

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Matot-Masei)

Maxim Cohen was born in Morocco and made Aliyah to Israel as child in 1948. He enlisted in the IDF and became a driver. But following the Six-Day War in 1967, Cohen left Israel with his parents to live in France.

On Yom Kippur in 1973, Cohen – a traditional, observant Jew – was in Synagogue with the Jews of his community. At 2 p.m. during the afternoon prayers, his wife arrived in a car and Cohen immediately knew something was wrong. He rushed outside to discover that war had broken out in Israel. He rushed to the Israeli embassy in Paris where they were assisting soldiers wanting to return to Israel to join the war effort.

Arriving in Israel, he was attached to an armored force fighting the Egyptians in the Sinai. Cohen and his unit eventually crossed the Suez Canal, and after three weeks of intense fighting, on October 24 – the last day of the war, arrived at the outskirts of the city of Suez.

The IDF had decided to attempt to conquer the city, a key strategic point on the canal. Preparations were rushed and the breaching forces received little forward intelligence. Cohen found himself part of an armored column rolling into the city.

Suddenly, on one of the streets that appeared empty, an inferno of concentrated fire was unleashed on the vehicles from inside the buildings that lined the street. The Israelis were trapped in a wall of fire. Bazooka rockets, anti-tank missiles, and thousands of grenades and bullets from automatic weapons rained down on the Israeli force which dispersed in every direction to escape the inferno. The battle continued for many hours – the Israeli soldiers took cover in the houses.

The commander of Cohen's APC (Armored personnel carrier) had been hit in the firefight, along with most of the vehicle's soldiers. Cohen maintained composure under heavy fire and proceeded to evacuate the wounded Israeli soldiers while running over enemy troops with his vehicle. Without concern for his own safety, Cohen drove back into the city and the heart of the inferno again and again to save more wounded troops.

After the war, Cohen was awarded the Medal of Courage for his resourcefulness, composure under fire, and for putting his own life in danger to save the lives of his brothers in arms.

So, what motivates a Jew, safely living in France, to drop everything, literally at a moment's notice and risk all for a land he was not even born in?

This week, we will read the double portion of Matot-Masei, concluding the entire book of *Bamidbar* (Numbers). *Bamidbar* is the book that sees the transformation of the family of Yaakov (Jacob) transformed into the nation of Israel.

Interestingly, it begins with a census suggesting the value of each individual, which seems to be somewhat of a theme throughout the book as some individuals (Eldad and Meidad, Yehoshua, Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam, Elazar and Pinchas) get it right, while some (Korach, Balak, Datan and Aviram, Zimri and Bilaam) seem to get it very wrong...

There is a flow to this book both in terms of its events as well as the historical unfolding of the Jewish journey, which is what makes its conclusion so odd:

The final verses of the entire book of *Bamidbar* (36:1-13) return us to the story of the daughters of *Tzafchad* and their quest to honor their fathers' name by inheriting his portion in lieu of sons to inherit the land. After no less than G-d Himself ruling they should receive their father's portion, the tribal leaders of the Tribe of Menashe approach Moshe with a seemingly legitimate complaint. If these daughters of *Tzafchad* receive his portion and marry outside the tribe, the lands they inherit will end up in a different tribe, which seems to be upsetting. Again, after approaching G-d the ruling received is that this is a legitimate issue. The women can inherit their deceased father's portion but must then marry within the tribe.

Why is this the conclusion of the entire book of *Bamidbar*? And why this concern with where the land ends up? Aren't we all in the end one nation: one people? Seems like a less than inspiring idea with which to conclude one of the five books of the Torah, no? It's also surprising that this story is not placed in conjunction with the original story of the daughters' query to Moshe back in last week's portion of *Pinchas*; why are these two parts of this story separated in such a way?

Perhaps the Torah is making an important point:

In truth, the daughters' initial request is a very individual issue: to uphold the name of their father and to acquire land for their individual family. (Thus, the story initially appears in the portion of *Pinchas* whose theme is clearly the value and power of an individual, in the right place and at the right time, to effect change and make a difference.)

But it takes a lot more than healthy individuals to build a healthy society. It takes a willingness to compromise individually in order to be part of a larger Tribe. It is no accident that the Jewish people are consistently counted by Tribes; each Tribal group brought something special to the nation while maintaining a certain level of individual, alongside the context of a group, identity.

The Tribe is the paradigm of the compromise between the individual's need for self-expression and fulfillment, alongside the need to sacrifice one's individual wants and desires for the benefit of a greater good.

And so the book which begins with the counting of every individual, concludes with an expression of the inherent danger of individual expression left unchecked. As we conclude *Bamidbar*, the Torah affirms the value of compromise, and the willingness to subjugate one's individual desires to a greater good, without completely losing the value of the individual, and the individual subset group to which one belongs.

Fifty years ago, one Maxim Cohen, safe and sound in Paris, was willing to give it all up without even being called for something greater than himself. But he never lost his individual identity as a religious Moroccan Jew through all the battles he fought.

There is a powerful message here we would do well to consider.

We live in a society which seems to place the right to individual expression as the be-all end-all pinnacle of society. Whether in prayer debates at the Kotel, or the right of every individual to choose and live the

lifestyle he or she feels most comfortable with, we try to be sensitive to the needs and different forms of expression of every person, any and everywhere.

But it is not accidental we always read these words during the three weeks in between the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by the Roman Legions, and their ultimate destruction of the Temple on the ninth day of Av in the year 70 of the Common Era.

We need to be careful that in our desire to be sensitive to and respect every individual, we don't lose the beauty and value of the larger group that has kept us together ever since we were able to all crowd into the Temple Mount all those thousands of years ago...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman