

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Ki Tetzeh)

He had such a beautiful face; I had seen him on the same street corner a couple of times, and each time I caught sight of him, he challenged me anew. He couldn't have been more than seven or eight, with dark curls, olive skin, and the most beautiful brown eyes, twinkling above the wisp of a smile that hovered on his face. To me, he epitomized the challenge of the war we have been engaged in for the past sixty years and more, in the State of Israel.

It was the height of the Intifada, and we were in the midst of a months' worth of reserve duty in Hebron, back in 1990 or 1991. It is so easy to demonize the 'enemy', and one almost needs to imagine the terrorists we were trying to root out as men with evil in their hearts and hatred on their minds, but life isn't always quite so simple.

Deep in the heart of Hebron, above Kikar Gross (Gross Square, named after a yeshiva student, stabbed to death years earlier on that spot) was an Israeli lookout position, meant to spot trouble on the road below and protect Israeli civilians driving through.

Every day, round about the time kids from the local village got out of school, the lookout post came under heavy bombardment from the local kids as they came home from school. Rocks, bricks, bottles and metal bars would come sailing through the air up onto the rooftop, endangering and sometimes injuring the few Israeli soldiers manning the position. Unfortunately, every time they would call local patrols in to try & catch the perpetrators, they would be long gone by the time the troops arrived. And there simply weren't enough men to station soldiers in all the alleyways below the lookout post for any extended period of time.

So one day, we decided to try a more innovative approach, in order to send a message to the local populace, and put an end to what was becoming a dangerous phenomenon.

The village where all this rock throwing was taking place was situated on the side of a hill and the rear end of the hilltop was actually a beautiful valley full of vineyards and rocky slopes, largely uninhabited. So we decided we would hike up the valley arriving at the top of the village late in the morning, when everyone was already in school, and wait for the rock throwing to begin. The assumption was no-one would be looking in that direction for troops to arrive, so we might catch some of the perpetrators off guard, and send a message to those instigating the violence.

As it turned out, our plan worked like a charm. By 12:15pm we were in place behind the stone wall of the vineyard, and the lookout was clued in to let us know as soon as any action started. Sure enough, at 1:00pm, the bottles and rocks started flying and we came out of cover, running down the hill at the direction, via radio, of the men on top of the lookout post. Suddenly, a frantic cry over the radio alerted us to the fact that one of men from the lookout post had spotted a masked terrorist ("Ra'ul Panim"), directing the violence from down an alley, out of range.

This was a serious matter; the men who wore those masks were usually members of the death squads that terrorized Arab and Israeli civilians alike, and apprehending one of them could save many lives.

I took off down the alley following the directions of the soldier on the rooftop, who had visual contact with the terrorist. Very quickly I was running on my own, as I was in my twenties, and all the men with me

on that patrol were considerably older. (Most of them hadn't seen the color of their socks in quite some time...!)

Coming around a corner, I suddenly spotted this fellow, mask and all, waving something akin to a medieval mace above his head with one hand, and holding a Palestinian flag (then illegal) with the other. When he turned and saw me, he dropped the flag and the ball-and-chain and took off down the street.

As I was running down the side of a hill, he was a couple of levels lower than me, and I could only see the top of his body as he ran, with all the speed of an Olympic runner. After a couple of minutes, I saw that he was headed into a maze of alleyways, and, realizing I was about to lose him, stopped running and aimed my rifle at his back yelling out "Stop!" (Or "Wakef" in Arabic.)

Technically speaking, in that situation, as he was a masked terrorist, once ordering him to stop I could fire in the air, then at his legs, and finally even risk killing him to stop his escape. I guess he realized this, because when he looked back and saw me aiming at him, he threw up his hands and stopped running. To this day, I thank G-d he stopped, because when I got close enough to pull off his mask, I discovered he was an eight-year-old boy.

And yet, amidst pride that in the Israeli army we go to such lengths to avoid loss of life, even to our enemies, one wonders where that boy, schooled in the tactics of terror at such an early age, is today. While I would do the same thing again, is it so simple to assume I was right? Did I allow an enemy of the Jewish people to live on, and can I be so sure the consequences of that action are acceptable? If he is today an enemy of the Jewish people, wasn't he already our enemy then?

After waiting half an hour with this boy, a patrol finally came to pick us up, and we took him back to base in a jeep where his father came to pick him up and pay a very severe fine for his son's infractions. And it was then, seeing that same little boy with the beautiful face and the beautiful brown eyes talking to what was clearly his close friend, the 'masked terrorist', that I realized we had no idea who our enemies really were.

We love to speak of peace, and dream of a time when "*Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and will learn no more of war.*" And we spend much time devoted to assessing how we can create opportunities for bridge building and dialogue, negotiation and common dreams.

This week's portion, *Ki Tetzeh*, however, begins on a much less positive note.

"Ki Tetzeh Le'milchama Al Oye'vechah'...."

"When (If?) you will go out to war against your enemies...." (Devarim 21:10)

There will come a time, suggests the Torah when you will wage war. And there are specific *Mitzvoth* (commandments) associated with such wars. And if the Torah shares with us a series of *mitzvoth* associated with battle, one can assume there will be such conflicts, because the Torah would not give us *mitzvoth* unless they were meant to be utilized.

Why the focus on war? And why here? What life lesson are we meant to glean from this challenging reality?

It is interesting to note that the verse here does not describe "waging" war, nor fighting, or encountering war, rather it speaks of "going out" to war. Is there some significant difference between fighting a war and "**going out to war**"?

The conclusion of this verse is:

“... *U’Netano’ Hashem Elokecha’ Be’Yadecha’, Ve’Shavita Shivyo’.*”

“*And Hashem your G-d will give him (your enemy) into your hands, and you will capture his captives.*”

And while the most obvious understanding of this verse, referring to the *mitzvot* that follow, is ‘**If** when you go to war, G-d will make you victorious....’

But one could also understand this verse to mean (as do many of the Chassidic masters): *If you will go to war, **then** G-d ... will make you victorious, and you **will** capture captives’*, in the form of a promise.

Which is challenging to say the least: why does going out to battle necessarily merit, much less guarantee victory?

If anything, one would have expected the verse to be read in precisely the reverse order:

*‘If you will accept that it is really G-d who gives victory into your hands, **THEN** by all means, go out to war!’*

And lastly, why does the verse need to add the seemingly moot point that we are going out to war “*against our enemies*”? Isn’t that rather obvious? Who else would we be fighting against if not our enemies? One certainly does not wage war against friends, (and in the event such a sad state of affairs does indeed transpire, it is merely evidence of the fact that the two parties were never really friends in the first place.), so why the redundancy in the verse?

Perhaps this is the key to this question, and particularly the reason we always read this portion in the month of Elul, leading up to Rosh Hashanah.

You see, in order to wage war, two conditions need to be in evidence: One needs to have enemies, and one needs to be able to identify them. If you don’t know *who* your enemies are, there is no point in going out to war, and if we weren’t aware of having any enemies, we wouldn’t feel the need to go to war.

This may well be precisely the challenge we face today: there seems to be some confusion as to whom our enemies are, and whether indeed we need to wage war against them. And while this is not the forum to enter into the specifics and the politics of this issue in the Middle East, certainly, this is a crucial piece of the puzzle we need to solve in Israel, (and in the world) today.

They say you don’t make peace with your friends; you have to be willing to make peace with your enemies, which is true. But you also can only make peace with an enemy who *wants* to make peace. Perhaps this is why no peace has ever been achieved in the history of conflict without a war first being won. Sometimes, until you are willing to win a war, you cannot begin the process of creating peace. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that ironically, it is often, in retrospect, the hesitation to fight a war, that actually *prevents* and impedes the pursuit of peace.

We so admire restraint (and correctly so) as a crucial ingredient to compromise and harmony. Yet imagine if the Allies had shown a little less restraint when Adolph Hitler took over Austria (the *Anschluss*), instead declaring war on Germany as early as 1935. How many tens of millions of lives might have been saved if America had not waited essentially until 1942, *seven* critical long years later, and instead decided to join forces with England against Germany as early as 1935?

Perhaps this is the question this week's portion introduces. Indeed, this may be why the verse speaks of "going out" to war, because going to war in a sense requires us to step a little bit outside of the box we normally occupy.

It is good, in the end, that we live in a world of tremendous desire for peace. And it may well be that the fact that our willingness to wage war is *outside* of our normal 'box' is what guarantees that it will be a war waged in the way only a Nation striving to be an ethical light unto the world can hope to achieve.

And it is only if, in the unfortunate circumstance that we must wage war, we remember in that same moment how much we long for peace, and how far outside of our desired reality war really is, that we can be assured that G-d will find us worthy of victory in the long run. And of course, victory here is not only about vanquishing the enemy; it is as much about what we become in the process. And if the battleground becomes our reality, such that we do not need to 'go out', but rather find that war has become a part of us, then even if we win, we will have already lost.

And even more to the point is the question of who really wins the war, and for that matter wages it in the first place. Sometimes, we have to be willing to fight. But in the end, after having created a world with us in it, Hashem wants us to be partners with Him in the entire spectrum of life, and only if we are willing to fight, is Hashem willing to give us the victory, which was never in our control in the first place.

More than any other experience, war and the battlefield are almost calculated to determine whether we really believe that Hashem runs the world. No matter how skilled the commanders, and how thick the armor, any soldier worth his salt knows there are no rules on the field of battle. Bullets don't know about statistics, and if your number is up, it's up. To run up a hill under enemy fire, you almost have to believe that it has nothing to do with you, because if you really thought your survival depended only on what you did, it would be madness to run up *any* hill under fire.

Perhaps then, war is almost an opportunity to step outside the reality we are so immersed in, and encounter a degree of truth, which often eludes us. Perhaps this is why we read this portion in the month leading up to *Rosh Hashanah*, the day when we re-discover the concept of *Malchut*, royalty, and the idea that it is really G-d who runs the world.

All of which leads us to one last point. Because before we can begin considering the implications of the struggle between the forces of evil and terrorism, and the world of Western and Jewish values, we first have to begin with ourselves.

Every one of us, in this month preceding *Rosh Hashanah*, has an opportunity to go to war. Not against the forces of evil we read about in the papers, but rather against the dark challenges that often lie behind the eyes that stare back at us in the mirror.

If we really want this year to be different, if we want who we are to be different, the question is how far we are really willing to step outside of the box each of us has created for ourselves.

Do we even recognize the 'enemies' that so often bring us down? Are we really willing to fight and to struggle to grow and change? Do we even have the courage and determination to take the field when the odds seem so stacked up against us? After all, we just contemplated this same 'enemy' army last year, and we seem to have gotten nowhere!

And yet, Hashem promises us that if we are willing to fight for our selves, for the better selves we can become, then Hashem will be our silent partner in making sure that we really do succeed in achieving victory against the greatest enemy who is also our greatest friend: ourselves.

May it be G-d's will that this year, in becoming all we are meant to be, that we finally, as one people, discover the peace we have so longed for, both as a nation, and as individuals that we may be blessed to *beat our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks*, and know no more war.

Shabbat Shalom,

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