

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Devarim)

His face is a study of pure determination, seeking every depression in the rock with which to grab hold. There is very little room for mistake, as one slip can result in a 3200-foot free-fall to the valley floor below. But he is determined, and foot by foot, precarious handhold by precarious handhold, he inches his way up in his relentless drive to reach the top of El Capitan, in Yosemite National park.

El Capitan is not just another climb; it is the Everest of free climbing which sees climbers from all the world attempting to scale its sheer cliff face. But they all do it with ropes and spikes. Alex Honnhold, perhaps the greatest free-climber alive today, is determined to do it without any ropes or spikes; he wants to do what no-one has ever done: to climb El Capitan with no help and no aids, just himself alone with sheer will.

*En-route to Australia this week I had a lot of flying time, and I started watching a National Geographic documentary, *Free Solo*, and became totally captivated. What possesses a man to take such enormous risks, simply for the sense of accomplishment that comes with success? There is a certain hubris that must accompany such endeavors, and yet, there is also something so very admirable, even inspiring, about one man's determination to achieve the seemingly impossible, simply through raw courage and determination.*

Watching this climber, foot by foot, hour after hour, climb the sheer face of El Capitan's unforgiving 90-degree vertical climb, it does not seem possible for a human being to do this.

I remember once, hiking in the valley of Ein Gedi in southern Israel, seeing a family of Ibex literally running across the cliff face high above me, and pausing in sheer wonder at the agility and speed with which these animals seemed to literally skip across the face of the cliff high above. But I never imagined a human being could attempt to replicate such a feat.

At one point in the documentary, Honnhold is joined by his good friend Tommy Caldwell, himself a likeable world class climber. Caldwell is helping Honnhold develop his strategy for free-climbing El Capitan via the Free rider route, which involves some difficult moves, including a leap across the cliff face and twist allowing the climber to grab the only hand-hold available a few feet away. A number of times the documentary shows Alex practicing for his free-climb, attempting this leap while attached to ropes... and failing.

And as Caldwell describes just what a difficult move this is, you begin to understand why no-one has ever attempted this before.

The documentary takes a tragic turn when Caldwell, in a separate climbing incident falls to his death, and Alex has to deal with the loss of one of his closest friends. And it becomes clear that the list of climbers who eventually do not make it to the top, is almost as long as those who do. And you get the sense that it is precisely Alex Honnhold's understanding that it could easily happen to him, that drive him in his relentless training and preparations for his climb.

This week we begin the fifth and final book of the Torah, Devarim (Deuteronomy). It is the farewell Soliloquy of Moshe, delivered to the second generation of the Jewish people, in this, the fortieth year of the Exodus from Egypt. These are the children of those who experienced the miracles of the Exodus, born free in the desert and readying themselves for their triumphant return to the land of Israel after two hundred and fifty years of exile and bondage.

And it is instructive to see how Moshe chooses to begin his speech, seemingly designed to prepare the Jewish people for the difficult road of conquest and re-settling the land that lies ahead.

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all the children of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the Aravah (great Plain) opposite Suf, between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan and Hazerot, and Di-Zahav.” (Devarim 1:1).

Rashi here quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan who points out that many of these places do not actually exist, they are, rather, references to events that occurred when the Jewish people transgressed and rebelled. *Lavan*, (literally ‘white’) as an example refers to when the Jews displayed incredible ingratitude complaining about the manna (which was white), and *Di-Zahav* (literally meaning ‘of gold’) refers to the sin of the Golden calf.

Moshe, it seems, begins his farewell speech by criticizing and reproofing the Jewish people for all the mistakes they have made, as a warning to avoid these mistakes in order to earn and build a better future.

It is interesting that Moshe, while reproofing the people, only alludes to these transgressions of the past without actually delineating them in detail. **Rav Moshe Feinstein**, in his *Darash Moshe*, points out that this was both to avoid public embarrassment, as well as allowing the people to receive the criticism. It’s always smarter to allow a person to *infer* he has something to learn, without directly criticizing him.

The problem here however, is that Moshe is speaking to the Jewish people of the second generation, who, for the most part did not actually commit these transgressions; so why are they being criticized? Why not just tell over the history of what happened and enjoin them directly to learn from the mistakes of those that came before them?

Moshe, suggests Rav Feinstein, is referring to an often sub-conscious character flaw that we all share: the hubris of ‘*it could never happen to me; I would never do such a thing*’ which flows from the assumption that we are so much better than that....

The children of those who experienced the Exodus from Egypt must have grown up on the miraculous stories of the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, the revelation of Sinai and the incredible Manna falling from heaven. But it must have been somewhat more difficult, even painful, for their parents to recount the thousands who died at the sin of the Golden calf, or the great mistakes they made when hearing the slanderous report of the ten spies, or allowing themselves to be seduced by the Midianite princesses.

So it would be only natural for these children, now middle-aged, to imagine, especially after decades in the desert hearing the teachings of Moshe and Aaron, and living such a spiritual existence, that it could ever happen to them. They could never imagine themselves frolicking in an orgy of idolatry and

worshipping a golden calf at the foot of Sinai. And they might be sure that they, who experienced the miracle of the Manna every day, would never allow themselves to complain about anything. And that is what Moshe here is attempting to address.

There is a certain arrogance to assuming that we could and would not repeat the mistakes of those who came before us. And there is a healthy humility in recognizing, we can all make such mistakes and we all need to take special care, constantly guarding against the tragedies that can occur from not learning from the mistakes of others.

While writing this article, my wife sent me a news-piece of a woman describing a near tragedy she experienced. She drove four of her five kids to a costume store to buy costumes for Purim. Her oldest child was ten at the time. When they finally found a parking space three of the kids jumped out of the car and were heading towards a busy street with a lot of vehicular traffic speeding in both directions; while ten month-old Aviad, remained sitting quietly with his pacifier in his mouth, in the car-seat in the back. Like any responsible mother would, she jumped out of the car, auto-locking it with the remote while running towards her kids and yelling to them to stop before crossing the busy street.

Helping them cross the street they entered the costume-store and began trying on and picking costumes, oblivious to the fact that the baby was still in the back seat, locked in the car. Fortunately, they were in a hurry as she had to get them to an after-school-activity that was starting soon. Equally fortunate for them, it was February and the weather was cool, and it was getting dark as she and her children headed back to the car fifteen minutes later.

As she walked back towards the car with her kids safely running ahead, she instinctively reached out with her remote to unlock the car, and when the light went on in the car, and she saw her ten-month-old baby's head in the car seat, and the penny dropped. Describing that moment, she would later say it was the longest fifteen seconds of her life. She broke into a run yelling to her children to hurry and open the door, as she prayed to her father who had passed away, and after whom baby Aviad was named, to please intercede in heaven and allow her baby to be alive and healthy.

When they got to the car, they found Aviad sweating and crying but otherwise Ok. As the realization of what could have happened sunk in, she began to cry hysterically as did all her children, calming down only half an hour later, after giving the baby water, and thanking G-d and her father of blessed memory for looking after baby. The child was overheated after fifteen minutes in the car in February. If it had been July, or if they had stayed away much longer, it could have ended very differently.

It goes without saying, this could happen to any one of us.

Eli Be'er, the head of *Hatzalah* (Emergency rescue services) in Israel, wrote an Op-ed article this week (in the Jerusalem Post) regarding the tragedy of children who die needlessly in pools and at the beach, every year. The primary cause of such tragedies, as it turns out, is apparently parents who are on their smart phones. And a child can heaven forbid drown in two inches of water, or in barely full bucket of water left unattended while cleaning the house.

This woman subsequently did a lot of soul searching, and described some of the terrible posts she received from people telling her it happened because she is religious (she actually describes herself as

secular) and that she should be locked up, or should not have had so many children and the like. What incredible arrogance to send someone a post like that, as if we are less likely to make such a mistake simply based on the number of children we have or how many kids we have in the car.

It could happen *chas veshalom* (G-d forbid) to **any** of us, any time and any place.

She describes trying to come to terms with **why** it happened to her, knowing there are no excuses for such mistakes but determined to learn from the experience for the future: she was distracted and out of her routine and the like, but in the end at the root of it all, we all of us simply don't believe it could happen to us.

And that is precisely what Moshe is trying to communicate to the next generation as they prepare to enter the land of Israel:

'Don't sit in judgment of your parents: if you were there, you might easily have made the same mistake; learn from their mistakes so that the future will be better.'

This woman is a lawyer and was the head of the Parents' Association in her kids' school; she seems as responsible as it gets, but she decided something had to change. So she bought a buzzer device that attaches to her car keys and her child and sounds an alarm when she exits the car if not disabled by taking the child out with her.

I myself am a grandparent and have added a warning on my Waze that sounds off when I arrive at my destination with the names of our grandchildren asking me if they are in the car, and I have developed a habit, to turn my head and look back at the back seat whenever I turn my car engine off regardless of whether the kids are in the car. I also have the habit of placing my bag in the back seat.

The next time you read or hear a terrible news story, whether it's a fire that started *chas ve'shalom* from Shabbat candles or someone embezzling money in the most heinous way, don't jump to judge. Instead, take a moment to consider how easy it is for all of us to make the same innocent mistakes that can lead to such terrible results.

It is not accidental that it is Moshe, described by the Torah as the most humble of men, who shares this message with us. As we enter *Tisha B'Av*, anniversary of the day the Jewish people, two thousand years ago lost almost everything due to such hubris, it behooves us all to do a little soul-searching as to how we can become better and learn from the mistakes of others.

A little humility is most certainly in order.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman