

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tisah)

This past week I spent the week in Poland with Orayta and there an experience we had that I cannot get out of my head, shared with us by Rav Yitzchak Rubenstein our incredible guide for the week:

The wind was howling as we walked into the forest of Zvilitovska Gora, a suburb of Tarnow, but we could not have imagined what awaited us there.

How do you make a people die? You kill all the children.

We came to a clearing in the forest and saw a mass grave surrounded by a blue fence with a Magen David where 800 children lie buried, brothers and sisters forever.

Eight hundred children all below the age of ten; because of what use were children in the German empire; they would not have even made good slaves...

We all fell silent as the trees swayed as if in mourning, and you could hear the moaning of the wind in the trees.... we had no words.

So Rav Yitzchak helped us fill in the picture: he showed us a family photo from a Tarnow family before the war and pointed out a beautiful four or five-year-old boy named Benny.

Benny's family heard they were rounding up Jewish children so they told him to stay inside. But four-year-old boys are naturally curious and he heard something interesting and went outside; he was never seen again; 4 years old he is now buried in the mound we saw before us with 799 other children, none of whom were more than ten years old.

And then he read us a moving letter which a mother wrote the night before she had to give her two-year-old daughter Mirreleh' away. Not knowing if they would ever see her again she sewed it into the girl's undershirt and eventually she found it and kept it with her forever as an adult; it was all she had left from her mother.

How do you share a lifetime of love in a few pages?

The mother explained how they had put off this decision, but this would be the last child rescue and the word on the street was that the last big round up would be happening the next day when they were ordered to report to that same main square...

So what do you say (write) to your two year old daughter whom you will most likely never see again? Who will most probably not even remember you?

How do you explain why you gave her away?

All this as you wonder who would take her in? Will they love her?

Could anyone ever love her as much as her own parents?

And as the letter described the mother holding her daughter one last time, our eyes filled with tears....

The letter was simply signed "Mama"....

Three times they had a chance to get some of their children out, but how do you give your child away? Would it really be better? And yet, you have seen so much already; deep inside you know they are killing all the children even as your mind cannot bring itself to grasp this reality...

Why do we vacillate? They say you can't have your cake and eat it too, but why not? Why else would you have your cake if not to eat it? Why do we try so hard to keep all our options open?

This week we read the portion of *Ki Tisah* which tells the tragic story of the Sin of the Golden Calf. And, possibly because its central point concerns the worship of idolatry, we also read the *Haftarah* (Prophetic portion) of Eliahu Hanavi's (Elijah the prophet) famous battle with the prophets of Baal, when Eliahu (in Melachim (Kings I; chap. 18) confronts the fact that the majority of the Jewish people seem to be worshipping the Baal.

So Eliahu challenges the prophets of Baal to a duel and just as he is about to perform the greatest miracle of his career, bringing fire down from the heavens to consume his sacrifice, he exhorts the Jewish people: *"How long will you vacillate between the two opinions?"* (ibid. v. 21)

In other words, how long will you straddle the fence and try to keep both Hashem (G-d) and the Baal as open options?

One wonders why Eliahu did not just lambast the people for worshipping idolatry. What does it mean that they somehow vacillated? How can a person worship idols and G-d at the same time? What is the difference between outright worshipping idols, and vacillating with idolatry and Belief in G-d at the same time?

The Rambam makes clear (*Hilchot Avodah Zarah* 1:1) that the essence of idolatry is when I confuse the means and the ends. The sun, moon and stars were magnificent manifestations of Hashem's greatness, but when I think they themselves are to be worshipped; awe of G-d becomes idolatry. And whenever we see something which is just a vehicle and make of it the goal, it is essentially a form of idolatry.

Money, as an example can be a magnificent tool for good in the world, but if I think it is the goal, then it becomes a form of idolatry.

Perhaps then, when we vacillate between G-d and such 'idols' it is because we find it difficult to let go of them as the real purpose. Deep down we know that money and power, honor and success should not be the goal, but it's hard to let go of how much we seem to get from them. And in a certain way maybe that is actually worse than the pure idolater.

After all, if you believe money or power is the goal, or the worship and power of nature for that matter, at least you have a clear goal, and while you are living a life based on a flawed perception, maybe you just don't know any better. But the person who vacillates between G-d and the Baal (or money and spirituality), deep down knows the truth. We know money should not be the goal, it's just hard to let go.

How many times this week did we hear stories of those who deep down knew something was wrong, but leaving Poland was too hard; it was too hard to let go of everything that had been built up over centuries of Jewish life in Poland...

Interestingly, this connects as well to the festival of Purim we celebrate this week, when Haman (perhaps the original Nazi?) wanted to destroy the entire Jewish people.

And Mordechai taught them, there comes a time when you have to take a stand; you have to decide who your really are and who you want to be.

One of the most powerful moments I had this week, I shared with our son Yair who be'ezrat Hashem will be drafting into the IDF as a paratrooper in just a few weeks.

We stood in the main square of the city of Tarnow, a city an hour due East of Krakow, in the middle of Poland.

Tarnow had a Jewish community since the early fifteenth century, and before the Holocaust nearly half of the 45,000 people who lived there were Jewish.

Tarnow was the same story that happened town by town, city by city and village by village all over Poland

First they discriminated against them and humiliated them forcing them to perform menial often embarrassing tasks in public streets and squares. Then, very shortly they were made to wear yellow stars and then they were forced into the ghetto, the center of which was the edge of the town square in which we were standing.

And eventually, broken, starved and beaten so that there was no fight left in them, they were rounded up in the central square from where they were sent off in waves to Auschwitz and later to Belzec.

And in this same square Yair thanked his great-great grandfather Moishe Schmeil Schiff for getting off the fence and making the decision to leave when the going was still good. Moishe Schmeil was from Tarnow. And I realized with a chill that we were standing in the exact place where all my cousins of the Schiff family were sent to their deaths....

In life we often struggle and vacillate, and have a very tough time letting go of one path in order to choose another.

Eliahu was teaching us, all those centuries ago, that we have to make a choice and we have to let go in order to choose the path we know deep inside is the one we should choose...

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman