

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman
(Portion of Ha'azinu)

May 4, 2009; Seconds, then minutes; the overturned boat remained upside down in the murky waters of the Yarkon River, trapping the woman who had been energetically rowing moments before; even the air bubbles had ceased....

Incredibly a small crowd of onlookers had gathered along the banks of the narrow river watching and pointing, even exclaiming, yet none seemed willing to brave the waters and attempt to rescue the woman whose life was clearly in danger. It was not a raging river, nor were the waters particularly deep, nor wide; rather it was well known how polluted these waters were and none seemed willing to risk the potential illness that might result from entering the waters, even for such a worthy cause.

Finally, nearly four minutes after the woman had capsized, Avi Toibin, a sixty-two-year-old passerby, apparently realizing the stakes and ignoring the danger, jumped in and managed to wrest the woman's now limp body from beneath the unforgiving waters allowing for her evacuation to a nearby hospital and the long ensuing recovery period ...

Since that day Yasmin Feingold the twenty-year-old Olympic Kayaking champion who very nearly died, has made a miraculous recovery. After three days during which her family was unsure whether she would live or die, Yasmin regained the ability to breathe on her own. The following week she was healthy enough to be discharged from Ichilov hospital in Tel Aviv to the Beit Levenstein rehab facility in Ranana.

The general assumption is that the highly polluted waters of the Yarkon River which Feingold swallowed during her ordeal are responsible for much of the damage incurred during the near fatal incident. She eventually met her savior, who was subsequently awarded the President's decoration for his selfless bravery. And she recovered sufficiently to win the national crew championship in 2010 and regained her title in the single Sculls in 2012.

This week, immediately after Yom Kippur and as a prelude to the festival of Sukkot we will read the portion also known as the song of Ha'azinu. And we will encounter one of the most challenging questions in the human experience!

"HaTzur tamim poalo' ki kol deracahv mishpat; Kel emunah ve'ein avel, tzadik ve'yashar hu"

"The Rock (G-d) is perfect; all of his ways are just; a faithful G-d who does no wrong; righteous and moral is He." (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 32:4)

G-d it seems, is perfect, and everything that flows from Him is true and just. And yet, we often encounter a world that does not seem anywhere near perfect, much less just.

Many suggest that G-d's world is just, the challenge is what we choose to do with it.

And yet....

Equally challenging, Moshe notes that the people will one day grow fat and complacent; they will stop appreciating how blessed they are and even forget the source of all their blessings attributing their accomplishments to themselves, and subsequently drifting away from their faith . (ibid. 32:15-18) This

will result in great suffering for the Jewish people who, distant from their true selves will have only themselves to blame.

It would seem that when trouble appears, we should search within our own actions for the cause. Seriously? Are we to blame every travail that befalls seemingly good people on their hidden evil actions? Is anyone who suffers meant to be perceived as evil? After all, G-d is just, it is only we who are to blame!? This difficult question (if G-d is just, why do good people suffer?) has challenged us since the birth of Judaism itself. When Abraham confronts G-d over the imminent destruction of S'dom suggesting there may be innocents in S'dom he says: *"Will the Judge of the world not do justice?"* (Genesis (Bereishit) 18:25)

The Talmud (*Berachot 7a*) has no less than Moshe himself posing this question when asking G-d to see His glory, and notes that G-d's response is that no man can see Him and live, suggesting that as mere mortals we cannot understand Hashem's ways and that this difficult question will forever elude us. Indeed, it is no accident that the verse in this week's portion (32:4) which considers this question, describes G-d as the Rock; impenetrable, inscrutable and beyond our capacity to fathom....

On the one hand, it actually makes sense that human beings cannot presume to understand the ways of G-d who is the source of all reality. And if indeed G-d is not the source of all that happens in this world, then we would be left with a world that is random with no meaning whatsoever in history, let alone value to future actions. It all becomes a Darwinian struggle to survive; Shakespeare's world of 'no rhyme nor reason, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

Conversely, there are those who suggest that if all comes from G-d then in truth it is all good, we just have difficulty seeing some things as good. In the long run it is all good and G-d simply hides our ability to see it thus; we have to step aside and let G-d run the world. But this leaves us with the question of what value simply trusting that a child dying a painful death of cancer is somehow a good we cannot see brings to the world; what really, is the value of that way of thinking?

There is another way to approach this question however, and that is not to step away, but rather to step forward. We are here, all of us, with the opportunity to contribute to making a better world, and everything that we encounter affords us the opportunity in some way shape or form to do just that. It is not our job to understand why an innocent kayaker suddenly has her life turned upside down; but it is our challenge if we happen to find ourselves standing on the riverbank, to decide whether we will jump in and change the world, or remain a bystander as the world passes by.

And we can only be inspired by the Yasmin Feingolds of the world, whose indomitable spirit refuses to step aside in the face of the challenges life may present; rather stepping forward instead to the world of a life worth living.

As we prepare to enter the Sukkah, and re-enter the world G-d created, not allowing ourselves to stagnate in taking for granted the life we are living, let us this year consider how the world will be a better place for our being here ; each one of us; every day.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman