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

(Portion of Emor)

An open road, on a beautiful day, with your kids in the back seat, maybe even a picnic lunch; what could be more perfect? What thoughts go through your mind at such times? Is your mind focused on all the challenges tomorrow always seems to bring, or do you take the time to appreciate the moment? Are you listening to the news about the ever-looming threat of terrorism, or do you take the time to appreciate the gift of the moment?

I will always wonder what Tali Hatuel, eight months pregnant, with her four daughters Hila, Roni, Hadar and Meirav, aged 11 to 2 in the back seat, was thinking in those last moments. Was she considering what she and her husband David would name their soon- to-be-born child? Was she wondering how Meirav, their two-year-old, would accept the newest addition to the Hatuel family? Or was she just appreciating the pure joy of the open road, with the dunes of the beach in the distance, and her growing family with her in the car?

And what went through her mind; their minds, as the sounds of gunfire filled the air and bullets tore through the car? What does a mother think as armed terrorists walk calmly over to a car lying on the side of the road, and one by one, shoot each of her children while she lies helplessly watching? Is she still capable of seeing the future, and dreaming of a day when the guns will finally be melted down into plowshares?

Many years ago, on a road near Gush Katif, south of Ashkelon and Ashdod along Israel's coastline, the beautiful sounds of a family drive gave way to the horrible silence that follows gunfire when terrorists opened fire on the Hatuel family and murdered Tali Hatuel and her four children and unborn baby.

So how do you fill that silence? What words can break the barrier of such a tragedy?

A few days later, a heartrending meeting took place as Boaz Shabo, who lost his wife and three of his children in a terrorist attack in Itamar two years earlier, came to comfort David Hatuel. He struggled to find the words, but of course, there are no words.

During their meeting, David Hatuel asked Boaz Shabo the unanswerable question:
"Boaz, how, how am I supposed to get up in the morning?"
And Boaz responded: "You get up in the morning, and you get up - to no one. But …Tali [your wife] is looking at you from above, spurring you on to continue."

This week's Torah portion, *Emor*, has much to say on both the challenge and the nature of this question.

In general, every weekly portion contains a theme to which all the topics of that portion are connected. This week, however, the divergence of the topics leaves us wondering what common thread could bind these different ideas together as a thematically connected portion.

Emor opens with an exhortation to the Kohanim (the priestly class) not to come into contact with a dead body:

> "*And G-d said to Moshe: 'Say to the Kohanim (Priests), sons of Aaron, and tell them: he (each Kohen) may not become Tameh (defiled) to a (dead) person amongst his people."* (Vayikra (Leviticus) 21:1)

Then, after some fifty odd verses (chapters 21 and 23 of Vayikra) specifically addressed to the Kohanim, the portion then switches (in chapter 23) to a review of all the Jewish festivals: Pesach (Passover), the counting of the Omer (during the seven weeks following Pesach), Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, and the festival of Shemini Atzeret.

What is the common theme that binds these seemingly incongruous topics of Priesthood, death, and the festivals?

Perhaps one detail will help us to shed light on this entire topic: in describing the mitzvah of counting the days and weeks from the offering of the Omer sacrifice leading up to Shavuot, the Torah tells us:

"*And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after Shabbat, from the day you bring the waved Omer offering, seven complete weeks*…" (Leviticus 23:15)

It is interesting to note that the day we bring (and wave before the altar) the *Omer* sacrifice is called here "*Macharat HaShabbat", "the day after Shabbat".* Our oral tradition teaches, however, that Shabbat here refers not to the seventh day of the week, but rather to the first day of Pesach, also called Shabbat.

This is an important point, which was the source of great controversy in Jewish history. Over two thousand years ago, a sect of Jews who believed only in the literal translation of the Bible, known as the Sadducees, understood this verse to mean that the counting of the *Omer* always began on the first Sunday after Passover, a point bitterly contested by the Rabbis of the time.

So if this wording became the source of such controversy, one wonders why the Torah chose to use such ambiguous terminology. Why not just say that the counting of the *Omer* begins on the day after Passover? Alternatively, as is done with each of the other festivals listed here in our portion, it could simply have said that the counting begins on the sixteenth day of the first month (of Nissan), which would have left no doubt as to the day specified.

Obviously, there must be some connection between this mitzvah of the *Omer* and the theme of Shabbat. So, what does Shabbat have to do with the *Omer*, and for that matter with Pesach (Passover)?

Further, a closer look at the portion begins to uncover other allusions to Shabbat: In discussing the mitzvah of blowing the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the Torah tells us:

> "…*In the seventh month, on the first of the month, you shall have a rest day (Shabbaton), a remembrance of Shofar, a holy calling*."

The Talmud in tractate *Rosh Hashanah* (fourth chapter) explains that this 'remembrance' of the Shofar refers to the fact that when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the Shofar is not blown and only remembered. Why, in the midst of teaching us both the mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah itself, as well as the

central mitzvah of the day (blowing the Shofar), does the Torah feel a need to allude to the mitzvah of Shabbat?

The truth is, it makes a lot of sense that there are so many references to Shabbat in this week's portion, because the theme of this entire Parsha is time, and Shabbat, just like the festivals, is all about time.

When the Jewish people left Egypt, the greatest gift Hashem gave them, was the gift of time. In fact, the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people, while they were still in Egypt, was the counting of the months, and the fact that:

> "*This month (Nissan, when the Jews left Egypt) will be for you the first of the months…*" (Exodus 12:2)

A slave, you see, has no time, because his time is not his own, it is his master's. A slave doesn't spend much time thinking about what he wants to do, because his master decides that for him, every day. Even when he thinks he has a little time, he is ever conscious
of the fact that in an instant, his master can decide, often on the spur of a moment, that he wants his slaves to do something else. There is no thought given to building a future, because the slave has no future, he lives only in the present, which is really part of the future and the present of someone else.

And then one day, the Jewish people were suddenly free, with no one else deciding for them what they had to do every hour and every minute of the day. On the one hand, this must have been an intoxicating experience, much like the student who graduates and can suddenly decide to sleep in, the Jews had the ability to get up in the morning not to satisfy the desires of someone else, but to live for themselves.

At the same time, however, it must have been somewhat frightening, because now they had to decide what they were going to do. There is a certain security and comfort in the knowledge that someone else is worrying about where tomorrow's food will come from, and even how the day will be filled. A slave has no budget to balance, no bills to pay, no worries about whether the crop will come in; it's all in the hands of the master.

And this was the challenge facing the Jewish people as they journeyed forth towards the land of Israel, knowing the miracles of the desert would soon be behind them, and a land needed to be conquered; its fields plowed and planted.

Indeed, a slave, with no time, also has very little purpose, he lives from day to day, and his purpose is wrapped up in the daily struggle for a piece of bread or a drink of water, a few hours of sleep, or even a comforting word.

The Jews became a nation only when they left Egypt, because now they had a mission and a purpose: to be a "*Mamlechet Kohanim Ve'Goy Kadosh*", a "*Kingdom of Priests and a holy Nation*" (Exodus 19:6).

Could a people that had been focused solely on the challenge of the moment, become a nation looking towards and building the future? Indeed, this very same challenge faced the Jewish people three thousand years later after the Holocaust and after the Israeli war of Independence. After years of living

in the camps, and struggling to survive, could this people become a nation, building a future which would make a lasting contribution to the entire world?

Perhaps that is why this portion begins with the Kohanim, the Priests: Because the concept of the Priesthood is really meant to be a model for the Jewish people. The Kohanim are our educators, who lead by example, and their lives are wrapped up in the service of a higher purpose, the challenge of bringing G-d into the world and into our lives.

Too often, we have difficulty finding the balance between the present and the future. Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in the moment, in the car accident, the spilled milk, or the news on CNN, we lose sight of what life is really all about, and how meaningful it can be when we are imbued with a sense of purpose, and a connection to something higher than the dividends on the stocks, or getting the kids to school in the carpool. Yet, at the same time, sometimes we become so enthralled and excited with the grand mission and the purpose, we may lose touch with the need to sanctify every given moment.

And that is what Shabbat is all about: Shabbat teaches us to step off the ride and take stock of where we are headed and why we are doing all that we spend so much time doing. At the same time, sometimes, we become so caught up in the objective, determined to achieve whatever goals we may have set for ourselves, be they noble or otherwise, we lose track of the beauty of every given moment.

And this too, is the essence of Shabbat: can I learn to live in every moment and appreciate its beauty and power and the gifts that exist alongside its challenges.

And this, of course, is why Pesach here is called '*Shabbat*', and the counting of the Omer is begun on the day after '*Shabbat*', because the Omer is all about appreciating each day of each week as we move from Pesach and the Exodus from Egypt, towards Shavuot and the giving of the Torah. On the one hand, we count each day, to appreciate its gifts amidst all the little and sometimes very large challenges that may come our way, while never losing sight of the goal, represented by Shavuot, when we receive the Torah and with it our mission and purpose as a people.

And this is at the heart of all of the festivals, which are also all about appreciating each moment of each season, and each stage in our journey as a people, while never losing sight of the fact that each season and step in the journey is also part of a larger reality, with a starting point of embarkation, and a destination.

And this is also at the root of the beginning of the portion: the defilement by contact with death.

Death is the ultimate reminder that we are all here today and gone tomorrow. It tends to suggest to us that we are merely physical beings, and that we should live only for the here and now, and so the Kohen especially, whose mission is to remind the Jewish people that there always has to be a higher purpose, avoids contact with death wherever possible.

Nearly eighty years ago, as a people, we made a decision to build a future and not get stuck in the moment. If there was ever a people with the right to escape the challenges of the future, or get stuck in the moment, it was the Jewish people of 1945.

Yet, driven by the passion of a three-thousand-year journey, we accepted a partnership with G-d in building a homeland, against seemingly insurmountable and often undeniably cruel and unfair odds.

We still have a long way to go, as a nation, and as a people. It is hard for us to imagine how David Hatuel managed to get beyond his present and move forward into an uncertain future. But he did eventually remarry and build a new family. And somehow, perhaps the knowledge that we as a people continue to embrace the future amidst all the struggles of the present, will give strength and hope to us all.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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