

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Massei)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

7 a.m.; the news comes on, and everything else just stops. Five names have been released for publication, of the thirteen IDF casualties in the previous day's fighting in the Gaza strip, and my heart stops. I don't recognize any of the names, but I don't feel a sense of relief; just the pain of knowing that there are five families that are broken; shattered; they will spend a lifetime trying to pick up the pieces.

And eight more families may not even know yet; may not have received that most terrible of knocks on the door one can ever hear....

"Am hanetzach lo' mefached mi'derech arukah ..."

"The eternal people are not afraid of a long journey" (Rav Kook Sefer Orot)

and it is indeed such a long and painful journey we have been on these past two thousand years.

Some of us thought we were there; the long journey was about to end, but just like the intense pains of labor just before birth, it gets toughest when you are close to the finish line....

I received an incredible email from a student serving on or near the front lines, whose unit was taken to the border with Gaza on Shabbat. A deeply religious young man who has most probably never been in a car on Shabbat found himself in an army bus headed for the border along with his entire unit (including many other religious boys) last Friday evening. As the sun set in the distance over the Mediterranean Sea, he realized he was the only one with a siddur (prayer book) on the bus, so by default he led the Kabbalat Shabbat service. Dozens of soldiers singing the *Lecha Dodi* prayer, with its magnificent welcoming of the bride (an allegory for Shabbat and the Jewish people) longing for peace and joy, on their way to war....

He wrote me of his attempts to avoid unnecessary desecration of the Shabbat, particularly the prohibition of carrying on Shabbat, whilst fulfilling all of the orders he was receiving to help set up their base camp, a near impossible task. By the time I saw the email he was out of contact, and so I did not have the chance to tell him any mistakes he may have made were not an unintentional transgression of Shabbat; they were its fulfillment on the deepest level possible.

This week's portion, *Massei*, begins with and is named for the forty two journeys of the Jewish people in the desert, on their way to entering the land of Israel. Describing each stop along the way, the Torah delineates no less than forty-two separate places the Jewish people passed through on their way to Israel.

From *Ramses*, the Egyptian suburb built by Jewish slaves, all the way to the plains of Moab on the banks of the Jordan River, the Torah takes the time to list each and every part of the Jewish journey from slavery to freedom. Each of these separate journeys carries its own message and its own story, all part of the road the Jewish people were meant to take on their way home.

In one of the brief descriptions of one of these stops, the Torah tells us (Numbers 33:14) that:

“...they encamped at Refidim, and there was no water there to drink.” After which the Torah describes that they then travelled from there into the Sinai desert.

Strangely, the Torah does not even mention in this accounting of the Jewish journey, that they received the Torah at Sinai, but it does take the time to tell us there was no water at Refidim. Some suggest that the Torah is telling us that receiving the Torah was not meant to be a one-time event; it is something we do each and every moment, of each and every day.

But what happened at Refidim was much more than just the fact there was no water for the people to drink. The people complained, Moshe had to hit the rock whereupon they were miraculously given water from the rock but then were immediately attacked by the nation of Amalek at which point the Jewish people fought their first war, according to Jewish tradition as a direct result of their lack of faith at Refidim. Yet the Torah does not mention this.

Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l in his *Darash Moshe* makes a fascinating point: The real issue at Refidim was not that there was no water. After all, they had just passed through the sea which G-d split for them; they had seen plagues where fire mixed with water and rivers turned to blood. Rather the issue was that they felt they were *missing* water; they were *thirsty*.

This is a level of faith we cannot even comprehend, but the Jewish people in the desert, only a few days from receiving the Torah at Sinai were ready to achieve that level. If they had truly believed that whatever they needed they would receive, then they would not have needed water. Indeed, according to Jewish tradition, Moshe was up on Mount Sinai for forty days without bread or water. And he merited this miracle, suggests Rav Moshe, because he fully believed that Hashem would give him what he needed, and if he did not have water then obviously he did not need it, and so he was not thirsty!

Interestingly the Torah describes (Exodus 17: 1-3) how the people were thirsty for water, which was why Hashem gave it to them. And in the previous story in Exodus (16:2-3) the people were hungry and complained they needed food and so were given manna from heaven.

But the people, despite being in the desert for forty years, never complained they had no clothes; they never complained that their clothing was worn out and so the Torah tells us (Deuteronomy 8:4):

“Simlatcha’ lo valta me’alecha’ ... “

“Your garments did not wear out from upon you...”

Their clothing never wore out. In this instance we do not find that they were cold with threadbare clothing, subsequently complaining to G-d and Moshe and then receiving a miracle. Their clothing just never wore out. This suggests Rav Moshe, was because they knew Hashem would provide; they put themselves in G-d’s hands, and they were fine. If they had not been hungry and complained, they would not have needed the manna at all!

Hidden in the listing of the different stops on the journey of the Jewish people then, is the idea that Hashem will give us what we need when we need it, if we will only know that, with all our hearts and all our souls.

As an example, one of the great challenges of combat is fear; fear of making a mistake, costing someone their life; fear of charging up a hill or leaping into a building knowing the enemy is waiting and not knowing, when you start out on any given patrol, whether you will make it back to base in one piece that day. And sometimes, you fear even the fear itself; one of my greatest fears was whether I would one day freeze under fire or under pressure and let my men down.

I tried a lot of different things to overcome that fear. At first anger seemed an appropriate solution. A commander I greatly respected told me the way he got up the hill or through the door was just to get really angry; angry at the terrorists who were trying to murder his family; angry at the enemy on top of the hill who wanted to kill his men. And truth be told, this worked for a while; you could get angry enough to do anything; your anger could drive you to be crazy enough to run up a hill under fire, directly at terrorists who were determined to kill you. The only problem was, when the day was done and the dust had settled, you were left with all that anger.

I finally found the solution in, of all places, Maimonides' code of Jewish law. Writing in the 11th century, the **Rambam** (Maimonides) rules that a Jewish soldier fulfilling the mitzvah (commandment or opportunity) of fighting in a war to protect the Jewish people must not be afraid. And he suggests what a soldier who is nonetheless afraid should do:

“ Yishan al mikveh Yisrael ve'moshio'... “

“He should lean on the wellspring of Israel and its savior...” (Hilchot Melachim 7:15)

Putting aside for the moment how incredible it is that the Rambam, writing during one of the darkest periods of Jewish history, knows that there will come a time when a Jewish army is once again fighting in the land of Israel to protect the Jewish people, for me, this was the solution.

At the bottom of a hill, or about to enter a building just as you are about to give a command to your men that will put all of you deep in harm's way, you just put yourself into bigger hands. And once you know you have done all you can do, you can trust that Hashem runs the show.

After all, fear is all about the unknown; we fear that which we do not know; once you know; really know, you are no longer afraid.

Indeed there was no water at Refidim, and the challenge of the Jewish people was to know that it would be OK, that somehow everyone would get home.

And that student of mine, so concerned about not carrying on Shabbat was living that exact idea. One way of understanding the prohibition against carrying in a public domain on Shabbat is that carrying represents the idea of ownership. When I carry something I am making a statement that it is mine. One day a week, on Shabbat we remember that nothing is really mine; it's all on loan, for a higher purpose.

Nowhere does a person come face to face with this idea more than in combat. In war, you learn nothing is really yours, not even your life; it's all a gift Hashem gives us, ours only to decide what to do with it.

Thousands of our best and brightest in the Israeli army are putting themselves in harm's way as these words are written, with no complaints, and no hesitations, confident in the fact that we are not fighting this war for any other reason than that ours is a message the world needs to learn, and here in our beautiful land of Israel, we are finally creating a homeland that is slowly teaching the world just how a people is meant to behave. And

somehow, Hashem will give us what we need to get through this war and soon, ever so soon, to experience peace as it is truly meant to be.

May Hashem bless us soon to know real peace, and to see no more bloodshed and no more war, soon....

Wishing you Shabbat Shalom from Israel,

Binny Freedman