the chance to give over one last time, the mission of the Jewish people.

And this appears to be what Moshe wants to do:

"....and so Moshe explained this Torah saying: Hashem our G-d spoke to us at Chorev (Sinai) saying...." (1:5-6)

Apparently, Moshe is about to review the point of it all: the commandments we were given at Sinai. Except that he doesn't.

In fact, Moshe begins what seems to be a random review of a number of extremely unpleasant incidents which don't seem to be all that significant, and doesn't even mention any of the commandments, the mission, or even the purpose of entering the land itself.

And finally, in chapter 4 (4:1), when it finally looks like Moshe is going to get down to business ("And now Israel, listen to the laws and statutes that I will teach you...."), we again find Moshe recalling a series of transgressions the Jewish people perpetrated which are the real reason they ended up spending all this time in the desert.

So what is going on? What is the purpose of this entire speech? Further, there is an understanding amongst the commentaries that the beginning of a matter contains its essence. In other words, since this portion begins an entire book, understanding what this week's portion is really about, allows us to ascertain the meaning and purpose of the entire book of Devarim.

Additionally, it is worth noting that we are in the midst of the most painful and challenging part of the Jewish year. This week, beginning with the first of the month of Av, is a period traditionally known as the nine days, leading up to the ninth of Av on which both Temples were destroyed. This week's portion always falls on the Shabbat preceding the ninth of Av (known as *Tisha' Be'Av*). (Indeed, when reading the portion, we begin the second section (1:12) with the mournful tune used for the book of lamentations, read on Tisha B'Av.)

So what is the connection between this portion (Moshe's speech) and *Tisha' B'Av*?

A closer look at the opening words of Moshe's speech actually reveal a number of challenging questions which may contain the answer to this question.

Although the portion begins by telling us that *"These are the words which Moshe spoke to the entire Jewish people...."* we then launch into a rather lengthy description of exactly where the Jewish people were when Moshe spoke to them (1:1-5). Why was it so important to know exactly where this speech took place? Would it not have been enough to know they were on the banks of the Jordan?

This is especially challenging, as the place described could not possibly have existed!

"....In the desert (the Midbar), in the Arava, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan, Chatzeirot and Di' Zahav...." (1:1))

If they were in the Arava, the wilderness south of the Jordan valley, then they were *not* opposite Suf, the Red sea (known as Yam Suf). Indeed, Rashi quotes Rav Yochanan (in the Midrash Sifri) who points out: "We have searched the entire Torah and know of no place called 'Tofel and Lavan'...."

Tradition teaches, rather, that all these names of places were actually allusions to events that occurred in the past forty years, during the Jews' sojourn in the desert.

"These words (spoken here by Moshe) "are words of chastisement, and Moshe lists here all the places where the Jewish people angered G-d, therefore they (the places) are only alluded to, out of respect for the Jewish people." (Rashi 1:1, quoting the Sifri)

The Midrash goes on to connect these unknown names with some of the painful episodes which occurred to the Jews in desert. Di-Zahav (Zahav is the Hebrew word for gold) alludes to the Golden calf; Tofel Ve'Lavan refers to the Jews' denigration of the manna, which was white (Lavan) etc.

All of which is absolutely stupefying! This is what Moshe chose to say upon bidding farewell to the Jewish people? A list of all the terrible things their parents did in the desert? What could possibly be the benefit of listing all the terrible things done in the past at this juncture? This is not to say there is no benefit to be learned from past mistakes, but not here and not now!

One of the most important moments before a mission, in which the right commander can make all the difference actually has very little to do with the actual mission. After all the training is done, and all the preparations are in order, the unit is ready to go, and the waiting game begins. And there is a moment, a last opportunity, for the commander to inspire his men.

I remember one winter morning in Lebanon, standing at the main gate of the base about to head out for yet another patrol. It was freezing out, and there was a light rain making everything wet and muddy. The cold seemed to penetrate everything getting under the layers into your bones. Some of the guys in this unit were supposed to have gotten a week's pass, but leaves had been cancelled for some logistical or security reason, which left the guys even more depressed than usual.

The area we were stationed in was a hot zone, with Israeli army vehicular traffic forbidden at night, and we were setting out on what is known as a petichat tzir, with the goal of checking out the stretch of road under our command for any booby traps or ambushes that might have been laid in the night, before allowing any normal army traffic out on the highway.

Dawn had not yet broken, and we were standing in the dark about to head out. I could tell the guys, who were all exhausted, were more depressed from having to get out of bed in the rain than anything else, and I realized I had to say something.

I was actually in the middle of a book by Yigal Yadin on the story of the archeological dig which rediscovered Masada, and had been reading the night before of a small piece of parchment which was discovered one morning on the eastern escarpment. It was a single psalm from Tehillim, the book of Psalms, and the general opinion was that the site of its discovery had been a rebel guard post, so most probably this was a page of the psalms a Jewish sentry had read for inspiration and prayer.

Two thousand years ago, a Jewish soldier had prayed from Tehillim, while looking down on the might of the Roman legions, and here we were, some of us as it turned out, with the same book of Tehillim in our breast pocket in a modern State of Israel. I told the men to think about that and we headed out on patrol.

To be honest, I had forgotten all about that little episode, until I ran into one of those soldiers at a bus station in Israel a few years ago. I didn't even remember his name, but he remembered me, and reminded me of that moment. He was in uniform, in the middle of a stint of reserve duty, and with a smile pulled out a worn little copy of the book of Tehillim from his pocket. He told me since that moment, whenever he had found himself a little down or challenged by the events surrounding him in the army, he would recall my little speech and pull out his little Tehillim book....

Moshe here has an enormous opportunity. Why is he squandering this moment by telling the Jewish people off?

Rashi points out, in fact, that the words "*Eileh Ha'Devarim*" ("*These are the words*") refer to words of rebuke, thus making this the opening theme of the entire book of Devarim. Why?

Perhaps in order to understand what is going on here we need to take a closer look at what reproof (Tochachah) is really all about.

Maimonides makes a fascinating point in his *Hilchot De'ot* or Laws of character traits.

"When a person errs against his fellow, he (the person who was wronged) should not be silent.... Rather, it is a mitzvah to let him know (Le'Hodiah) and tell him: 'Why did you do such and such a thing to me'...."

"If one sees his friend erring (transgressing) or pursuing a path which is not good, it is a mitzvah to return him to goodness (a good path) and to let him know (Le'Hodiah) that he is transgressing against himself with his wicked ways, as it says: 'Hocheach Tochiach Et Amitecha', And you shall rebuke (or give reproof to) your colleague".
(Maimonides De'ot 6:6-7)

Maimonides here is describing two types of rebuke: one where a person does something wrong to me, and the second, where a person does something wrong to.... himself.

Incredibly, the motivation for telling someone else off has to be love for that other person. If it is all about me, and what he has done to me, then there really is no point to it all. The question here really is, do I care so much about my fellow human being that I can't bear to see them doing something that will result in them hurting themselves.

You see, the real question here is what Tochachah (reprove) is meant to be. Maimonides is making a clear point that the goal of Tochachah is not to rehabilitate someone so that they will be able to function in our community or society.

The purpose of Tochachah, ultimately, is to teach me how much this other person is already a part of our community. In fact, the Hebrew word Tochachah actually comes from the same root as Hochacha, or proof. When I care enough about the mistakes that I perceive a friend to be making that I take the time and the effort to involve myself in them, what I am really doing is *re-proving* just how much I care about them.

But it is much more than that. It is no accident that Maimonides, in his Mishneh Torah or magnum opus on all of Jewish law, includes these laws within the section of *De'ot*.

Most people translate the word De'ot as opinions, or character traits. Indeed, the purpose of these seven chapters of laws is all about how one becomes an ethical person. If the goals of being Jewish and having a Jewish people are about making the world a more ethical place, then Judaism has to have a system for *how* one becomes such an ethical person.

Hilchot De'ot are essentially the laws of mentschlichkeit, or how to become a mentsch.

But the word De'ot also comes from Da'at, or knowledge. And of course, in order to have a De'ah, an opinion, one must have knowledge with which to develop such an opinion. (unless one is a politician....).

Maimonides points out, at the beginning of his book of Mitzvoth, that there is a positive Commandment "*Lei'dah Sheyesh Sham Eloha*", "*To know that Hashem exists.*" (Maimonides *Sefer HaMitzvoth Mitzvah Aseh*'1)

This is a difficult commandment to comprehend: how can one be obligated to know anything? One either knows or one doesn't! But the word Da'at may also mean something else. The first time we find mention of Da'at in relationship to human behavior is in the fourth chapter of Bereishit (Genesis):

"Va'Yeidah Ha'Adam Et Chavah Ishto', Va'Tahar, Va'Teled Ben."
"And Adam knew Eve his wife, and she became pregnant, and gave birth to a son."(Genesis 4:1)

Adam had relations with Eve. Da'at is also about relationships. In fact, relationships are all about getting to know each other, and this may well be what Maimonides means with regards to G-d: our challenge is to develop *a relationship* with G-d.

The laws of De'ot then, are the laws of relationships. And Tochachah is all about healthy relationships.

In real relationships we can tell each other what is wrong. If I am a guest at a dinner party, and some stranger is behaving rudely, say, eating with his mouth open, I can't imagine I would say anything. But if that were one of my children, I would absolutely tell them, and would view it as part of my responsibility to share with them what was missing or lacking in their behavior, precisely because I love them so much, and want them to grow to be all that they can be.

If my wife tells me I am doing something wrong, what that really means is how much she cares about me, because if I were some stranger, she wouldn't bother.

Perhaps this, then, is what is going on here in the book of Devarim. As the Jews are about to enter the land of Israel, Moshe is expressing to the next generation how much he really cares about them. One might think that a part of Moshe would be only too happy to see them fail, proving that the Jewish people without Moshe just don't have it.

But Moshe wants to see them make it. He wants them to learn from past mistakes, and wants them to know that it all starts with relationships. That is why this book is all about Moshe's words. The Torah does not tell me here that G-d spoke these words to Moshe. These are presented as Moshe's words, because Moshe became Moshe by virtue of the relationship he developed with Hashem, and we will be able to continue that path by continuing to develop the relationship with Moshe, and tapping into his relationship with G-d. Indeed, the entire Torah is called '*Torat Moshe*' precisely because real Torah comes as the result of relationships, and education and learning come not by reading a book, but by developing a relationship with whoever is teaching me that book, in an unbroken chain, all the way back to Moshe himself.

This is not to say Tochachah is so simple. The Talmud and other sources make it pretty clear that there has to be an assumption the person you are speaking to will actually listen, and if words of Tochachah will lead to enmity one is not permitted to speak out.

The tradition is replete with examples of how reprove must come from love and care for my fellow and that he or she must see that, and indeed Maimonides makes clear that this process occurs when one sees one's *friend* ("*Chaveiro*") doing something. There is an assumption that the person you are speaking to is your friend, and that they know it is coming from a good place. In fact, it is not at all clear that most people today are even capable, much less allowed to give Tochachah.

Ultimately, however, if I take the time to give Tochachah, to reprove someone, what I am really demonstrating is how much I believe in the person I am communicating with. If I didn't think they could change, I wouldn't bother. Tochachah suggests that I believe you are worth it, and I believe you can grow and change.

Perhaps what Moshe was saying to the Jewish people so long ago, on the banks of the Jordan River, was: 'I believe in you, and you can do this. You are a part of something incredible, and you have the power to do something here that will still be meaningful thousands of years from now. 'And Moshe was right, because here we are.

And so, as much as I may disagree with both what that fellow in Meah She'arim was saying, as well as how he was saying it, I can't help but wonder about the implications of that same Tochachah. Would this fellow have been as riled up if he was walking down a street in France next to a group of Catholics wearing the same thing?

Maybe there is still something very special about the fact that there are Jews who have never have met us, but still care enough about us to get upset with us....?

And maybe this is why we read this portion just prior to the fast of Tisha' B'Av, when the Talmud tells us the temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred. Maimonides points out that not giving Tochachah can actually lead to hatred, and sometimes telling a person off for what he has done wrong clears the air and allows, again for the building of a healthier relationship.

May Hashem bless us this year, to rediscover the things we all share in common, and to tap in to how much we really care about each other, so that soon, instead of mourning what was lost, we may rejoice in what has been rebuilt.

Wishing you all comfort on Tisha B'Av, and a Shabbat Shalom,

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