

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Mattot)

What makes leaders willing to sacrifice everything?

This week marked nine years since my cousin Benjy Hillman fell in battle leading his men into combat in the second Lebanon War in 2006. One would think by now, the tears would no longer flow so easily and the memorial ceremony at his grave would be less gut-wrenching. But watching his mother Judith's eyes fill with tears, and listening to his younger brother Shimon's voice crack as he shared his thoughts made me lose it all over again. Just last week, Shimon related that his four-year old daughter had asked why Benjy had died before she had a chance to meet him; how do you respond to a question like that ?

There is a fascinating episode in this week's portion, Mattot, which relates to this question.

The tribes of Reuven and Gad, desiring the vast grazing lands of *Gilad* and *Ya'azer* (areas recently conquered by the Israelites from Amon and Moab) present a startling request before Moshe: after 40 years wandering in the desert, they ask Moshe for the grazing lands across the Jordan, rather than enter the land of Israel. Moshe is appalled:

"Will your brothers go to war while you sit here?" (Bamidbar 32:6)

As Moshe points out, this is reminiscent of the mistake their fathers made in the sin of the spies when they desired to remain in the desert; indeed this could undermine everything and demotivate the entire Jewish people!

So the Reubenites and Gaddites respond with a counter-offer: 'We will enter the land with you and fight in the vanguard; we will lead the way and we will not return to our lands across the Jordan until the rest of the Jewish people have inherited their lands.'

Moshe accepts this response and indeed they fulfill their promise by leading the people in battle and not returning to their promised lands until the war is over, and the other tribes have inherited their own lands. (Joshua 6:7)

Jewish tradition is replete with descriptions of this story as the paradigm of a healthy compromise. Indeed, the Talmud (Baba Kama 20b) describes this as a clever conflict resolution which allows everyone to benefit. The Jewish people gain because the tribes of Reuven and Gad will lead them into battle, and the Reubenites and Gaddites gain the fertile land they desire.

But one wonders why these tribes volunteered to **lead** Israel into battle? Why could they not simply **join** them in battle? Those who lead the way in battle are typically most at risk; being the first one through the door, or charging up the hill is frightening and quite dangerous, so why would they suggest this? After all, should not offering to join the battle have been enough? And for that matter, what was the root of the issue in contention here to begin with? What did these tribes really want, and why would Moshe subsequently agree to allow two whole tribes to settle outside the land of Israel?

Moshe's greatest fear might have been the dangerous impact a separate unit of tribes on the eastern banks of the Jordan River might have on the unity of the nation, as witness a story that indeed takes place in the book of Joshua (Chap. 22).

Fourteen long years later, after the battles have been fought and won, and the Jewish people have inherited the land of Israel, the men of the tribes of Gad and Reuben finally return home, and build an altar to G-d, which causes an uproar amongst the remaining tribes and very nearly leads to a civil war!

Fearful that these tribes are separating themselves from the people and the beliefs of Israel they send a delegation to ascertain what the intentions of building this altar are all about. And they are appeased and even approve when the tribes (of Reuven and Gad...) explain that the altar was rather built as a symbol of unity, lest the children of Israel one day think that the river that separates them physically, also separates them spiritually. Rather, they explain 'we are one'.

Perhaps what motivated these tribes all along was exactly this sense of one-ness. While they desired the lush lands along the Jordan, they had not considered that this would be interpreted as a desire to separate themselves from the rest of the Jewish people, when nothing could have been further from their minds. And this is what drove them to lead in battle: a deep burning love for their fellow Jews. When you love someone or something you are consumed by a desire to give, and just as a parent will not hesitate to give everything, even sacrificing life itself, for their child, and a lover will equally risk all for the one they love, the men of Reuben and Gad (And eventually half the tribe of Menashe) loved their Jewish brothers and sisters so deeply it was only natural that they would want to lead in battle as well.

And that was Benji Hillman H"YD; called to leave Ayala, the love of his life less than a month after their wedding, he was willing to risk giving it all up for the one thing he loved greatest of all, even greater than life itself: us; the Jewish people. And just as the men of the tribes of Reuben and Gad of old, he fearlessly led his men into battle, carrying us all on his shoulders.

All of which leaves us with a final question; what and who are the things for which we would be willing to give up ... everything? Is there something in this world, someone, we would be willing to die for? Are there principles which are really more important than life itself? Can a land be so important? You who live in America, would you be willing to sacrifice your lives for that country as we are willing to, and do, here? Can you, should you, love a land more than life itself?

Steve Jobs, in his commencement address to the graduating Stanford class of 2005, reflected on his struggle after being fired from Apple, the company he had founded at the age of 20, which had by then, ten years later, become a 2 billion dollar company with over 4,000 employees. He thought he had lost it all, and then realized he still loved what he did. He had been rejected, but he was still in love.

So he decided to start all over again, eventually founding Pixar, the most successful animation studio in the world. "Sometimes", reflected Jobs, "life will hit you in the head with a brick; don't lose faith; find and stick with what and whom you love, and great things will happen. "

Two thousand years ago it seemed as though we had lost everything; we had been rejected, by our land, by the world, and maybe even by G-d. But we never gave up; we stuck with our true love, with G-d, and with Israel; and now we have come back home, to the land we love. And we are blessed with leaders like Benji Hillman who remind us, every day, that there are things in this world worth fighting for

Yehi Zichro Baruch; may his memory be a blessing for us all.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman