

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tisah)

Jerusalem; 722 BCE: the mightiest army on the face of the earth has surrounded the city; bent on conquest and determined to put an end to the Jewish people once and for all.

Approximately 35,000 people, all that remain of the Jewish people after the destruction and conquest of the North and the exile of the ten tribes, are crowded inside the city walls as the Assyrian army lays siege to Jerusalem.

The Assyrian general Saragon, also known as Sanhereb, the Destroyer, has never been defeated, and has amassed the largest army the world has ever known: 185,000 men.

Hizkiah, the Jewish king, has no army to speak of; it would seem we are in the verge of the final solution to the Jewish people, 2,700 years ago.

And then G-d performs a miracle, and according to the book of Kings, on the first night of Passover, an Angel smites the Assyrian army and all 185,000 Assyrian soldiers die, saving the city of Jerusalem.

And yet, this great miracle does not ultimately save the city, only delaying its eventual destruction by the Babylonians 150 years later.

Gush Etzion; 1948: the Jordanian legion, along with tens of thousands of Arab irregulars has surrounded the village of Kfar Etzion south of Jerusalem. Fighting a pitched battle over three days, on May 14, the beleaguered defenders finally succumb to the Arab hordes, and Kfar Etzion falls, literally as the state of Israel is declared. Only 4 of the 245 defenders survive; the rest are massacred, and the village of Kfar Etzion is completely destroyed. For 19 years the town will lie empty, bereft of her children, until 1968, when, after the re-conquest of the Etzion bloc in 1967, the children of those brave defenders will return and rebuild Kfar Etzion into the beautiful and thriving community it is today.

What hope is there for the future of Kfar Etzion and the rest of the land we have come home to after two millennium of dreaming, if the miracles of the prophets in the Bible did not last?

There is a fascinating question in this week's portion ***Ki Tisah*** that may shed light on this question.

After 40 days on Mount Sinai, Moses comes down off the mountain with the tablets of the law in his arms, only to discover the people engaged in an orgy of idolatry we have come to know as the sin of the Golden calf.

Apparently outraged at the sight of the Jewish people, not six weeks after receiving the Ten Commandments, worshipping a golden idol, Moses, in what seems to be a fit of rage, hurls the tablets off the mountain shattering them to pieces.

We will never again have such a holy possession. Fashioned by no less than G-d Himself, these Tablets would seem to be the holiest object the world has ever seen. So how can Moshe destroy them? Especially in what seems to be a fit of rage?

In truth, a closer look at the story in the Torah suggests we might be missing a pretty important piece of the story. In fact, G-d actually tells Moshe ***when he is still atop Mount Sinai***, that the people have sinned and are worshipping a Golden calf! (Exodus 32:7-8) So Moshe cannot be shocked at the sight. And if his intent is to destroy the tablets, why does he bother to carry them all the way down the mountain? (32 15-16). In fact it is

actually when Moshe is descending the mountain with the tablets in hand, (already knowing the people are worshipping a Golden calf down below) that the Torah describes them as fashioned by G-d! So how can Moshe take them down to destroy them? If indeed the people are simply not worthy of such a gift, why not simply leave them atop Mount Sinai?

Indeed after destroying the Golden calf and successfully gaining forgiveness for the Jewish people, Moshe will ascend the mountain again this time fashioning a second set of tablets himself (34:1). And these tablets, fashioned by man, will remain intact, constituting the Torah we received at Sinai, while the seemingly more holy tablets, fashioned by G-d, will remain shattered forever.

A paradox, to say the least: why would the less holy tablets seem to be a better choice than the holiest tablets fashioned by G-d Himself?

Perhaps this is the real message behind Moshe's shattering of the tablets of G-d. Maybe the first tablets represent the initial experience at Sinai: the overwhelming, spectacular experience of G-d. The people are but passive receivers of the Torah, it is G-d, who as it were, comes down to man. We are spectators in the miraculous, even supernatural spectacle of G-d filling the world.

But such supernatural miraculous experiences do not last. And ultimately, they do not change us. When Elijah has his famous encounter with the prophets of Baal in the book of Kings, a great fire comes from the heavens and the entire Jewish people fall to their knees crying out "G-d the true G-d", but it does not last. The next day they are back to their idolatrous ways leading no less than Elijah the Prophet to despair.

And when G-d splits the sea vanquishing the entire Egyptian army and leading the Jewish people to a moment of mass prophecy in the Song of the Sea, there too, it does not last. The very next day the Jews are back complaining about water.

But later, when the Jews fight Amalek, and are victorious in battle, that actually does seem to last, and we do not see the Jews complain again until much later in the sin of the spies.

One wonders if the entire story of the Sinai experience along with the sin of the Golden calf is designed to teach us that lasting change has to come from us. If G-d is doing all the work, and there is no partnership on our part, we do not really change. Ultimately, we have to be our own agents for change.

Twenty seven hundred years ago G-d performs a great miracle for the Jewish people, but it does not last because it was all G-d; real change has to come from within. And so, in 1948, after two thousand years of exile, the Jewish people finally answered the call and took an active role in shaping our destiny and that is what changed history.

It is the second tablets fashioned by Moshe that will ultimately become the lasting Torah.

And today, surrounded by enemies on every side, the message of those second tablets could not be clearer. More than seventy years after the Holocaust we have been blessed with a country we can call our own with a Jewish army. It is ultimately G-d who will decide how history unfolds, but our job is to be active partners in seeing that dream become a reality, every day.

And each of us must decide whether we remain spectators to the spectacle of Jewish destiny, or whether we become active participants in helping it unfold, each and every day.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman