

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Masei)

Somehow, the computers or the staff making such decisions had really fouled this one up; how could anyone have thought this fellow was suited to be a gunner?

His name was Shachar, which means the dawn, and the joke was with him around it was always dawn, because he blotted out the sun. He was a massive fellow, and watching him squeeze into the gunner's seat, the smallest, most confined place in the tank, deep in the belly of the turret, was a sight to behold. He told me the reason he had fought so hard to get into sergeant's (commander's) course was because it was the only way he could think of to get out of the gunner's turret....

One would think with such a fellow sharing your tank, there would be a lot less room to breathe, but in fact the opposite was true. Somehow, his sharp sense of humor, and the smile always twinkling at the corners of his mouth, made it seem like there was lots of room, and late at night when the maneuvers were done for the night, guys would end up hanging out in our tank to shoot the breeze with Shachar. Sometimes nine or ten guys would be crowded on and in the tank, sharing a good laugh, and the smallest bag of pistachio nuts he always carried seemed to go on forever. It always fascinated me that at the end of the week, back on base, the room I shared with a different group of guys seemed a lot smaller than the tiny tank turret we all had to maneuver around in.

It was only later, in Officer's course that the mysterious truth of this reality really hit home. In the winter, out in the field, it is incredibly depressing to have to sleep out in the tanks. The desert nights where we were training are bitter cold, and finding a spot in and around the tank to stretch out in was always extremely challenging. The best place to sleep, strange as it may sound, was usually (barring rain) out on the 'sipun' or flat rear of the tank, on top of the engine. Long after the tank went quiet, the heat of the engine kept the exterior of the tank warm, which made for a cozy night's sleep. Usually, there was a scramble to get your sleeping bag laid out there at the end of the night inspection, so you could get the best spot.

Somehow, Shachar had figured out a way for all four of us to sleep out on the sipun. I thought this was a great trick, and made sure to watch how we slept as I thought it would be a great trick to share with my crew one day as an officer.

But years later, as hard as I tried, I was never able to replicate Shachar's feat, which is especially strange when considering how much space Shachar himself must have taken up. In fact, one night, in trying to arrange my crew in just such a manner, I nearly rolled off the tank, sleeping bag and all!

I guess space isn't about where you are; it is somehow connected to who you are.

The second of this week's portions, *Massei*, seems to be all about space; lots of it.

The portion begins by describing the many 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, leaving us to wonder why so much space is devoted to a delineation of geographic progression. Why not just express that over forty years the Jews made it up from Egypt to the staging ground along the Jordan, from whence the entry to Israel would begin.

Why the need for so many ‘pit-stops’? In fact, the desert is all about space, and much less about place. Indeed, it is the place which is really ‘no-place’. You don’t hike in the desert to get to a specific spot; you go so as not to be in *any* particular spot. We get so focused on our own little places, the desert is a place where we don’t get distracted by any particular place; we have the chance to appreciate the vastness and beauty of no place....

All of which is what makes this list of places and spaces in the desert so strange. Why did we need all these places? Why not just say the Jewish people journeyed through the desert to reach their destination: the land of Israel?

Rashi, in explaining why the Torah chooses to delineate each one of the stops on this long journey, suggests that it is:

“Le’hodiah chasdav shel ha’Makom.”
“To make known the loving-kindness of G-d.” (33:1)

Interestingly, one of the many names of G-d, which Rashi chooses here, is **Makom**, which means literally ‘the place’.

In other words, each stage in the journey affords us the opportunity to appreciate all that Hashem has done for us, by continuing to give us manna in the desert even while we were frolicking with the Golden Calf, and by transforming bitter water into sweet water at *Marah*, and allowing us victory in our battle with *Amalek*, and so on and so forth.

And of course, this is larger than just the Jewish people appreciating their journey three thousand years ago; it is the recipe for our appreciation of our own journey each and every day.

Most people will concede that the ability to appreciate all the good that comes into our lives is a valuable part of the journey and even transforms the journey itself. But the Torah may well be suggesting something much more significant: perhaps the ability to appreciate what we have been given and where we have come from, is really an essential ingredient without which we will never arrive at our destination at all.

“Min ha’meitzar karati’ kah. Anani bamerchav kah.”
“From the narrow confines I call out to G-d, and he answers me from the wide open spaces.”
(Tehillim (Psalms) 118:5)

Why does King David suggest that we call out to G-d from the narrow confines? Wouldn’t it be just as important to call out to G-d from the open spaces? Imagine you are lost in the desert, wouldn’t you naturally call out to G-d to save you? And why, if indeed a person is in the narrow spaces, does G-d only answer him from the wide open spaces? Wouldn’t it be more powerful for G-d to come into the narrow spaces where we are and be there for us?

Take a close look at the problems we have in life as individuals and in our communities and you may notice that their root is always in the narrow perspectives we allow ourselves to fall into. Too often, we allow ourselves to remain confined to our own narrow view of the world. And the way we tend to look at life as black and white, or from our own limited perspective actually perpetuates that same narrow view.

Indeed, the ability to see things from other points of view, and include others who are different from us in our circle of thinking, actually creates space for more people. And the result of widening our own way of looking at the world to allow room for other perspectives and opinions, even though we choose to disagree with those same opinions results in more people being able to ‘share’ the same space, and actually transforms the narrow confines we fall into back into the wide open spaces the world is meant to be made up of.

This does not mean, incidentally, that we all have to agree; it just means you cannot disagree with someone until you first respect where they are coming from.

No-one starts out bad, and people’s ideas and attempts to change the world around them always start from a good place; the hard part is to find that good place and respect what we share in common with how we all began, before disagreeing on where that has to take us. Indeed, the ability to make room for other people’s way of looking at the world is often a form of largesse, itself a word denoting space. And when we refuse or are unable to do this, we will often be referred to as narrow minded.

In fact, in modern Hebrew slang the word “large” denotes the ability to make room for someone else (and someone else’s perspective) in your space.

Actually this is where everything begins, because in order for Hashem (G-d) to create the world, He first has to make room for it. After all, before creation, there was only Hashem, also referred to as the Endless One. And if G-d is Endless and everywhere, and unlimited, how is there ever going to be room for me? And where can G-d put the world, if he is already everywhere?

This, in fact, is one of the inexplicable, wonderful things about a relationship with Hashem; the realization that in all Hashem (G-d)’s greatness, there is still room for me. And that Hashem actually created me, which means I am important enough to be created, and even more, that without me all of creation would be missing something.

Of course, this also means that the same applies to everyone else. Even the annoying person incessantly honking his horn in bumper to bumper traffic is an important and even critical part of the fabric of the world, and if I took the time to spend with him or her, I might even discover why. And doing that actually makes me a larger person, while making more room in the world.

The way out of the narrow confines we find ourselves in begins with figuring out what we share in common, and learning to respect each other at the very least for where our journeys began.

And part of this of course, is appreciating every step on our own and everyone else’s journeys.

It is not accidental that all this is going on, and indeed this portion is always read, during the three weeks of mourning that mark the terrible period from the breaching of the walls of ancient Jerusalem by the Babylonians and Romans thousands of years ago, to the destruction of our temples on the ninth of Av.

This period is also known as '*bein ha'metzarim*' which can mean between the tragedies, but also can mean, in between the narrow confines.

Two thousand years ago, the rabbis believed we lost everything because we were too narrow, and did not know how to accept and respect each other's viewpoints.

In fact, learning to appreciate each other's journeys might be the greatest journey of all.

Best wishes for a Shabbat shalom, from Jerusalem

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