

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

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(Portion of Ki Tetzeh)

“Achi!” “My brother!” These were the words that always greeted me when I got to the meeting point for reserve duty every year, and it was the most common word on everyone’s lips. Men who had not seen each other often for nearly a year and commonly had little or nothing to do with each other during the year for a few weeks a year rediscovered a brotherhood for those weeks of reserve duty. It’s a funny word “Achi” which does not easily translate as ‘my brother’; there is a power to it in Hebrew as in Israel it connotes much more than a blood relation, being closer to a ‘brother in arms’, and it means that these are men who would lay their lives on the line for each other, quite literally.

I never imagined I would see this anywhere else but in the context of the army, perhaps subconsciously assuming it was the product of intense sometimes life threatening situations which bound us together.

But this week in a most unexpected and mundane fashion I discovered I was wrong.

This past week we welcomed the incoming (ninth) class of Yeshivat Orayta; seventy 18-19-year-old boys from thirty-one different high schools in twenty-seven different cities, including eight public school boys. Perhaps the most diverse group of incoming classmen we have yet welcomed to Jerusalem’s Old City halls....

Yet, it has been remarkable to see the fashion in which they have bonded as a brotherhood so quickly. Part of this of course, to be completely honest, is by design. It is our belief that boys who are unhappy socially will not be happy in their studies, so from the moment they board the El Al plane to Israel we are focused on creating a sense of community. Yet, there is something more which we cannot plan and which nonetheless occurs again, every year.

One of the characteristics of an Orayta Shabbat is the sharing that goes on at the Shabbat meals. On Friday night (our first Shabbat at Orayta) boys were standing up and sharing something they had not expected to find and yet did, and one of the boys expressed his surprise, having expected to make new friends and discovering that after only three days he felt he had joined a special brotherhood. At the moment, even for Orayta I was surprised by the sincerity of his words, especially after only a few days, but was equally surprised to see a lot of the boys nodding their heads in agreement, and I had a flashback to a moment I had forgotten about which I experienced over the summer.

This past summer in Teaneck we were welcomed by the Bnei Yeshurun Teaneck Jewish community for an inspiring Orayta alumni Shabbaton with close to 50 students participating. While we have run many College campus Shabbatonim for alumni as well as spring get away retreats, this was the first time we did something like this in the middle of the summer, having noted many students do internships in NYC, and we were pleasantly surprised to see so many students come out for the weekend. Friday when I arrived, boys were still trickling in and I watched the shouts and hugs as they embraced friends they had not seen in a while and heard one of them scream out that same word: “Achi! “... It was the only time in my life that I can recall experiencing that comradery and brotherhood outside of a Sunday morning start of the reserves... so what is that??

Another boy this past Shabbat told a story that suggested it is not even about close relationships. A couple of boys on Friday morning had decided they wanted to walk to Meah Shearim (an Ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood) to buy some Jewish books as well as explore some of the unique sights and sound of this special Jerusalem community.

But they were not sure of the way, so they stopped a Jewish fellow wearing a Kippah and Tzitzit walking in to The Old City. The fellow pointed them in the right direction and then, seeing they still seemed confused turned around and walked them all the way (a 25 minute walk) there while telling them his life story and hearing some of theirs. And this boy realized that in truth, we are all brothers. But what does that even mean?

Perhaps, hidden in this week's portion of **Ki Teitze** the Torah shares a deeper understanding of this idea.

*“You shall not see your **brother**'s ox or sheep driven away, and hide from them, you shall surely bring them back to your **brother**. And if your **brother** is not near you, you shall gather it into your home until your **brother** seeks it out and the return it to him. And so shall you do ... for any lost item of your **brother**, which you find, you cannot hide (ignore?) ...” (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:1-3)*

Essentially, the Torah is telling us that when we find something someone may have lost we have a responsibility to return it. This mitzvah, known as *hashavat aveidah* (returning lost property) is actually two mitzvot as expressed by Maimonides (Rambam; *Hilchot Gezeilah Ve'Aveidah* 11:1): A positive Mitzvah (*Aseh* 204) to return lost items, and a prohibition (*Lo Ta'aseh* 199) forbidding us to ignore lost property when coming upon it.

The Torah, in expressing this mitzvah uses the word ‘brother’ (ach) no less than five times. Why is this mitzvah, more than any other so connected to the idea that we should be more than just neighbors or fellow Jews; we are meant to be brothers ...

Interestingly though a full analysis is not possible here, there are two other places which mark the beginnings of the Jewish people, where the word ‘brother’ features prominently.

The story of Yosef (Joseph) is commonly known as the story of ‘Joseph and his brothers’. Indeed, Yosef first errs in bringing the “talks of his brothers” to their father, and the entire story opens by describing Yosef as “shepherding with his brothers” (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 37:2). It is worth noting the Hebrew word used is “*et*” which really means ‘at’ or ‘opposite’ as opposed to the word “*im*” “with”, which would have been more appropriate. Clearly this was a brotherhood by birth, but not of spirit. It is ‘the brothers’ who conspire, ‘the brothers’ who see Joseph coming and ‘the brothers’ who throw him in a pit.

Yet, at the end of their story when they bury their father (ibid. 50:8; 14) they come back to Egypt as brothers this time truly, as a brotherhood.

And at the other end of the story of the Jews in Egypt, Moshe's first experience as a leader is when he goes out to “see his brethren” (*Shemot* (Exodus) 2:11). Indeed, Moshe sees an Egyptian beating a Jew “from his brothers”, and his first act which will see him on the road to becoming perhaps the ultimate Jewish leader, is his decision, despite having been raised as an Egyptian prince, to see a fellow Jew as his brother.

There is a telling comment in Rashi in a most unexpected place which will perhaps shed some light on what brotherhood is all about.

Lavan, Yaakov's wicked father in law, has been chasing Yaakov and his family through the night and, catching up with him on the third day we read (*Bereishit* (Genesis) chap. 31) of the ensuing conflict which nearly ends in disaster. When Yaakov and Lavan finally make what must be a cold peace, each going their separate ways, Yaakov tells "his brothers" to gather stones and make a monument to their agreement (ibid. v. 46). Yet Yaakov has no brothers to speak of in that moment!?

Rashi explains that these are his sons, who became like brothers when they came to his aid in distress and battle. Brotherhood then, is much more than biology; it is a singularity of purpose, and the knowledge that whatever the circumstances arise one knows that there are those who will put aside their differences and truly *be* there for each other.

The story of Joseph is all about growing from being just biological brothers, to becoming a true brotherhood. And it is not accidental that Moshe, who will ultimately bring the Torah to the world, begins his journey by demonstrating that though he may be an Egyptian Prince, even a Jewish slave is still his brother.

We are given the special mitzvah of returning a lost object to our brothers, just as Yosef sought the brotherhood he had lost as a young man (when he went 'seeking his brothers *Bereishit* 37:16). And we are enjoined to reach the point where 'we cannot hide'. (*Devarim* 22:3). This mitzvah challenges to reach the point where, when our brother is in pain or experiencing loss, we are simply incapable of not being there; that is what true brotherhood is all about.

Something to strive for as we get closer to Rosh Hashanah

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem

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