

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

Why was Abraham the first Jew? What happened to Noach? Last week at Orayta, we met a living legend, who, less with his words and more by the glint in his eye, provided the answer.

On October 6, 1973, Effie Eitam was a commander in the elite reconnaissance unit of the Israeli army, Sayeret Matkal. Known simply as 'the Sayeret' (recon unit), they were deployed along the line of defense in the Golan Heights and their mission in the weeks leading up to Yom Kippur had been to observe and report back on the obvious buildup of Syrian forces in the area.

Hundreds of tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery guns, anti-aircraft and anti-tank units were observed, and with increasing urgency Effie's unit was reporting back on the dangerous enemy buildup, but it seemed no one was listening.

And then, late morning on Oct 6, 1973, to quote Effie Eitam's exact words: "The gates of Hell opened up". The Syrians unleashed an artillery barrage of a thousand cannons: mortars, artillery guns and heavy arms fire. For the better part of two hours, death and destruction rained down from the heavens and half of his men were killed or wounded. After two hours, when the artillery suddenly stopped, and the smoke began to clear, another sound filled the air: it was the clanking sound of armored forces moving forward.

*Rubbing his eyes in disbelief, at first Effie could not believe what he was seeing: hundreds, not tens but **hundreds** of tanks were surging forward towards the Israeli lines. Effie had taken cover inside a large rainwater pipe beneath a road, and could not believe what he was seeing.*

So, what do you do? He had an old World War II vintage bazooka with a few anti-tank shells, but firing it would mean giving away his position to the enemy; not a particularly bright thing to do when commanding only a few men as part of a spotter unit, facing hundreds of tanks and thousands of enemy soldiers.

Meeting Effie Eitam as part of our Orayta Golan trip last week, at 64 years old he still casts an impressive figure. A unit commander on board the lead plane in the famous Entebbe hostage raid, he has clearly looked fear in the eye on many occasions.

But he told us unequivocally, that his natural instinct was to run. What could possibly be the point of staying?

But he decided, with nothing else between hundreds of Syrian tanks and the belly of Israel save him and his bazooka, he had to try. The lead tank, bristling with antennae was crossing over the road under which he was lying, threatening to collapse the concrete drainage pipe on top of his, and he leaped out and fired his bazooka shell at the Syrian tank; there was an explosion, and the tank ground to a halt. And then the most incredible thing happened: the entire column of over forty tanks leading the Syrian armored forces just ... stopped.

An eerie silence filled the air as all the Syrian tanks stopped advancing. One bazooka shell inexplicably stopped the advance of the entire Syrian army. Effie Eitam would later be decorated with the Israeli Army's highest military honors for this brave act, but he himself was consumed for many years by what exactly had happened.

The conclusion he came to after years of poring over military field reports of the battle and even getting his hands on American satellite photos is fascinating, and is actually alluded to in this week's portion of Lech Lecha.

This week, a new idea will burst onto the world scene and the Jewish people, through the vestige of a seventy-five-year-old man named Abraham, will be born. Not content with the pagan idea that the world is run by a collection of different gods who rule nature, he will, alone in the world, grasp the idea that there is only one G-d, who is not actually *in* reality but the source of *all* reality. He will hear a voice; a calling that no-one else hears; and follow that calling to a new land and the birth of a new society, where might does not make right, and every human being is created in G-d's image.

His response to a world filled with violence that needed to be destroyed (which will become Judaism), will save the world from a flood of violence and pagan idolatry no less than Noah's ark will save him and his family from the flood.

So the question obviously, is what happened to Noah? In the entire written bible, he is the only individual actually described as a *tzaddik*, a truly righteous person. Noah is so righteous that he succeeds in remaining righteous in a society that becomes the epitome of evil; a land 'filled with violence'. Indeed, he merits to be the vehicle through which the entire world is reborn. So, what happened? If Abraham is the only true monotheist in a pagan world, we can assume the same to be true of Noah, and in spades. So why does Judaism not begin with Noah?

The same individual who, in the face of what we can only imagine was intense skepticism, cynicism and even evil, stayed the course, building a massive ark over a period of 120 years and collecting all the known species of animals, will exit the ark after the flood, become a drunkard and so debase himself that his own children who cover him cannot look at him. (Genesis 9:20-23)

Where did the dream of Noah go wrong? What quality made Avraham the story of spiritual success? The Torah describes in vivid detail what happens when the flood ends, and its waters recede over the face of the earth.

G-d tells Noah literally, to "*get out of the ark...*" (ibid. 8: 15-16). Which makes us wonder, why does G-d have to tell Noah to get out of the ark? Even more interesting are the 14 verses preceding this command (ibid. 8:1-14), as the tops of the mountains appear but Noah does not yet leave the ark. He send out a raven, and then a dove.

In fact, contrary to popular perception, Noah does not exit the ark when the dove returns with the famous olive branch; he waits another seven days, and even then, when the dove has not returned, G-d finally has to command him to get out!

What is the nature of this command? Is Noah waiting for permission seeing as how he was commanded to enter the ark at the onset of the flood? (Itself a question; *ibid.* 7:1)

Can you imagine being locked up in an Ark with all those animals for the better part of a year? Wouldn't you be itching to get out? One might expect him to have broken down the doors!

So what is he waiting for? Perhaps this is Noah's fatal flaw: What does Noah do when G-d tells him he will destroy the world? Really, he does not *do* anything at all. In fact, sadly, he does not even *say* anything at all. Contrast this with Avraham who, when faced with the destruction of Sodom actually argues with G-d!

*“Will the righteous perish with the wicked?
Will the Judge of the entire Earth not do Justice?”* (*ibid.* 18:23-25)

When faced with the capture of his nephew (Lot), Avraham goes to war despite overwhelming odds; when faced with famine for better or worse, he sets out to find sustenance even going down to Egypt!

Avraham has seemingly been commanded to journey to Canaan (Israel) and yet, not waiting for G-d to tell him what to do, he decides the correct course of action is to travel down to Egypt.

But Noah? In the entire story of the unfolding of the flood and the building of the Ark and the salvation of his family to rebuild the world, Noah says ... nothing!

Not when G-d say he will destroy the world nor when the rain begins to fall; Noah will do whatever G-d tells him to do, but he will do nothing else. If G-d tells him to build an ark he will build an ark and if G-d says to get in then he'll get in. And when the flood ends he stays in the ark until G-d actually has to tell him to get out.

Noah does nothing to save the world, he saves only himself; and if you save only yourself, then really, you destroy yourself at the same time. Noah exits the ark and confronts a destroyed world, and, unable to face it he wallows in drunken misery.

Avraham, challenged by the evil of the world is determined to change it; even if it means he will die in the process. And that is what makes Avraham, Avraham.....

For five years now, the West has sat idly by while hundreds of thousands of people are being murdered in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Sudan. The world is becoming Noah all over; but we owe it to our children to be better; to live up to where it all began, and become Avraham....

And when you step forward towards the impossible you actually make room for G-d to fill the gap making the impossible real. That was what Effie Eitam did on that lonely Yom Kippur afternoon, its what a generation of pioneers did in building the State of Israel in 1948, and it is what each and every one of us must do to see a better world

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
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