

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

Portion of Ki Tisah

(reprinted from 2016)

“Make it count”. Words that would stay with me forever.

Lying on a hill not four hundred yards from two terrorists who were firing indiscriminately on the local Jewish civilians behind us, it should have been simple. It’s you or them, on top of which you are protecting civilians; women and children taking cover in the homes behind our position. But sometimes life is not so simple.

It was getting darker, and as the sun dropped lower on the horizon, and the light mixed with shadows, it was clear why we could not open fire. Literally in between and all around the two terrorists who were firing were about twenty or thirty little kids.

The local Arab school they were firing from was one that was familiar to me, such that I knew this school was never open at 5 in the afternoon. They had brought these children there for a reason: they were hoping we would respond with fire so they could show a dozen dead Arab children on the evening news.... Four hundred yards is a long shot for regular troops with M-16 rifles.

Eventually, two IDF trained snipers arrived on the scene. Equipped with special long-range sniper rifles called Barrettes, they had a range of about 1600 yards and after setting up were just waiting on my command. Easy to say, hard to do. What if they missed? What if they hit a six-year-old boy as a result of your command? But then, what if one of the Jewish women or children lying on the floors of civilian caravans behind me (they had refused to let us evacuate them on principle...) was hit instead? And the longer I hesitated the more probable that possibility became....

I vividly recall the gleeful face of a Palestinian boy, sitting not more than a foot away and watching these two terrorists empty their magazines in our direction

Finally, one of the snipers turned to me and said “nu? Give the order!”

And a moment later, the image of what one such bullet can do to a human being’s head will stay in my mind forever. Leaving me wondering whether we would ever be able to make peace with those children who had just seen us kill what must have been their heroes....

This week’s portion of *Ki Tisa*, famous for the story of the sin of the golden calf, begins with a rather strange injunction. For whatever the reason, Hashem (G-d) wants Moshe to count the Jewish people. But it seems we are not meant to count each other, the transgression of which can actually be disastrous.

When conducting a census, rather than count Jews directly, each Jew must contribute half a Shekel as an atonement ***to avoid death by plague***. (Exodus 30:12).

Indeed, when King David decided to count the Jewish people (apparently for military strategic purposes) the consequences are disastrous. A plague strike the Jewish people and many Jews are killed. (Samuel II chapter 24)

What is so terrible about counting people? Certainly, in our generation we are all too aware of how dangerous it is when we turn human beings into numbers. But especially given that there are many justifiable reasons to conduct a census, for military, strategic, economic or even demographic purposes, one wonders why this is such a serious ‘crime’?

Rav Yonatan Sacks, based on the Midrash, suggests a magnificent thought: Whenever we count the people, we are implying there is strength in numbers. We presume that the more soldiers we have, the stronger we are. And the larger our population the greater we are.

But Judaism has never believed our greatness lies in our size. Indeed, we have always been and most probably always will be, a tiny people. Our strength lies not in our numbers, but in what we contribute. We matter because of how much we give.

The greatness and even power of the Jewish people is in how much we have contributed to civilization, since time immemorial. The Jewish people has more Nobel Prize winners per capita than any nation on earth. Israel today has the highest production of scientific publications per capita in the world, and Israel’s academics produce more scientific papers per capita than any other nation on earth. And the list goes on and on.

In *Yad Vashem*, Israel’s national Holocaust museum, there is a small exhibit with the photographs and brief biographies of some of the twentieth century’s most famous people who literally changed the world. Einstein, Wittgenstein Levi-Strauss Salk and Oppenheimer and their colleagues changed the world we live in. And all they wanted to do was to share their brilliance with the world, because Judaism was never just about Jews; all the way back at the beginning of the Jewish journey Hashem tells Avraham that the goal of the journey he was meant to begin was “*ve’nivrechu becha kol mishpechot ha’adama*”; “*through you will be blessed all the nations of the earth.*” (Genesis 12:3).

You want to measure the strength and greatness of the Jewish people? Ask them to give; ask them to contribute.

So, what is this doing as the prelude to the sin of the Golden Calf? At the beginning of the description of the commandment to build a Mishkan (Tabernacle), Hashem tells Moshe to tell the Jewish people they must contribute, and the verse says they should “take for me an offering”. This Hebrew word ‘*Kicha*’, *to take*, is the same verb used for marriage: “When a man takes a woman”. And it denotes a relationship, a sense of belonging, and commitment. Indeed when G-d first creates Adam the verse in Genesis says: “And G-d... *took* Adam and placed him in the garden of Eden “. Which means Hashem had a deep and loving, even giving relationship with Adam whom he had created.

But when the Jews complain to Aaron (Exodus 32) that they want a replacement for Moshe who seems to have disappeared and perhaps even died on the Mountain , Aaron tells them to ‘take off ‘ (“*parku*” literally ‘take off’ ...) and bring their gold. Which is not about acquiring a commitment but rather about letting go of one.

The Golden Calf, not 6 weeks after receiving the Ten Commandments was about moving on, and letting go. Rather than remaining to receive what Hashem wanted to give, in order to be a light for the world,

they wanted to move on to enter Israel for themselves. Which would have eventually meant the end of who we really are, and why we really matter.

Even today, all we really want is peace.

Yet our enemies continue to take the contributions they receive to build tunnels of terror and develop weapons of destruction. While we are teaching our children to share and to give, they are teaching their children to hate and destroy.

The ultimate response to the mistake of the Golden Calf, was to build a tabernacle (Mishkan) in whose holiest space golden cherubs stood in holy embrace symbolizing the longing for a world of peace and tolerance.

Perhaps one day our neighbors will learn that love is so much powerful than hate.

After all, you can only give what others want to receive....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman