

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ha'azinu)

The thundering sounds of artillery fire echoed through the valleys beneath the Golan Heights and across the Sea of Galilee. All across the Northern border with Syria, civilians were huddled in their bunkers and bomb shelters, wondering when this latest round of violence would abate.

*On the face of it, this was nothing new; for nineteen years the Israeli citizens of the north had endured an almost daily barrage of shellfire from the Syrian guns perched in the Heights above. In fact, an average of **one thousand shells a day** fell on the Kibbutzim, towns, and villages within range of the Golan, when the Syrian army had control of the Heights.*

But this time it was different. It was June of 1967, and Israel had finally decided enough was enough.

For five weeks, Israel, in response to the Arab armies massed on her borders, had mobilized her reserves, and the economy had ground to a halt; it was a situation Israel could not hope to maintain.

For months now, the radio waves all across the Arab Middle East had been filled with calls for Israel's destruction, and Egypt's President Nasser vowed daily that the Arab armies would finally push Israel into the Sea; the entire country was waiting for war.

And so, on June 6, 1967, the six-day war finally began, with Israel's lightning strike against the Egyptian air force. Catching over eighty percent of the Egyptian air force on the ground, the war was practically won in the first few hours of fighting, as Israel took uncontested control of the skies.

On the third day of the war, a delegation of citizens from the North came to see the Israeli Prime minister, Levi Eshkol. They demanded a solution once and for all, to the constant, unprovoked Syrian artillery barrages stemming almost daily from atop the Golan Heights. Things had gotten so bad, parents didn't even bother putting children to sleep in their own beds, preferring to tuck them into beds in the bomb shelters, rather than wake them up in the middle of the night when the sirens went off.

Farmers went to the fields in armored tractors, and the fishermen on the lake plowed the waters in armored boats.

Which was why this time the artillery howling down off the Golan was different; it was no longer unprovoked. The Israelis had done the unthinkable; they had decided to take the Golan Heights. Gambling that the Syrians would never expect a surprise attack on such strategically superior positions, the Israelis were climbing the hills in an attempt to remove, once and for all, the Syrian guns terrorizing the citizens of the North.

The battle was not just about a piece of real estate; at stake was Israel's right to live in peace, and her responsibility to protect her citizens from aggression. Finally, after nineteen years of unremitting terror, Israel had an opportunity to set the north free; there might never be a second chance.

In the northern thrust, the elite Golani brigade was in trouble. Apparently, aerial reconnaissance photos, which had been misinterpreted as pathways across the mountain terraces capable of supporting tanks, proved to be an illusion. The lines were really the marks separating the terraces up the side of the mountain, and were completely impassable to armor, so the infantry found themselves all alone.

Everything came to a head on the slopes beneath the Syrian fortifications at Tel Facher.

The Syrians had spent an inordinate amount of time building this defensive position, as it was clear that this was the gateway to the entire Golan Heights.

The Israelis, caught in an impossibly exposed position, with no armor support, and with quarters too close for real artillery and air support, were being forced into almost single file up the mountain path, as they encountered intense defensive positions including mines and barbed wire.

Tel Facher was dangerously close to becoming the turning point of the war, and the advance up the mountain ground to a halt.

The Syrian artillery was now concentrating on a single three-foot wide stretch of dirt where the Israelis were stuck on the barbed wire, within range of the Syrian machine-gun nests above. The boys from Golani were being cut to pieces.

Enter one David Shirazi. Not even a sergeant, he had already been wounded in the fighting but refused to let the platoon medic evacuate him, insisting on staying with his unit moving their way up the hill. He had spent the better part of three years with these men, and they were more than just members of his unit; they were his brothers.

They say he looked up that hill, and knew there was no way he would make it to the top; the climb was too steep, his wounds were too great, and the merciless hammering of the artillery and machine gun fire meant there was nowhere to go.

The rows of barbed wire, normally such a simple obstacle, were, because of the terrain, proving to be the undoing of the entire Golani brigade. The narrow approach meant only one man at a time could approach the wire, which gave the Syrian machine gunners more than enough time to cut the Israelis apart, one by one.

There is a powerful teaching in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the fathers):

“Be'makom She'Ein Ish, Hishtadel Le'hiyot Ish.”

“In a place where there is no man, try to be that man.”

Someone had to do something, and in that place at that moment, with the Golan and the entire seventh brigade hanging in the balance, Shirazzi was that man.

Shouting out one word, “Alai” (“On me”) over and over again, he leapt forward and threw himself on top of the barbed wire transforming himself into a human bridge over which the men could run across and storm the Syrian positions. With tears in their eyes as they trampled over his body, the men of Golani took heart from Shirazi's example, and reclaimed the Golan Heights.

Only three men eventually reached the top of Tel Facher, but it was enough. On June 12, 1967, the Syrian guns on the Golan Heights finally went silent. Two thousand years after the Roman legions had exiled them, the Jewish people had finally come home to the ancient mountaintops of the Bashan.

One wonders what gives a man the strength to pursue something he knows he will not finish. David Shirazzi, who is memorialized for eternity in the Golani museum at Tsomet Golani, had no illusions that

he would ever reach the top of the Golan, yet he kept moving up that hill to get as far as he could, clinging to the belief that he could still make a difference.

This Shabbat, as we do every year on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we will read the portion of *Ha'azinu*. The song of *Ha'azinu* is actually Moshe's swan song. And while Moshe shares Judaism's vision of the future with the second generation ready to enter at long last the land of Israel, Moshe himself will not be going with them.

Having appointed Joshua (at G-d's command) as his successor, Moshe is getting ready to say goodbye.

It is not an accident that this song is always read on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat preceding Yom Kippur, whose theme is the challenge of 'return': the opportunity to go back and become the 'me' I always meant to be.

The song of *Ha'azinu* as well, has as its theme the idea that as a people, no matter what mistakes we make, we can always go back and become the people we are meant to be.

One wonders what gave Moshe, perhaps the most tragic figure in the bible, the strength to go on, knowing he would never get to finish what he had started.

Even more challenging is the fact that next week we will read the Torah's last portion (*Ve'zot HaBeracha*), and the Torah will end before the Jewish people even enter the land of Israel.

The Torah speaks so often of "*Ki Tavo'u El Ha'Aretz*", "*When you will come to the land*", and seems to have as its goal the return of the nation Israel to its homeland, which it had left as the family of Yaakov nearly three hundred years earlier. So why does it end now? Why isn't the book of Joshua, which sees the Jewish people cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Israel, included in the Torah?

How can we spend so much time preparing for the realization of the dream to be a nation in our own land, and then stop short of seeing it come true?

In truth, Jewish tradition is replete with instances of individuals who do not see their dreams through to fruition, as well as tasks begun but not completed.

Joshua, Moshe's successor, is given the mission of both conquering the land of Israel (whose borders are defined not by committee but by G-d,) and dividing the land amongst the tribes. But most of the land is neither conquered nor apportioned in his lifetime. In fact, some portions of the land of Israel as defined in the Bible were *never* conquered!

The Jewish people, prior to entering the land are given the mission of building a *Mikdash*, a permanent edifice as G-d's sanctuary, something that does not happen for nearly four hundred years, and King David himself, who dreamed of building this Temple, does not live to see it happen, just as Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov do not live to see the birth of the nation of Israel.

And this pattern continues, as with Eliahu (Elijah) the prophet, whose mission to reform the nation of Israel and rid her of idolatry is not only never realized, but may well be described as an abysmal failure, at least within the context of the plain text.

All of which must challenge us to consider the very nature of setting goals in the first place. What does it mean to set goals?

We find ourselves at the beginning of a new Jewish year, with the power of resolutions, goals, and objectives very much on our minds. It has become an accepted truism in our society, that in order to accomplish things one needs to set goals and objectives. But what is the nature of these goals? How does one arrive at goals that are realistic, and is there a system for ensuring that such goals are achieved? And, of course, if one cannot or does not achieve some or all of those goals, does that necessarily imply failure?

There is a fascinating statement in Ethics of the fathers (Avot 2:21) that may shed light on this topic:

“Lo Alecha HaMelacha Ligmor, Velo’ Atah ben Chorin Le’Hibatel Mimenah”
“It is neither incumbent upon you to finish the task, nor are you free to desist from it.”

Apparently, the Mishnah is suggesting here, that while I cannot ignore projects, challenges, perhaps even mitzvot that come my way, I am not responsible at all to see such items through to their satisfactory completion.

Which begs the question: why not? Why am I not responsible to complete any and every project that comes my way, especially once I have taken on such responsibilities?

Indeed, what value is there to the enterprise if there is no obligation to attain the goals that have been set?

Perhaps the issue at stake here is not *whether* we complete our goals and tasks, but rather *how* we achieve them.

The idea that I can complete something, anything, on my own, stems from the illusion that in this world we are ever really alone.

Imagine setting the goal of climbing Mount Everest this year. Could such a goal ever really be yours to complete alone? So much thought, effort and work goes into the planning for such an expedition. And so many different people have to commit to do so many different things, to see such a project through to its natural conclusion. In fact, perhaps this Mishnah (teaching) in Ethics of the Fathers is suggesting just how valuable a habit it would be to recognize this truth in *everything* we do.

And of course, when this idea begins to permeate my thought consciousness on a constant basis, it changes the way I look at the world, and everything and everyone in it.

Anyone who has ever built a company will agree, that any successful business venture depends on teamwork. The attitude that the company is ‘mine’ is not just unhealthy, it also isn’t true. And the best way to inspire the people who work *with* you, is to do away with the illusion that they work *for* you. The successful surgeon recognizes that all alone in an operating room, he could never be all that he was meant to be. It is only with the nurses and interns, the anesthesiologists and technicians upon whom he or she absolutely depends, that the operation can be a complete success. And however skilled his or her hands are, they too, are in the end, a gift from the ultimate One upon whom we all depend; the only true One.

What an incredible world this could be, if only we could all inculcate this idea. The absurdity of war would be akin to my hand fighting with my foot as to who is really in charge. In the end, if my hands and feet were fighting with each other, I would never be able to get out the door, much less get anything done.

Perhaps this is at the root of the way in which the Torah ends.

When one man accomplishes so much, it is easy to forget how much he still needs to be perceived as part of the team. Moshe, of all the individuals that ever walked the earth, reached a level, according to Jewish

tradition, that most people never come close to even comprehending. Moshe somehow achieves the ultimate 'I-Thou' relationship, speaking to G-d face to face, whatever that means. And when you get that high, it is easy to forget that you don't get there on your own.

So the Torah ends before we get into the land of Israel, making the point that for all his greatness, he didn't do it all; he merely set the stage. Moshe gets the Jewish people out of Egypt, and through forty years in the desert with all the challenges that entails. But in the end, even he can't do it all, he has simply prepared the way for Joshua to bring the Jewish people home. Moshe alone, without Joshua, would be teaching Torah to a Jewish people still languishing in the desert. The book of Yehoshua, coming as it does after the five books of Moses are completed, sends a powerful message that we are always part of a larger picture.

And in the beginning of this week's portion, *Ha'azinu*, we see this idea very clearly.

"Ha'azinu Hashamayim Va'adabera, Ve'Tishma Ha'Aretz Imrei Phi."

"Hearken heavens, and I will speak, and let the land hear the words of my mouth." (Devarim 32:1)

The heavens and the earth are a balance, between all that we can do here on earth, and the fact that we on earth, are ultimately in a partnership with heaven. And if we think that we of the earth are doing it all, then ultimately we will not be doing it *at all*.

"Ya'arof Ka'Matar Likchi, Tizal KaTal Imrati...."

"Let my sayings slice down like the rain, and let my words flow like the dew." (32:2)

Rainfall is the ultimate reminder that we are not alone. However much we plan, however hard we work in cultivating our fields, in the end, it will depend on the rainfall, which is completely out of our control.

And of course, this is true for all the 'fields' we cultivate: Our businesses and projects, our homes and our families; ultimately they are all 'rain' from heaven.

"Ki Shem Hashem Ekra, Havu' Godel Le'Elokeinu."

"For I will call out the name of G-d; bring greatness to G-d." (32:3)

Greatest of all, Hashem allows us, even wants us to be His partners, allowing His greatness to be dependent on us.

Our goals this year will become valuable not by virtue of what they are, but rather by virtue of *how* they are. If my goals for this year are not just about me, but about all of us, and if even those goals that are about me, are really about the 'me' that wants to be there for all of us, then those goals are not just mine; they have the potential to be everyone's. And what an incredible year *that* would bring.

For David Shirazi it was never about whether he made it up that hill, and I suspect it wasn't even about his entire unit, or even his brigade. On that terrible afternoon at Tel Facher, David Shirazi was carrying the entire Jewish people on his shoulders. And while some of us might consider that a burden too heavy to bear, I suspect for Shirazzi it just made it clear that he was not alone. He was leaning on the wellspring of the entire nation of Israel.

Wishing you all a sweet, happy, and healthy New Year, full of Joy and blessing for us all,

Ketivah ve'Chatimah Tovah,

Binny Freedman