

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tisa)

There is an amazing story told about Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was on a speaking tour across India, part of his non-violent struggle for independence from the British.

At that time, the only affordable mode of travel across the country was by rail. When there were no whites waiting for a train, the British rail company, in an effort to save the expense and time of actually stopping at the station, would have the trains slow down long enough for passengers to run along-side and hop on. (This racist policy was part of what Gandhi was struggling against...)

One day, Gandhi was running to get on a train, and as he jumped up, his shoe slipped off his foot. Though he tried to grab it, he ended up watching helplessly as it fell to the tracks. Quickly, he grabbed the other one off his foot and threw it back down the tracks toward the first rapidly disappearing shoe.

People who saw this thought perhaps Gandhi had taken leave of his senses. His response to their mystified expressions was: "At least now if a poor person finds his way across my shoe he will soon come across its mate and end up with a good pair of shoes. (For most Indians back then a pair of good shoes was equivalent to a month's salary...)

What does it take for a person to develop his ethical instincts to such a degree? If Gandhi had waited another moment, he would have lost the opportunity; what poor person would continue for miles along the tracks in search of another shoe? To have such an immediate reaction, a person has to reach such a level of ethical behavior that ethics are no longer a thought-out process; they become instinctive. How can the average person aspire to reach such a level of human behavior?

This week's portion, *Ki Tisah*, contains one of the most challenging episodes in the entire Torah, the debacle of the Golden Calf. Most often, we focus on how the Jewish people, a few months past the miracles of the Egyptian Exodus, and a few weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments, could be worshipping an idol. But it behooves us as well to take note of Moshe's behavior at this critical juncture.

Moshe is in the midst of receiving the Torah at Sinai. Forty days after hearing the Ten Commandments, with one day left before his triumphant return to share the oral tradition he has received directly from G-d, Moshe receives stunning news:

"Lech Rayd, Ki Shichet Amchah..."

"Get thee down, for your people have become destructive..." (Exodus 32:7)

Hashem tells Moshe what the people have done, and that he must go down to deal with them.

The **Meshech Chachmah**^[1] points out that what G-d is telling Moshe, in commanding him to "Get down", is that if you are all the way up here, and they are all the way down there, something's wrong. If you are their teacher and they are all the way down there, you don't belong here. If you want to make a difference as a teacher, as a parent, and even as a friend, you have to be with others where they are, and understand where they are coming from. You can't do that on top of the mountain; you have to be with them at the bottom.

The most amazing part of this story, however, is what comes next: Despite the fact that Hashem has told Moshe that he must go down the mountain, Moshe clearly does not comply, instead beginning to argue with G-d! (32: 6-14)

In fact, Hashem tells Moshe (32:10) *"Let me be...and I will destroy them..."* Clearly, G-d has decided that given the circumstances, the Jewish people have forfeited any right to be here, and, as in Noah's flood and later with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, G-d will just have to start all over again. Yet, Moshe has no interest in G-d's plan. Rather than acquiescing, and heading down the mountain, he actually begins to argue with G-d! And he offers three cogent arguments for the continued existence of the Jewish people. 'You can't destroy the Jewish people', says Moshe to G-d, 'for three reasons:'

First, how can You destroy the people You just spent so much trouble taking out of Egypt? After all the plagues, the splitting of the Sea, and the endless discussions, now you want to destroy them? What a waste!

Second, 'How will the nations of the world perceive your decision to destroy the Jewish people?' Imagine the Egyptians' reaction: 'We kept the Jews under control for over two hundred years; Hashem couldn't even handle them for three months!' How would that look? It would be a *shandeh*!

And lastly, says Moshe, 'remember your promise to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov: You promised to bring them home to Israel. If You destroy them now, You will totally lose Your credibility...'

Incredible! Moshe is actually arguing with G-d! The entire premise here demands explanation. How can Moshe argue with G-d? The idea is absurd! If everything is a part of G-d's plan, and G-d, the All-mighty, All-knowing One, says that the Jewish people will be destroyed, then that is what has to happen. So how can Moshe start arguing with G-d?

Essentially, Moshe is actually asking G-d to change his mind. Think about it. Moshe comes before G-d and basically says, 'Look, I know your plan is to wipe them out, but I really think you should reconsider. In fact, here are three very good reasons why I think You need to change your mind...'

How ridiculous is that? How could any human being, even Moshe, imagine there is anything we can come up with that G-d hasn't already considered? In fact, it seems that what Moshe is telling G-d, is that He is wrong! But how could G-d ever be wrong?

Even more amazing, however, is G-d's reaction to Moshe's preposterous suggestion:

"Va'Yinachem Hashem Al Hara'ah Asher Diber La'Asot Le'Amo"

"Concerning the Evil Hashem had intended to do to His people, G-d 'Va'Yinachem's." (32:14)

So, what does it mean, that Hashem *'Va'Yinachem's*?

Well, consider the results of Moshe's discussion with G-d. G-d seems to have decided to destroy the Jewish people. And then Moshe intercedes, and obviously, G-d ultimately does *not* destroy the Jewish people. (At least, not yet!) So what, in fact, did G-d do? Essentially, it seems, G-d did indeed change his

mind! "*Va'Yinachem Hashem*" essentially means: "*And G-d relented...*". But how could G-d change His mind? After all, that would have to mean that G-d was wrong. How could G-d be wrong?

It is interesting to note, that this section of the Torah^[2] is actually the portion that we read on all the Jewish fast days (save Yom Kippur), perhaps alluding to the fact that this is the essential question of every fast day: we fast and pray, and attempt to repent, in an effort to *change G-d's mind*. But how can we expect G-d to change His mind?

Indeed, what is Moshe actually doing here, in his conversation with G-d? The word "*Va'yechal*" is actually a language of prayer. Moshe is praying to G-d. And of course, this is also the essential question of prayer. We come before Hashem every day, asking G-d to change His mind. How do we do this? What, indeed, am I attempting to accomplish with prayer?

As an example, imagine for a moment what these prayers are all about. One of the prayers contained in the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the nineteen-benediction prayer that forms the mainstay of our Jewish liturgy, is the prayer of *Re'faei'nu*. In this prayer, we ask G-d to heal us from all our illnesses.

When you have a five-year-old daughter undergoing brain surgery, what else can you do, but pray? And yet, consider the absurdity of this premise: I have to *ask* G-d to heal our daughter? G-d doesn't *know* I want our daughter to live, Please G-d, a long and healthy life?

And if, indeed, Hashem had decided, G-d forbid, that the outcome was meant to be different, then how on earth could I imagine that my prayers should change G-d's mind? Perhaps what we are really meant to say every morning is: 'if this is Your plan, then so be it! If someone is sick, there must be a reason, and since You, G-d, obviously know what You are doing, keep up the good work! If they are meant to be sick, then keep them sick as long as necessary! Who are we to imagine that we know what is good, and what is meant to be?

I remember, thirty years ago, on a hill just outside of Tsidon^[3], meeting up with my old unit and actually having a chance to stop and catch my breath. It was the first time in quite a while there were enough guys who wanted to pray, and to actually conduct a service.

We had just finished a patrol, and I remember listening to the person leading the prayers reciting the 'Sim Shalom' prayer, a prayer for peace. It was a particularly moving moment. There we were in enemy territory, surrounded by tanks and guns, facing south towards Jerusalem, praying for peace. There is no one who appreciates peace like someone who has seen war.

So, I have to ask G-d for peace? Doesn't He know that is all we were dreaming about? Imagine if G-d had listened to all the prayers for peace in 1941. Hitler controlled all of Europe, and had thrust a thousand miles deep into Russian territory, and America was months away from even entering the war, not yet beginning to make a difference. How different the world would be if peace had indeed come in 1941! We think we know what is good, and we think we know what we want. But in truth, we have no idea what we really should be asking for. So why not just leave it all to G-d?

Why aren't we content to let events challenge our faith, and learn to accept them as part of the stream of life, like a twig accepting its fate of floating down a river...?

Indeed, this is one of the major points of divergence Judaism has with Buddhism and many of the eastern disciplines. We Jews believe somehow, that we have the right to challenge G-d. Does this simply mean we are arrogant? Or is there some deeper meaning?

Obviously, we can't change G-d's mind. To assume that G-d changes as we do, is to imagine that Hashem can be something today that he was not yesterday, which would mean G-d was limited, or incomplete.

"*Ani Hashem lo Shineti*", *I, G-d, do not change*", says the verse. (*Malachi 3:6*)

G-d doesn't change, we do. In fact, part of the purpose of prayer, or fast days, for that matter, is to help us change, and to help us become better people.

Why do I pray for peace so often? On one level, it is because if a day goes by where I don't appreciate how lucky I am to have peace, then something is wrong. And if a day goes by where I don't appreciate what a gift good health is, and where that really comes from, then again, something is wrong. And the act, every day, even three times a day, of appreciating all of this, has to make me into a better person, if I will only take the time to consider the implication of what these words of prayer really mean. But it is also much deeper than that.

We'll call him Kobi, for the purpose of the story. Kobi and I had studied together in yeshiva before the Lebanon war, but he was in a different unit, that took him up along the Lebanese coast. On the third day of the war they ran into a world of trouble just outside of Rashe'diyeh', a PLO stronghold about sixty miles south of Beirut. A Sagger anti-tank missile, a nasty little Russian toy that first blows a hole through the tank's armor, and then shoots a stream of lead at about four thousand degrees in through the hole, hit his tank. Basically, everything it hits explodes into fire. Men in the armored corps are trained to recognize a Sagger, as well as the BMP-1 Syrian Armored Personnel Carrier that launches it from a good distance away. So most of the crew saw it coming, and had a few seconds to jump out of the tank.

But Kobi was the gunner, who sits deep inside the belly of the tank, and cannot get out until the commander is out of the way. So Kobi sustained third degree burns on nearly eighty percent of his body.

Third degree burns are the worst kind of burns, burning through the skin all the way to the bone. Although the nerve endings are usually eaten up so that there is initially less pain, the rehabilitative process is perhaps one of the most difficult in modern medicine. Ultimately, Kobi underwent over six hundred plastic surgeries, skin grafts, and operations, and was in and out of the operating room for nearly a year and a half.

A few of us managed to get up to Rambam Hospital in Haifa to visit him. I had never been in a burn unit before and as this was the center for burn treatment in Israel, and we were in the middle of a war, the place was a madhouse.

A nurse directed us down the hall to the elevators. There was a big sign stating that no one under sixteen was allowed into the burn unit. The procedure for these types of burns is not to bandage them. Eventually, as the nerve endings hopefully are rejuvenated, the bandages can cause infections, not to mention tremendous pain, so the scene that greeted us when we stepped out on to the third floor, was like

something out of Dante's inferno. Charred patients were everywhere, and beds lined the halls. There was simply no room to move.

We didn't know where Kobi was and we walked over to an orderly adjusting an I.V. for a burn patient. I tried so hard not to stare at the horror that was this man's face, but I couldn't help myself. And as one of the guys asked about Kobi's whereabouts, I thought I saw a tear in the corner of his eye. And then he mouthed the words "Zeh Ani", "Its me".

He was so burned we didn't even recognize him. And one of us was actually his closest friend. Can you imagine? We had no idea what to say. You come to visit someone who is sick, hoping to make him feel a bit better, and you have just told him he is so burned you don't even recognize him. So what do you say?

If a day goes by where we don't appreciate how blessed we are to be healthy then something is wrong. But more importantly, if a day goes by where we don't stop to take the time to think about all the people out there who are sick, then something is really wrong. And the act of taking the time, every day, to think about others and care about their well-being, has to make me a better person.

The Talmud in *Berachot* actually says: "*Halevai Ve'Adam Yesader Tefillotav Kol HaYom Kulo*", "*Would that a person would pray all day long...*"

Most of us are not on that level, but imagine what a world it would be if we could actually maintain such a perspective of caring for the world around us, all the time.

When we pray, if we really use the opportunity to care about others, to actively decide to consider the well being of the world around us, and to make a conscious decision to hope others will get better, then we, in the process will become better as well. And from a mystical perspective, when I change, the entire world has changed with me, if only in some small way.

Why do I pray for peace? Because if a day can go by when I don't appreciate the gift of peace then something is wrong. But more, if a day, and even an hour, goes by without my thinking about all the people in the world who are not yet blessed to live in peace, then something is very, very, wrong.

We are not asking G-d to change. We are trying to change ourselves. And when and if we succeed, then in the process we have the right to expect that the world we lived in this morning no longer exists. We have changed and have a right to expect a different recipe in keeping with the idea that when one person changes the entire world changes with him.

This morning, this person was meant to be ill. But now there is a whole new world, and we hope, that as part of the new recipe that a new world implies, it will no longer fit into the plan for this person to be ill. And the war that may have been necessary this morning for reasons we are perhaps not meant to understand, that too, is no longer necessary.

Moshe is not asking G-d to change; Moshe is affecting change, and when Moshe changes, he has the right to say: I demand a new verdict. And if he doesn't get it, he will keep trying to change the world, one day at a time, until the right verdict comes along!

In fact, maybe this is why G-d actually tells Moshe to go down the mountain. If G-d just wants to destroy the Jewish people, what difference does it make where Moshe is standing? Hashem wants us to be partners with Him in this world. And if a person is all the way up the mountain, and completely out of touch with all the people in the valley far below, then something is very wrong. Hashem actually tells Moshe: "*Let me be...*" because he is implying that Moshe has the capacity to change everything. If Moshe will not let G-d alone, as it were, then he has the ability to change everything.

That is actually part of the meaning of the Hebrew word for prayer: *Tefillah*. When Rachel names her son Naftali, she says: "*Naftulei Elokim Niftalti*", "*I have struggled the struggles of G-d*". *Tefillah*, the same word, means to struggle. G-d actually does not want us to just blindly accept the world as it is. He wants us to struggle with it, as partners, in the hopes of making it a better place.

Each of us has no idea of the extraordinary power Hashem gives us, every day, to change the world. This is why if something happens to anyone in this world, it really happens to everyone.

And this is also why this story is here, at the pinnacle of the Sinai experience. Sinai was all about creating a relationship with G-d based on love. Love is all about giving. In fact, the Hebrew word for love, *Ahava*, has as its root the word *Hav*, to give.

Love is all about giving and caring. It is exactly the opposite of lust, which is all about taking. And that is what the sin of the Golden calf was all about. The people wanted something tangible they could take. They were thinking about themselves and satisfying their own physical and maybe even spiritual desires. Theirs was desire based on lust, on taking. And what the Torah was trying to teach us was how magnificent the world could be if it was based on giving.

We, each of us, sometimes stand on our mountaintops and forget, even if only for a moment, that we have to learn to be together, even in the valley. This week's portion challenges us to imagine a better world that depends on each of us, and begins every morning, afternoon and evening, one day at a time.

Shabbat Shalom,

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[1] Rav Meir Simchah of D'vinsk; so known for his commentary on the Torah published post-humously in 1927.

[2] Beginning with the words "Va'yechal Moshe..." (" And Moshe entreated"), (32:11)

[3] A city along the coast of Lebanon , which was the site of a particularly bloody battle with the PLO early in the Lebanon war.