

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tisa)

Sabra and Shatilla; for most of us, the names of these Arab refugee camps in Beirut, Lebanon evoke images of controversy and confusion as the sites where Christian Phalange soldiers massacred over seven hundred civilians: men, women and children in September of 1982. And most people will associate this controversy with the question of whether Israeli troops controlling the area should have or even could have prevented these terrible events.

But for the men of the 202nd battalion of the Israeli paratroopers, including my older brother, these names and that time recall a very different memory. I only got the full story a few months later, when my brother and I managed to get together for Shabbat in our rented apartment in Jerusalem. Late Friday night, I awakened to strange, muffled sounds coming from his room, and discovered him, in the midst of a nightmare. The sounds of his cries were muffled because in the midst of his dream he had rolled off onto the floor, 'hitting the dirt' as it were, and taking 'cover' under the bed, so we sat up talking about it till dawn.

A few days before Rosh Hashanah, the 202nd was called to enter one of the refugee camps in an effort to root out terrorist cells in the area. My brother's company who were only just finishing basic training, had only been in the army six months and had no combat experience. As such, they were meant to act as a rear guard in the event reinforcements were needed. Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell this to the P.L.O. terrorists.

As the paratroop unit moved deeper into the refugee camp, the alleyways proved too narrow for the tanks that were supporting the infantry advance, and the men had to continue on in their armored personnel carriers, without tank support.

The PLO fighters, meanwhile, had succeeded in circling around over the rooftops, behind the main thrust and ambushing the younger and more inexperienced rear guard.

There are no words that can describe that moment when night turns into day, and the relative quiet of slow, hidden movement becomes the overwhelming exploding noise of discovery and attack. All men in such situations experience a moment of pure, raw trauma; the measure of the man is how quickly he comes out of it. Anyone who has ever been in combat and tells you he wasn't scared is either a liar or a fool. But even with all the different experiences I have had, there is no situation I can think of that was ever remotely close to the awful circumstances of that night.

It was a classic ambush: the terrorists fired RPG's (Rocket Propelled Grenade) and took out the lead APC (Armored Personnel Carriers), and then did the same for the last vehicle in the column of three vehicles. My brother, who was not even a corporal, much less a sergeant, happened to be in the commander's turret in the middle APC, due to a shortage of officers, and literally watched his commanding officer (Nitzan)'s torso blown in the air as the APC in front of his was hit, and then, a few seconds later, watched the same thing happen to the APC behind him.

By some fluke, his vehicle was not hit, but with the burning hulks of the APC's at either end of the alley, they were all effectively trapped with nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

Strategically at a disadvantage to the terrorists firing at them from the rooftops, who knew the area much better than the Israeli soldiers, the men of the 202nd's third company had no officers or commanders to give them orders, and no way out.

Worse, due to their inexperience with maps and coordinates, they could not even explain to brigade headquarters exactly where they were. Ultimately, it took the Brigade nearly four hours to find them and get them out. Which was why my brother was still struggling with it in his dreams under a bed, nearly three months later.

I remember well the experience of being under fire for the first time; it is an experience I would be more than happy to forget. But I cannot imagine what it must have been like to be under fire for the first time without any experienced commanders to lead and respond, lost and completely alone in enemy territory, without any idea of what to do.

Ultimately, the officers who planned and executed this mission bore the responsibility for the debacle it became. All of which leaves us with a very difficult question regarding this week's portion, *Ki Tissah*'.

The central event in this week's portion is what has commonly become known as the sin of the golden calf. And much attention has been paid to the central question concerning the Jewish people's responsibility and even culpability for this event, namely: how, just six weeks after hearing the ten commandments, could the Jews be worshipping an idol? But perhaps, before we hold the Jewish people responsible, we might do well to wonder what G-d's role in all this was. After all, the Torah makes it very clear, that the problem actually begins up on Mount Sinai; Moshe, you see, was simply late getting back down to his job!

*“And the people saw that Moshe tarried (“**Boshesh**”), in coming down from the mountain. And they gathered around (literally: “on”) Aaron and said to him: ‘arise, and make for us a god, which will go before us, for this man Moshe who took us up from the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him.’”*
(Exodus 32:1)

What was troubling the Jewish people that caused them to seek solace in the raw idolatry they had left behind? Why were they so troubled about Moshe's late return?

Rashi explains that the word “**Boshesh**” means literally “*to be late*”, and explains that when Moshe went up to Mount Sinai, he told the people he would return in forty days (24:18), and somehow the people got the count mixed up, and were waiting for Moshe's return a day too soon. Which means the greatest mistake we ever made as a people all came to be because Moshe was late! Jewish tradition teaches that when Moshe later succeeds in gaining Hashem's forgiveness for the transgression of the golden calf, it was only because the necessary consequence, which was the destruction of the Jewish people, was simply transmuted to be meted out over generations.

Somehow, on some mystical level, Moshe succeeds in arranging for a long term payment plan, and in every ‘punishment’ (or painful consequence) the Jewish people will experience until the time of redemption, a little bit will be added from the ‘accounts payable’ of the golden calf, until finally there will be little enough left that we will be able to ‘make our last payment’ in one terrible and painful instance that will result in the eventual return of the Jewish people to their land. And while we have neither the time nor the space to properly treat this issue here, essentially the Jewish people will somehow suffer the painful consequences of the golden calf for three millennium, and every painful experience we have suffered over the last *thirty-two hundred years* is in part due to the terrible mistake of the golden calf. And all of this is because Moshe was

late? What happened, G-d broke His Timex? Couldn't Moshe have left a message for the Jewish on the heavenly wireless network that he would be back a day later?

Obviously, such a significant moment has to have been part of some larger message, which leaves us wondering why Hashem allowed, arranged, or called for Moshe to be late? Why did the Jewish people need to experience Moshe's seeming absence?

In fact, Rashi, quoting the Talmud (Shabbat 89a), points out that the people thought Moshe was actually dead, and that somehow this was because the "Satan" (some form of evil representative of G-d?) came along and 'mixed things up' in the world, causing the Jewish people to erroneously conclude that not only was Moshe later than they had anticipated, but that in fact he was gone for good. Which means that on some level, G-d was orchestrating this moment so the Jewish people would *think* Moshe wasn't coming back.

Why did the Jewish people need to have this experience? If indeed, three months out of Egypt, the Jewish people had obviously not gotten the Egyptian pagan idolatry out of their system, why was the manner in which this was brought to the fore Moshe's seeming disappearance? And what is this "Satan" Rashi introduces us to?

One of the most important tools in the study of Torah, and particularly the study of the many stories and characters in the Torah is to attempt to place oneself in the mindset and even in the shoes of the characters one is studying. Obviously, to assume that we can even begin to imagine what it was like to be at the foot of Sinai having just experienced the Exodus from Egypt is absurd. And yet, Nechama Leibovitch (of blessed memory) with whom I had the privilege of studying always insisted that this was a crucial step in attempting to uncover the hidden treasures of Torah study.

What must it have been like for the Jewish people standing there at the foot of Sinai waiting for a Moshe who just wasn't coming down? Recall that this was a people who had only just come out of a servitude that had lasted over two hundred years. And even if they weren't actually at hard labor for that entire time, they had certainly been conditioned to view their Egyptian masters as '*Ubermentschen*'; Supermen.

What does it do to the human psyche to be conditioned for generations to believe that you are a sub-human? How challenging this brave new world must have been for a people that had experienced total dependence for over two hundred years? The essence of the experience of servitude is that one ceases to be an independent entity, instead becoming a vehicle of another. In fact one of the comforts of slavery (and the reason an indentured servant might actually be quite happy to remain a slave, as in Exodus 21:5) is that there are no worries, and no decisions. You don't have to wonder how you are going to manage the budget, and pay the bills, or even which college to send your kids to, or what profession to choose; everything is given to you on your plate, every day, and all you have to do is follow along and swallow it up.

So imagine how frightening it must have been for the Jewish people, having left everything they knew and all that was familiar behind in Egypt, all alone in the middle of the desert, and coming to terms with an entire new G-d-Consciousness which was unlike anything they had ever experienced. There was nothing to hold on to, and no path being given to follow.

Convinced that Moshe was gone, and that they were all alone in the desert, with no map and no compass to guide them, what were they to do? In fact, the Midrash suggests that the miracle of the Manna fell in the merit of Moshe, who knew but that, added to their terror, was the possibility that with Moshe gone, there would be no more Manna from heaven.

Having come from a world where your relationship with the gods and the world of nature often depended on mysterious priestly incantations and mutterings, they may well have been accustomed to the idea that this was all working because somehow, magically, Moshe made it work. So what were they to do now? What if all the miracles stopped? After the intense religious fervor of Moshe's ascent to Sinai (heaven?) perhaps he was following the ascetic priestly model all too common in their world and had left the physical behind, to bond with the spiritual entity that was G-d? Maybe Moshe really wasn't coming back? So what were they to do? Just like those men trapped in that alleyway in Beirut, with no commanders, this was a people with no direction, and no leader. They desperately needed someone or something; anything; to give them their marching orders.

All of which, again, leaves us wondering why G-d seems to have brought the Jewish people to this point? What else did He expect from the Jewish people given who they still were and where they were obviously coming from? What was the point of taking Moshe all the way up the mountain and leaving the Jewish people all alone?

It is interesting to note that this paradigm is one that we have encountered before, and that, in fact, when one begins to take a closer look at the stories and experiences in the Torah one actually begins to see this exact scenario repeating itself everywhere one turns.

The most obvious example of this is Adam and Eve's mistake in eating from the tree of knowledge. (Genesis 3:1-11) The snake, described as "*the most cunning beast of the field*" (3:1), and associated in Jewish tradition with the evil inclination and the very same "Satan" Rashi describes as 'mixing things up' before the sin of the golden calf, seems to be doing the same thing here as well. G-d has told Adam and Eve they must not *eat* from the fruit of this tree, but somehow Eve seems to think they are not even allowed to *touch* it, lest they die (3:3), to which the snake responds: "*you will not die*". (3:4) And most of the commentary and discussion questions why the snake is there, tempting Eve in the first place? Why is the snake ("Satan"?) 'Mixing things up'?

The real question, however, is not why the snake is there, but why G-d isn't? Why has G-d left Eve all alone? All Eve really wants is to follow what Hashem has told her; she has her marching orders, and is quite happy to be the foot soldier following along, until her 'commanding Officer' disappears. Why does Hashem leave us all alone? Indeed, whom do you think sent the snake along in the first place?

Eve, who until now has known only a world where G-d is completely in charge, and everything is very clearly and precisely laid out, is confronted with a decision she seems woefully unequipped to handle. And then, after her tragic and very lonely mistake, she offers Adam the fruit, and he too, is confronted with what appears to be his first decision, only no-one is telling him what to do, and as he has never experienced the struggle of decisions, and certainly is not prepared for this challenge, he is almost doomed to failure. So where is G-d?

And of course, now that Adam and Eve are and feel so alone, they hide from the G-d who seems to have disappeared, and *then* he comes looking for them! Couldn't G-d have shown up a few minutes earlier? Imagine how different the world would have been! And imagine how different history would have been if Moshe had indeed been sent down a day earlier, after all, couldn't G-d have squeezed the material He was giving Moshe into thirty-nine days?

And this is a pattern throughout the Torah: G-d is so 'there', and then He is so 'not there'. Why does G-d become so absent? Where was he when Noah was all alone in a new world, planting vineyards amidst the terrible aftermath of total destruction? And where was G-d when Abraham, having just arrived in the land of

Israel *at G-d's command*, is confronted with the terrible famine that rages through the Middle East and forces him down to Egypt? Where was G-d when Yaakov struggling in the night, confronting the evil forces of the armies of Esav, and where was He when Yosef, whom Jewish tradition calls the Tzaddik, finds himself all alone in the pit of despair?

Again and again, G-d seems to be so close, only to once again withdraw into the hidden-ness that has so characterized life with all of its struggles and challenges?

And who better to ask this question than our generation that has seen this very reality all too clearly and so painfully, in our time. For twelve horrible years G-d was so 'not there', and we were all alone in Nazi occupied Europe amidst a world gone mad, as "Satan" threw us into pits and gas chambers and forced us into the most choice-less of choices.

And then, in the blink of an eye, once again, G-d was so 'there', as, against all the odds, a ragtag band of refugees fought off overwhelming odds, and with their bare hands, built a state which was a Garden of Eden from the sands and barren rocks of the wilderness. And in 1967, as we marched through the streets and alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem, it seemed as though G-d Himself were commanding the units that brought us home, finally, to our beloved Wall.

And yet, again, with all that has happened in these past few years, it seems as though once again, we are left all alone in the forest that was once Eden, with such terrible choices to make, and where is G-d?

Think about it: again and again, Hashem creates our world, and gives us everything we need, only to withdraw, apparently to see what we will do with it all on our own. Why?

The best example of this paradigm is the Jewish experience in the desert, which one might argue forms the single most transformative and central experience in Jewish history.

First, Hashem takes us out of Egypt with a mighty and outstretched arm. Ten plagues befall the overwhelmed Egyptians as G-d Himself turns nature on its ear, and takes the Jewish people out of two hundred years of Egyptian servitude, literally guiding them along with pillars of fire and columns of heavenly cloud. Hashem splits the sea and is so present, so 'there', that the Jewish people actually point to G-d and say "This is my G-d" (Exodus 15:2); they can actually somehow see G-d as an almost tangible reality.

Indeed, the entire miraculous desert experience, full of splitting seas and pillars of fire, manna from heaven and clouds of glory is very much an experience of G-d as ever-present. Hashem talks to Moshe all the time, and the Jewish people are constantly aware of Hashem's presence, all around them. In fact, Jewish tradition describes the desert as a recreation of the Garden of Eden, which is one way of understanding why the spies and ultimately the Jewish people were so hesitant to enter the land of Israel, after all, who would want to leave such a direct experience with G-d?

Then, when the Jewish people finally enter the land of Israel, all the miracles stop. The manna and the heavenly clouds, the magical well of Miriam, and even G-d's direct and miraculous intervention such as at the Red Sea all cease. When the Jewish people came into the land of Israel, they had to fight. And, in fact, it took a while till they started to get it; at the battle of Ai, the first Jewish casualties and captives fell in battle.

So what is going on? Why this pattern and this dichotomy?

Ever wonder why Moshe does not lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel, and even more, why the Torah actually ends before the Jewish people enter the Land? It seems the entire Torah is geared towards the Jewish people arriving in their own place, and everywhere you look the verse *“Ki Tavo’u El Ha’Aretz”* *“When you will come into the land”* keeps popping up.

In fact, there are hundreds of mitzvot that we cannot fulfill unless we are in the land of Israel, so why is it Joshua, and only in the post-Torah (post Mosaic) book of Yehoshua, who leads us into the land of Israel?

So the Talmud tells us that Moshe was like the sun, and Joshua was like the moon.

Moshe had such a direct contact and relationship with G-d, that looking at him was as close to seeing G-d as a human being ever achieved. In fact, as described at the end of this week’s portion, his countenance was so brilliant from his direct relationship with G-d, that there was a heavenly light that emanated and radiated from his countenance, and he wore a veil of sorts so people wouldn’t always have to struggle with looking at him.

Joshua, on the other hand, is one step removed from G-d. His relationship begins essentially through his relationship with Moshe.

Hence the period associated with Moshe was like the period of the sun, where the light comes directly from the source you are seeing. Moshe’s tenure as leader of the Jewish people is a recreation of the Garden of Eden, when G-d was everywhere you looked. Joshua on the other hand was like the moon, where the light is only reflected, from the sun that you cannot see. Joshua’s leadership of the Jewish people saw them leaving the Garden of Eden, and begin to struggle with the forest the world really was.

And there is a very important idea here. You see, a person cannot really look at the sun; its blinding light is too bright; only when one looks at the moon, can one really be seeing the light, and be a partner in bringing that light into the world.

You see, the problem with the desert experience, when we are really in the Garden of Eden, is that when G-d is everywhere, then where am I? If Hashem is so ‘there’ that He is everywhere, then maybe I am not so ‘there’.

Rav Kook compares this to the womb: the baby inside the mother’s womb experiences mother as everywhere and everything. And the mother is so much everywhere that in a way, the baby really isn’t there, and isn’t a real person yet. And when a baby is screaming at birth, it is because, just like the spies who don’t really want or aren’t really ready to enter the land, the baby doesn’t really want to be born. But Judaism teaches that the baby has to be born. And we have to let it grow up.

This is a challenge we often experience in life and in our relationships; sometimes someone is so ‘everywhere’ there is no room for anyone else. This is why very often, children of extremely successful parents are so challenged, because if parents give their children everything, all the time, then the parents are really there, but the kids really aren’t. Which is why the children of such successful parents often rebel, almost as though they are shouting out: *“Here I am! I’m here!”*

In fact, this is why the Jewish people rebel so much in the desert, because G-d is everywhere, I am left wondering: where, or for what purpose am I? And so G-d has to step back, and Moshe does not bring the Jewish people into the land of Israel, because once Hashem has shown us the world the way it is meant to be, it only becomes a world for us, when we then make it so.

Ultimately we are really here not in what we get, but in what we give. Giving is what a meaningful life is all about, much like the night sky, where one can really see the beauty of the stars. But when the sun is shining, you just can't see the stars.

In fact, one of the greatest gifts we can give our children, and indeed any significant others in all of our relationships, is to know when to take a step back, to let someone else begin to shine. In a healthy relationship, you have to know when to be the sun, and when to let yourself become the moon.

And this, ultimately, may be what is really going on at the foot of Sinai in this week's portion. Perhaps the Jewish people have simply substituted the idols of Egypt, for the leadership of Moshe. Moshe is so 'there' he has become their direct relationship with G-d. In fact, when G-d begins to speak to the Jewish people directly, they cannot handle it, and ask Moshe to give over the last eight of the Ten Commandments instead, because he has become, almost, their god, or at least their substitute for G-d.

But that is not what Judaism is meant to be; we were never meant to stay in the Garden of Eden, we were simply meant to experience it, as a gift, so that we could journey through the forest in search of what we had once tasted, this time earning it on our own.

The beautiful garden is not the Garden of Eden we were created in, it is, rather, the Garden of Eden we recreate ourselves.

And the proof that the Jewish people needed a healthy reminder that this was the goal, is the fact that as soon as Moshe was late, the Garden of Eden immediately became the barren wilderness, which means the garden wasn't one they were ready to plant, it was simply something they'd been given.

And maybe the "Satan" is that part of our selves that needs to struggle with this question; the part of who we are that longs to cling to G-d, and yet recognizes the need to be a partner in creating the world on our own.

Ultimately, Hashem wants us to be in partnership with Him in creating a garden that is truly ours. And when the moon shines, the light is still from G-d, but I can see it and be a partner in bringing it into the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman