

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Ki Teitzeh

It's been almost twenty years, and every so often I still pause to think about how different it could have been...

Just a few months ago we merited to walk our second child, our oldest son Yonatan, on that most special of walks, the walk down the aisle to his chuppah (wedding canopy.) It's such a powerful walk, because on the one hand, you can't wait to get there, and on the other, you never want it to end. And as people stood and clapped and smiled and laughed, and Yonatan's smile light up his entire face, and my wife Doreet's eyes filled with tears of joy, my entire being was filled with a deep sense of gratitude; what an awesome privilege Hashem bestowed upon us; such a blessing.

And I couldn't help but think about how different it might have been, and how many times I came so close to chas ve'shalom never experiencing such a joyous moment.

Just a few weeks ago we commemorated the eighteenth anniversary of the Sbarro's Pizzeria bombing. An Arab terrorist walked into a crowded Jerusalem Pizzeria on a beautiful Thursday afternoon and blew himself murdering fifteen innocent civilians and wounding over sixty more. I was sitting in that Pizzeria but was blessed to walk out without a scratch. So why am I still here, while fifteen other precious souls never left that Pizzeria?

When I was standing on line waiting for my baked Ziti I had been eyeing a table near the front door, which seemed to have a nice breeze. But then a mother balancing two trays of Pizza started arguing with her six-year-old daughter who was throwing a temper tantrum, so I decided to sit in the back where I guessed it would be quieter. (As it transpired the girl was refusing to sit at that table and I later saw them in the back as well...) So am I here because that girl threw a temper tantrum?

Over thirty years ago, getting off a tank in Lebanon and turning back to pick up a tool one of the crew had accidentally dropped caused me to join a fellow officer waiting to walk back to the mess tent and walk on his left instead of his right. He never made it to the mess tent; a sniper's bullet found him a moment later. So, am I still here because I happened to turn around and do such a small favor for someone? (Thirty years later, I don't even remember who that someone was...) Or was this all part of a cosmic master plan determined by G-d since the dawn of time?

And on a deeper level, that same question holds equally true for the mistakes we have made and the things we have done, especially those things we may deeply regret. What is a person to think as he lies down to sleep having finally finished a messy divorce full of so much pain and angst? Did he make a mistake getting married to that person? Or perhaps his mistake was in letting the marriage go sour? Or was it always meant to be? Was that marriage, and thus that divorce somehow part of G-d's master cosmic plan? In which case, do we bear any responsibility for anything we do? Are we captains of our own ship, or merely ants on a leaf floating down the river?

There is a fascinating mitzvah in this week's portion of **Ki Teitzeh** that perhaps addresses this timely question:

“If you will build a new home, you must make a railing (*ma’akeh* or fence) for your roof; (so you do not place blood on your house if the faller falls from it.” (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:8)

Essentially, the Torah is telling us that a rooftop left without a guard rail or wall is a dangerous place and an accident waiting to happen. We are obligated, when we build, to keep such a place as safe as reasonably possible, hence the mitzvah of *ma’akeh*. Interestingly, this mitzvah applies to many instances and not just rooftops. As an example, I recall many years ago hearing of a ruling of **Rav Moshe Feinstein** *zatz”al* suggesting that putting up a stop sign was a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *ma’akeh*, as it was designed to safeguard people from harm! (Though I could not find it online when penning this article).

It is interesting to note, however, that the verse does not command us to put a railing up to *prevent* someone from falling. Rather, it quite specifically tells us we put up the fence so that the person *who falls* will not fall from our rooftop. Rashi (ibid.) explains that this person is worthy of falling (in other words, he was *meant* to fall), but Hashem uses people who are worthy to bring reward and uses the guilty to bring appropriate consequences to those who are guilty.

Imagine a new teenage driver is driving down a quiet suburban street in his new Ford mustang sports car. We’ll call him Tom (as in Cruise ☺). The speed limit is 25 mph, but hey, this is a 760 horsepower jet on wheels; how can he stay at 25mph? His ‘friends’ are egging him on so he’s doing 70 mph, because he *can*. And a kid steps out from in between two cars and Tom doesn’t see him in time and discovers the hard way why there are specific speed limits in specific areas. SO this ruins Tom’s life because now he has to live with the fact that he killed an eight year-old kid, right? But the truth is, there is only one master of life and death and it’s not Tom. This boy was meant to die on that day. How do I know that? Because he did!

Whatever happens is meant to happen. Tom did not actually kill that boy but he does have to live and struggle with the fact that Hashem (G-d) chose *him* to be the driver whose car caused that kid’s death. And he does have to consider that if he had been driving 25 mph, maybe Hashem would have chosen some other fellow or instance for the moment that boy was meant to leave this world.

This does not mean we bear no responsibility for the things we do; but it does mean we are vehicles, rather than root causes. In fact the *Gaon of Vilna* (Rav Eliahu Kremer; 1720-1797) suggests (in his *Even Shleimah*) that we are meant to believe before an event, that it is all dependent on our actions, but once the event has occurred we are meant to understand it was always in G-d’s hands...

What a powerful idea! So many people are going through life with so much baggage, which really isn’t theirs to carry. After a difficult divorce it’s only natural for a person to wonder if he or she made a terrible mistake; maybe they should never have married this person in the first place, or maybe they should have worked harder at saving the marriage. And they feel that divorce means they have somehow failed.

But there is a mitzvah to get a divorce! It might be a mitzvah I never want to fulfill, but it obviously means that sometimes a person is indeed meant to give (or get) a divorce. Sometimes two people were meant to meet, and their souls were meant to be together for a time, perhaps even to bring a child or children into the world. But then they are meant to separate and move on. How do we know that is sometimes the case? Because it happens! Indeed, that person who fell off that roof was always meant to fall, which is why the Torah calls him the *nofel*; the person who was always meant to fall.

There are many lessons to be learned from the experiences we share in life, but living with guilt is most certainly not one of them.

Looking back and realizing that for whatever the reason, through all of our experiences Hashem always meant for us to reach the point we are at right now, simply because that is where we are! The question we are left with is what we choose to do with that, going forward.

As we enter deeper into the month of Elul with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur just around the corner, the portion of Ki Teitzei enjoins us to consider where we are in life and where we want to go; what battles do we choose to fight, and what realities can we surrender to, for a better year ahead.

Wishing all a sweet happy and healthy new year and a *ke'tivah ve'chatimah tovah* from Jerusalem.

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