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

(Portion of Devarim)

Visit *Yad Vashem*, Israel's national Holocaust museum, and wander off to the paths behind the plaza dedicated to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and you will come across an actual cattle car, one of the many used by the Nazis to transport hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths in the infamous concentration and death camps across Poland.

Engraved on the bannister opposite the box car is a powerful poem, (by Dan Pagis) found written in pencil in a railway-car:

Here in this carload
I am Eve
With Abel my son
If you see my other son
Cain son of man
Tell him I…

Whenever I see this poem, in that place, I am always moved by the abrupt ending of Eve's (mother of humanity) words: what would she say if she were able to finish her sentence? Why does she not finish her thought? What goes through the mind of Eve along with her son Abel (as in Cain and Abel) on their way to the slaughter? Where indeed was Cain, representing the rest of humanity?

This week we begin the fifth and final book of the Torah with the reading of the portion of ***Devarim***, literally: *the words* of Moshe our great teacher.

This book is also called *Mishneh Torah*, which means a *repetition* of the Torah: Moshe shares with us his farewell soliloquy to the Jewish people, and specifically the second generation of Jews, mostly born in freedom in the desert and about to enter at long last the land of Israel.

Interestingly this portion is always read on the Shabbat before the ninth of the Hebrew month of *Av*, when we commemorate the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem thousands of years ago.

Many suggest that the connection between this week's portion, 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* (The ninth of Av when both Temples were destroyed by the Babylonians in 586B.C.E. and by the Romans in 70 C.E. respectively):

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

"*How can I bear 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.

Somehow, this word "*Eicha*" has come to personify the pain of *Tisha B'Av*.

Jewish tradition notes that this is not the first place we find this word, or at least these letters.

When G-d responds to Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, he begins by calling out the word "*Ayekah*?" "*Where are you*?" (Bereishit (Genesis) 3:9)

Made up of the same letters as the word *Eicha*, it is essentially the same word. So, what is the connection between '*where are you'*? And '*How does the city (Jerusalem) sit all alone'*? (Lamentations 1:1).

Perhaps the root of destruction and being so alone begins with the question of where we are.

In addition to reading the portion of ***Devarim***, this week also always contains the beginning of the Hebrew month of Av, which according to Jewish tradition escalates our sense of mourning. Technically speaking on the 17th day of the previous month of Tammuz we begin what is known as the three weeks of mourning. The 17th of Tammuz is the anniversary of the day when the Roman legionnaires broke through the walls of ancient Jerusalem (in the year 70 C.E.) signaling the beginning of the end and leading to the Temple's destruction three weeks later.

As such during this period traditionally we do not listen to live music, do not celebrate weddings nor have parties and celebrations. Many of us (myself included) do not shave or get haircuts during this period of time.

Then with the advent of the nine days traditionally many of us (Sephardim do this only in the actual week of the ninth of Av) no longer wear freshly laundered clothes, do not swim for recreation, desist from drinking wine or eating meat (except on Shabbat) and even desist from bathing and showering, certainly in hot water. And as we get closer to *Tisha B'Av* (the ninth of Av) our mourning becomes more intense, culminating with a 25 hour fast with no eating nor drinking, no relations, and no washing or comfortable shoes.

There is then, a focus on mourning, and this seems to be our reaction to the pain of loss and destruction epitomized by the destruction of the *Beit ha'Mikdash* (the Holy Temple) on *Tisha B'Av*.

Which makes us wonder: why is this our reaction? Since when is the response to transgression one of mourning? Why do we not focus instead on repentance (*Teshuva*) as a more appropriate response to the iniquities described by the prophets as being the actual root cause of the loss and destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people?

Indeed, Maimonides (*Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva* 6:1) makes it clear that we are meant to view all such calamities as a response to the iniquities and transgressions of our generation, and the Talmud even describes the transgressions of the generation that led to the destruction. So why are we not rather experiencing three weeks of … repentance?

Indeed, this process of teshuva actually does begin soon after Tisha B'Av when we enter the new month of Elul which leads up to Rosh Hashanah and the ten days of repentance leading up to Yom Kippur. So why does mourning precede repentance?

And this is especially true as the Rambam (ibid.) implies that one must immediately repent to avert such calamity. Maimonides points out that although a consequence may be well deserved, teshuva (repentance) can avert disaster. So why do we wait and mourn before entering the days of repentance?

When we were in Poland I heard a story of five postcards and one little boy named Chenyo.

When the Nazis invaded Poland on Sept 1, 1939, little Chenyo was starting his first day of first grade. His uncle and aunt had made Aliyah before the war and soon received a lovely postcard from little Chenyo describing his first day of school and how exciting it all was.

Not long afterwards they received a second postcard from the family describing their efforts to leave Poland and immigrate to Palestine. At the end of the letter the father adds that they are all together and are all Ok. But no one is excited any more.

Three months later they get another postcard from their brother, Chenyo's father, explaining that they have been moved to the ghetto and that they are all ok. But no one is talking about getting to Palestine any more.

A few months after that they receive another postcard and Chenyo's father explains they have just arrived in Maidjanek, but he and Chenyo are together and Ok. There is no mention of the rest of the family any more.

A short while later they receive one more postcard in which the father describes that he is in the post office at Maidjanek and he is ok. But there is no more mention of Chenyo.

And after that there are no more postcards….

What struck me about this story was how all alone this father must have been at the end of his life, and how painful it must have been to contemplate all he had lost.

Perhaps the mistake we are making is assuming that mourning is separate from Teshuva, but maybe it is the essence of what the beginning of teshuva is all about. The Rambam says quite clearly (ibid. 1:1) that the first stage of teshuva is to recognize our mistake (*hakarat hachet*) which is followed by regret (*charatah*).

What indeed is the essence of the mistakes we make when we transgress? Ultimately the terrible consequence of Chet (our transgressions) is that ***we become distant***.

Whether a person's transgression was stealing from or embarrassing his fellow human being, idolatry or adultery, the greatest pain of such transgressions is that we become distant; disconnected. Indeed, when Adam & Eve eat from the tree, the consequence is that they are banished from Eden; ***they become distant*** from G-d. And when we transgress, we become distant from our loved ones and the people we have harmed.

And this is precisely what happened when the Jewish people sank to such a morass of unethical behavior in the period of the Second temple; the consequence ultimately was the destruction of that place that was the ultimate symbol of our connection with Hashem; ***we became disconnected***. And that is what we are truly mourning: we are yearning for a time when we were so much more connected, and we are recognizing the pain of how disconnected we still are.

If human beings can be put in cattle cars while the world just carries on, then we are completely disconnected as a people from the world around us whom we are meant to influence.

And this pain, this mourning, this realization of what we have lost is critical to recognizing how far we have to go and how much we yearn to get there which is the resulting next step in teshuva: the long journey home ….

We live in a world which is far too disconnected; from nations that wish to see us isolated, to the disconnection we experience amongst ourselves as a Jewish people and often even the disconnections and strife we experience in our communities and families.

Perhaps this Shabbat, we can all make an effort to become a little more connected: with our loved ones, with our communities and the Jewish people , with G-d… and maybe even with our selves.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman