

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

### (Portion of Devarim)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

Words; so innocent and yet so powerful....

Wars begin with words; with ranting by madmen, and absolute declarations of intolerance. But so many other experiences also begin with words; are grown with words; love is watered with words; forgiveness, hope, prayers and peace, all grown with words.

This week, one woman's words touched my heart as she has touched the hearts of an entire Nation here in Israel.

Miriam Peretz was a woman you might have passed in the street without a second glance; married with 6 children, she does not seem like a source of towering strength and faith. But Hashem chose her for as great a test as any of us can imagine. She joined the family of bereaved parents when her son Uriel, 22 years old, an officer in the elite Golani recon unit, fell in battle in Lebanon. But she experienced the unimaginable when the IDF knocked on her door again in 2010, a year after operation *Cast Lead*; to tell her she had lost a second son. Eliraz was 32 years old; the deputy commander of the Golani brigade, and married with 4 children, when he fell in combat in Aza.

How does one even find the words to express the bottomless pit of despair a person must fall into in such a moment? And how does such a person continue to live when, five years after losing Uriel, her husband Eliezer dies of a broken heart.

Miriam Peretz lives with her words, and her incredible faith. And she gives those words, as a gift, to anyone willing to listen. These last weeks, as once again photos of the fallen fill the news and Israelis by the tens of thousands flock to military cemeteries to bid farewell to fathers and sons, brothers and friends, Miriam has been traversing the country to visit with the newly bereaved families, hoping to share with them words of comfort and of faith; to share her journey, and the message that we can, we must, go on.

She visited last week with the parents of Max Steinberg, a lone Golani soldier from Los Angeles whose funeral was attended by 30,000 people, most of whom had never met Max. They came because he was not just someone else's brother, son and friend; he became their brother, son and friend.

Mrs. Peretz told Max's mother that she has a second home where two of her 6 children live: Mount Herzl military cemetery. Every time she visits her second home, she is torn by the question of whose grave she should visit first, which son should she put first - an impossible question. The Steinbergs are headed back to Los Angeles where they live and need to be for their remaining two children, so Miriam told Mrs. Steinberg that from now on, every time she visits Har Herzl cemetery, she will go to Max's grave to hug him, and let him and his family know that in this country, a Jew is never alone. The power of words....

When she visits newly bereaved families whose sons and daughters have fallen, she tells them not to struggle with the question “why me?” Because there is no answer to that question in this world. And if they stay in that struggle, with that question; they will slowly die. Instead, she tells them, you must answer the question of *why* they fell; what were they fighting for? This question, she says, must be answered. And the answer cannot be “stam” (for nothing), because then too, you die.

This week we begin the fifth and last book of the five books of Moses: Sefer Devarim; literally: the book of words. A strange name for this book of the Torah, seemingly chosen because it is the verse with which the book begins:

*“Eileh ha’devarim asher diber Moshe el kol Yisrael, be’ever haYarden...”* “*These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan...*” (1; 1)

But the entire Torah is all about words; why was this book the ‘Book of Words’? Interestingly, the book of Devarim is presented as the words of Moshe, as opposed to the normal verse one finds in the Torah when Moshe speaks the words of G-d to the Jewish people. And yet, we do believe that this book too is the word of G-d, just as is the rest of the Torah. So which is it? Are these G-d’s words, or Moshe’s?

Many of the commentaries take note of the fact that this same word *Devarim* (words) was a central part of Moshe’s beginning back when Moshe spoke with G-d at the burning Bush. Resisting Hashem’s command to redeem the Jewish people, Moshe contends that:

*“Lo Ish Devarim Anochi ”* “*I am not a man of words*” (Exodus 4;10).

Yet somehow, he will become the greatest man of words in human history; the five G-d-given books he shared with the world and the words he left us gave birth to three of the world’s greatest religions, and millions of people still read those words daily, three thousand years later.

Perhaps the key to understanding this phenomenon is to note the single most critical part of Moshe’s character; which the Torah tells us not only defined who he was, but how he got there as well.

*“Ve’haIsh Moshe anav me’od ”* “*And Moshe, the man was exceedingly humble*” (Numbers 12:3)

Of all the character traits that Moshe possessed, the Torah tells us that his greatest was humility, which is nothing short of incredible. After all, this was a man who allowed himself to argue with G-d! He was clearly the holiest man alive and must have known it. And he single-handedly led an entire nation of slaves out of servitude, defying the mightiest nation on earth. So how does such a man become “*exceedingly humble*”?

In fact, it actually makes a lot of sense once we understand what humility is all about. Most people think that humility is all about self-effacement; about assuming we are unworthy, and inconsequential. Judaism suggests nothing could be further from the truth. Moshe knew how great he was and knew that

the entire Jewish people was dependent on him, but he understood he was just a vehicle; his greatness was a gift from G-d and his was just to figure out what to do with that greatness.

Like a Beethoven who was a child prodigy, and whose greatness was a gift; his not to become arrogant from it but rather to struggle with what best to do with that G-d given talent.

An arrogant person thinks it's all about him; a humble person knows it's not about him at all, he has just been given certain gifts for which he can take no credit; he is a conduit for bringing something beautiful into the world. How can we, each and every one of us be the vehicles we were meant to be, to make the world a better place? Moshe understood he was Hashem (G-d)'s vehicle and his greatest attribute was the ability to know how great he was on the one hand, but how much it was not about him at all, on the other.

That is why Moshe could become that ultimate man of words; why the Torah can be his words and G-d's words all at the same time. Because his words **are** G-d's words; everything we do, every struggle and every triumph, every achievement and accomplishment are just our way of becoming a vehicle for good in the world.

Here in Israel these past weeks, we cannot struggle with why these boys fell, and why G-d chose them; there is no answer to that question in this world and to remain in that struggle is to slowly die. But we can be determined to know what they were fighting for, and why they chose to be willing to give up life itself, in the pursuit of something greater. And we can decide that we will become as Moshe: determined to live up to those lofty ideals, each of us according to the great gifts we have been given, becoming vehicles for a far better world where one day peace will reign and good truth and beauty will triumph.

These the past few weeks we have learned volumes about who these boys and young men really are and from what cloth they are cut, through the mothers of the three boys (Eyal, Gilad and Naftali who were kidnapped and killed just one month ago, and women like Miriam Peretz whose indomitable strength revives our broken spirits. These salt of the earth, loving, gentle mothers whose faith and resolve is as strong as their love for this land is what nurtures a generation of leaders who live a meaningful life and in their death, unite and elevate an entire people.

May Hashem bless the memory of all those who have fallen, and may we soon see peace in this special place, this country we call home.

Shabbat Shalom from Efrat and Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman