

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Miketz)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From Rav Binny and Yonatan Freedman

*To be honest, that year, I wasn't particularly looking forward to Chanukah, and hadn't really had much time to think about it. Our armored battalion had recently come down from a few months up in Lebanon, and while I was thankful we would be spending the winter in Israel and not up in the freezing cold mountains of Lebanon, we were still in the process of overhauling the tanks; not a particularly enjoyable task.*

*We were so involved with the various procedures, lack of sleep, and greasy filth inherently involved with getting our company's tanks back on alert status on time, that it was only a few hours before Chanukah when I realized with a start that, having given no thought at all to the holiday, I had no menorah, no candles or oil, and certainly no gold coins or dreidels.*

*A wave of depression swept over me, as I realized that I would be celebrating Chanukah all alone, surrounded by dirty, exhausted soldiers who didn't place much stock in the holiday and at best could be expected to enjoy the movie night that week on the base. This year Chanukah was just going to be a big pain; we were on alert status in the Jordan valley, which was not a tense border, but our tanks were charged with covering that area of the border, and as the youngest officer I had no hope of getting leave just to get some Chanukah candles. , I knew I would end up having to scrounge around every day for enough candles to light each night.*

*As the sun set, and the mountains of Jordan changed colors, my mood worsened, as I remembered what Chanukah used to feel like, how much I always looked forward to it, and how depressing it was going to be to light a simple white Shabbat candle in a corner of the dining room.*

*It was at this point that one of the reserve duty soldiers who was helping us overhaul the tanks that week, noticed that I obviously had something on my mind and, to my surprise, wished me a happy Chanukah. I guess he could see the surprise on my face, because he smiled and said:*

*"Mah' Ha'ba'ayah? Atah Lo Rotzeh' Chag Sameach?"*

*"What's the matter? You don't want a happy Chanukah?"*

*At which point I must have launched into a long-winded explanation of how depressing it was to be alone on Chanukah, especially since one of the major points of the Chanukah celebration is supposed to be Pirsumah' de'Nisah', or publicizing the miracle. At this point, this fellow, if my memory serves me, actually got annoyed with me, and said the only line from this entire experience that I remember with absolute clarity:*

*"Az Efoh Ba'Olam Yesh Makom Yoter Tov Lachgog Et Ha'Nes Ha'Zeh, Me'asher Ha'Makom Ha'Zeh?"*

*"So where else in the world is there a better place than here to celebrate the miracle of Chanukah?"*

*The guys were all starting to leave the tanks and head into the dining hall for dinner, and he grabbed me and told me to follow him, and we walked down to the edge of the line of tanks, where some spent 105mm shell casings were lying on the ground, waiting to be taken out to the ammo dump.*

*He grabbed a couple and gave me one, and started walking to the mess hall. Grabbing a shovel from the emergency fire stand, he started digging a small hole, and then threw me a shovel, and while I did the same, he shoved the empty tank shell casing into the edge of the hole, so I did the same with mine. Then*

*he started shoveling some of the dirt into the shell casing, which was about waist- high, and by this time, I was grinning, having figured it out. When we were done, we had the largest makeshift menorah I had ever lit. We poured gun-oil on top of the dirt that was in each shell casing, and then topped it off with some very flammable benzene (gasoline). And I grabbed a lighter and was about to light when he looked at me with horror, and said: "what are you doing?"*

*I guess, again, he saw the confusion on my face, because he said to me:*

*"Mah' Karah' Lecha'? Lech Tikra' Le'kulam!"*

*"What's the matter with you? Go call everyone out here!"*

*So I went inside and made what I thought was a fairly weak announcement that we were lighting Chanukah candles outside, and that who whoever was interested should come join us. I figured it would actually be nice if a few guys decided to join us, but I never expected what actually happened next. The battalion commander got up, looked around the dining hall, and strode outside to join us, at which point the entire base, at least a couple of hundred men, came outside to join us.*

*And then this fellow handed me a stick with a rag, dipped in some benzene he had put together, and said 'go ahead and light'. But I refused to take it, feeling this was really his show, and he should absolutely have the incredible privilege of lighting the menorah he had created.*

*So he took the stick in his hand, and when everyone got really quiet, announced in a loud voice:*

*"Lifnei She'nadlik, Bini Yomar Kamah Milim!"*

*"Before we light, Binny will say a couple of words!"*

*So what do you say, to two hundred modern day Macabees, defending the borders of Israel, after two thousand years of exile, in a modern Jewish state? Words definitely failed me that night, and to be honest, I don't really recall what I said, which is probably as it should be, because some experiences are not meant to be put into words.*

*I do remember looking over at my new-found friend, whose name, to be honest, I cannot even recall, and watching with some surprise, as he took a Kippah (Jewish head covering) out of his pocket and put it on his head, just before he lit the candles. And I remember being even more surprised as he recited all the blessings of the first night's candle lighting from memory. And then, I will never forget how someone started singing and a few of the guys started dancing, all by the light of the Chanukah 'candle' in a 105mm tank shell casing, in the middle of an Israeli Army tank base, near the Jordanian border. Could you ever have a more meaningful Chanukah candle- lighting?*

*Finally, when we were done, I went over to thank this fellow, who proceeded to thank **me** with the following explanation: He had been one of the original tank crews on the Suez canal, on the infamous bar Lev line, when thousands of Egyptian tanks and men crossed the canal into Israeli territory. He made it out of the first wave, and found himself, on the third day of the fighting with one of the tank units attempting to counter-attack and regain lost ground.*

*Deep in the desert, the night turned into day as tanks all around him burst into flames; his unit, he told me, was at the mercy of the newest anti- tank missiles being fired by Egyptian Commandoes from amongst the dunes. The whole scene seemed to him like candles burning in the night, and, terrified that his tank was next, he found himself thinking of Chanukah and the menorah lights, which he had lit as a kid. And he made a deal with G-d, that if he made it out of that inferno that year, he would light candles with all the blessings and all the bells and whistles. And indeed, he managed to do just that, and has not missed a night of Chanukah candles ever since.*

*Deep down, I will always wonder whether he survived his own personal hell in part to share with a very lonely battalion, as well as a particularly depressed platoon officer, what was absolutely the most incredible Chanukah lighting I have ever had.*

*One thing I can say with conviction: I have never lit Chanukah candles quite the same way ever since.*

So, how do we succeed in transforming a candle-lighting moment, into a meaningful Chanukah experience? How do we succeed in transforming not so much *what* we do, but *how* we choose to do it?

Perhaps this question is at the heart of an oft-missed dialogue Joseph's brothers seem to be having amongst themselves in this week's portion, *Miketz*.

Twenty-one years after selling their half-brother Joseph into slavery, the sons of Yaakov are now grown men, with families of their own. One would think that Joseph and that entire chapter in their lives is long forgotten, or at least hidden away in the deep recesses of their hearts and minds, especially as it is safe to assume they will never hear of him, much less encounter him again. But Hashem has a different way of running the world, and circumstances conspire to bring all the brothers together again.

There is a famine in the land, which eventually forces the brothers to travel south to Egypt, where food is in plentiful supply. Unbeknownst to them, Joseph has risen to a position of power and is now the Viceroy of Egypt, responsible for dispensing food to the masses who are starving.

It is no simple decision to venture down to Egypt, a society based on a caste system where evil abounds, and Hebrews do not seem to be very popular (see Genesis 43:32; even then, with only seventy Jews in the world, we were apparently already the Pariah amongst the nations...).

But the plan seems fairly simple: they will travel to the palace, pay for the food they need, and return home to Canaan. But G-d has other plans, and things begin to get complicated. Money they have paid mysteriously ends up back in their rucksacks, the Viceroy (whom they do not recognize as Joseph) seems to be toying them, accusing them of being spies and demanding that they return with Binyamin, their youngest brother, despite the pain this would obviously cause their father, who has already lost one beloved son....

It is in the midst of these tumultuous events, that we gain insight into the thought processes of the brothers. The Viceroy seems convinced that they are not innocent farmers attempting to acquire food for their starving families, but rather spies who seek to probe the defenses of the Egyptian capital.

Indeed, there is logic to this contention; after all, why send ten men to bring back food, leaving their families alone and untended in Canaan? It would have made much more sense to send a few of the brothers, with the rest staying behind to defend what little food they still had.

Joseph (known to them only as the Viceroy; though he quickly recognizes them) demands that they return to Egypt with their remaining younger brother, Binyamin in tow, along with the demand that they must leave one of their lot (Shimon) behind as a hostage.

Imagine: just as they see the fresh food being brought to them, and they can almost taste the end of their ordeal, they are told that one of them, their own brother, must remain in Egypt as a prisoner, wallowing in the Egyptian dungeon. It is clear to them this will be no small challenge, as they will not be able to make this journey again in such a hurry.

Their reaction is interesting, to say the least:

*“And each man said to his brother: but we are guilty (**Ashemim Anachnu**’), concerning our brother, inasmuch as we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us, and we paid him no heed; that is why this anguish has come upon us.*

*“And Re’uven responded to them saying: Did I not speak to you, saying: ‘Do not sin (**Al Techeta’u**’) against the boy’ but you would not listen!*

*“**Ve’Gam Damo’ Hineh’ Nidrash**” “And his blood as well is being demanded (avenged?)”  
(Genesis 42:21-22)*

At first glance it seems that the brothers are still torn up over selling their brother as a slave over twenty years earlier. And there is something very powerful about the fact that despite the challenge of their current situation, they not only recognize that they deserve this for the mistake they made so long ago, but they seem to accept the connection.

And yet a closer look at these verses produces a puzzling reality, because the brothers do not actually regret the fact that they actually sold Joseph into slavery, but only that in the process they did not take into account his pain and anguish! In other words they do not admit that they made a mistake in selling Joseph, they just feel bad about the pain they caused him in doing it! They simply should have been a little more merciful about the entire affair! How can that be? And, if this is correct, what exactly is this anguish Joseph experienced that the brothers regret? What would they have done differently?

It is clear that the brothers do not seem to recognize how horrible what they did really was, because a few verses later, when they discover the money they thought had been paid for the food back in their packs:

*“Their hearts sank, and they trembled ...saying: ‘what is this that G-d (Elokim) has done to us?’” (42:28)*

And later, when Yehudah is begging Joseph to take him as a slave in place of Binyamin he says:

*“What can we say? How can we justify ourselves? G- d has uncovered the sin of your servants...” (44:16)*

All of which seems to suggest that only G-d knows what terrible iniquity of theirs has brought on their current circumstances, whereas they themselves are clueless!

So what exactly is it about the sale of Joseph that they do regret, and why is the act of selling Joseph not a mistake in their eyes?

And what about Re’uven, who “*responded to them saying: Did I not speak to you, saying: ‘Do not sin (**Al Techeta’u**’) against the boy’ but you would not listen!” (42:22)? What exactly is Re’uven trying to say? Is the Torah trying to record for all time the fact that Re’uven was saying ‘I told you so’? Is this the message we are meant to take away from this moment?*

It seems that Re’uven does feel they have sinned inasmuch as he says ‘I told you not to sin’, and given that we have learned that *Chet* in Judaism is really a mistake, one wonders what Re’uven’s perception of their mistake was, as opposed to his brothers.

There is one additional person deeply affected by this story we have not discussed, and that is Yaakov.

How did Re’uven feel about what they had done to their own father? Granted, the story begins with Yaakov’s seemingly misjudgment in favoring Joseph by giving him the special *K’tonet Pasim*, the Technicolor, striped coat. And this may have bred a certain amount of resentment towards Yaakov on the

part of his sons, but one wonders how long that lasted in the face of the inconsolable anguish (37:34- 35) they witnessed their father undergo, after the news of the 'death' of his beloved son.

And remember that whatever guilt they may have felt towards Joseph could wane, because Joseph wasn't there. But Yaakov was very much there, and they had to live with the pain they had caused him every day, because a parent never really gets over the loss of a child; it is a black hole of pain they live with every day, for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, **Rashi** points out that the verse (42: 22) implies that the blood of more than one person (Joseph) is being demanded (or avenged)):

*“Ve’Gam Damo’ Hineh’ Nidrash” “And his blood as well is being demanded (avenged?)”*

Perhaps Yehudah is regretting the years of anguish they caused their father as well, suggests **Rashi**.

Perhaps it is this tragic error in judgment that may be at the heart of what Re’uven struggles with. A magnificent comment of **Rav Avigdor Nevensahl**, in his *Sichot Le’Sefer Bereishit*, puts a completely different spin on this entire dialogue.

Perhaps Re’uven is not castigating the brothers, but rather himself. His issue is not with the brothers, because they clearly had a completely different outlook on their responsibilities to Joseph within the hierarchy of the family. Maybe his struggle, which he has been carrying inside for twenty years, is not so much why the brothers were wrong, but why he himself did not succeed in *convincing* the brothers that they were wrong.

It is clear that Re’uven and the brothers had very different opinions as to what the issue was with Joseph, and what to do about it. After all, the brothers believe that Joseph deserves to be killed, whereas Re’uven feels he can still be returned home to their father’s household.

It is important to remember that inasmuch as we need to view the brothers and all the characters in the Torah as ordinary human beings so that we can analyze the stories and glean the ethical and moral lessons we can comprehend on our level, we need also to recall who they really are.

We are in the end, dealing with giants among men, who communicated with G-d in ways we cannot begin to fathom. It is indeed a basic Jewish principle that in order for a person to receive a prophetic vision they must be on an extremely high moral level, which leaves us wondering how the brothers could, however mistakenly, feel that Joseph deserved to die. Perhaps they felt, however mistakenly, that Joseph’s actions threatened their own lives. If that were the case, however mistaken they might be in hindsight, they might be entitled to feel the right and the need to kill Joseph before he killed them.

And while we do not have the time to give full treatment to this topic for the moment, this *possibility* would certainly change the way we look at the entire story.

It is worth recalling that until the time of Joseph and his brothers it seems to have become the tradition amongst families mentioned in the Torah that there is an heir to the legacy, and an outcast who is sent away. Beginning with Cain, who kills Abel, and even the sons of Noach, one of whom (*Cham*: see Genesis 9:22-27) is cursed and shunned for his improper actions, every group of siblings mentioned in the Jewish genealogy seems retain only a part or even one of the offspring as true heir to the tradition. Abraham has two sons, Yitzchak and Ishmael, and Ishmael is sent away. Yitzchak has two sons, Yaakov and Esav, and Esav leaves the fold as well. So there is every reason to imagine that the brothers assume the same thing will happen with them, (as we discussed in last week’s Byte).

Perhaps they view Joseph's telling of tales about them to their father, and the grand dreams he shares which imply that they will soon be bowing to him, as evidence of the beginning of that process. After all, while they are out in the fields all day tending the flocks, he is home and has their father's ear.

And maybe the fact that Joseph is actually sent by Yaakov out to the fields to see how the brothers are doing is the final spark that sets the tinder on fire.

It may well be that Yaakov, sensing the discord that is being created with Joseph at home and the brothers out in the fields, sends Joseph out to begin to repair this disparity. But the brothers may well see an entirely different reality, assuming that Joseph is coming to check up on them.

And if indeed the future of the entire Jewish people is at stake; if the possibility of creating an ethical people made up of a unity of eleven brothers to be a light unto the nations, hangs in the balance, then what is on the table from the perception of the brothers, is no less than whether the world will ever rise up out of its current morass of pagan idolatry, not to mention the storm of evil emanating from the empire of Egypt; indeed the world is at stake.

Is it any wonder, then, that they could arrive at the conclusion that the life of one brother not only *can* be sacrificed for the sake of the world, but indeed *must* be?

Viewed against this light, perhaps the fact that the brothers sit down to 'break bread' while their brother languishes in the pit is not a sign of their inhumanity, but rather represents their struggle to arrive at the correct course of action given their circumstances. And indeed they decide to give Joseph as a slave (it is unclear who sells Joseph for twenty pieces of silver and the text implies it may not have been the brothers, but rather the Midianites to whom they gave Joseph) because their obligation, in their eyes, may have been only to send Joseph away just as Esau and Ishmael were sent away before them, at which point they can trust the future to the hands of G-d.

All of which would explain why the brothers are uncertain as to what their mistake really is, as well as why Re'uven's issue is not with what the brothers did, which from their perception was reasonable, but rather with why Re'uven himself was not able to convince the brothers that their entire perception was mistaken.

Which leads us to wonder what exactly Re'uven's perception of this entire story was?

Suggests Rav Nevensahl in his *Sichot Le'Sefer Bereishit*, what if Re'uven knows he chose the best possible *action*, but subsequently realized he was simply missing something in his *motivation*?

Given the above paradigm, it is obvious that Re'uven could not convince the brothers they were wrong about whether Joseph was a threat to the future of the Jewish people. But what he might have been able to convey to them was the pain they would be inflicting on their father Yaakov. This added argument might well have swayed the brothers to put off selling Joseph and allow Re'uven to carry him home. Indeed, Re'uven may well be wondering what stopped him initially from just picking Joseph up and taking him home with the parting statement to the brothers: 'we can't do this to our father'.

Why indeed did Re'uven not succeed in saving Joseph? One wonders whether he just wasn't determined enough. Perhaps while he realized this would be the right thing to do, he did not fully comprehend how much this would mean to his father. And if indeed Re'uven was not in touch with his father's potential suffering, it also means that there was something lacking in his relationship with the very special mitzvah of *Kibbud Av Ve'Em*, the mitzvah of honoring and even cherishing one's parents.

There was not, to be sure, anything lacking in what Re'even was trying to do; what was lacking was his motivation. And in the end, our actions are ultimately guided by our motivations, and our inner thoughts.

Indeed, when our actions are lacking something in their motivation, ultimately something will be missing from those actions as well.

Often, we become so focused on the mechanics of the actions we are involved in, we do not give sufficient attention to just how crucial the intent, or motivation that lies behind those actions really is. So often, the body is doing the mitzvah, but the heart just isn't there, and in the end, if our hearts are not in all that we do, then we are not really doing (or achieving) what we think we are.

Judaism has such a beautiful tapestry of mitzvot: opportunities to connect, on so many levels, with who we are, and why we are here. But if all of these opportunities simply become the rote of tradition, and we continue to play by a particular set of rules simply because that is what our parents and grandparents have told us, then we are hanging up the tapestry, but we are completely missing out on the beauty it has to offer, because we are hanging it on the wall face down.

One wonders if part of this lack of motivation we so often encounter, really has to do more with who we are, than with what we do.

If you were elected to be the President of the United States, you would instinctively come to understand that everything you do and say has enormous significance. The wrong statement can send the entire world economy into a tailspin, and you might come to realize that a foul piece of language that leaves your lips has enormous implications for the education of children all over the free world, and that infidelity during your term of office has severe repercussions for moral and ethical standards in the entire country.

And all of this would make you realize just how important what you do and say and even think, really is and you would conclude that you are a very significant, and important person in the world.

Conversely, if a person thinks that what they say and do does not really matter, it is most probably because they do not think that they themselves really matter, which of course, is the root of the problem.

For whatever the reason, we as a people seem to really matter in the world. The entire globe seems focused on all that we do, and certainly everything that happens in Israel seems to capture the attention of the media, despite the relative insignificant size of its landmass.

Perhaps it is because deep down, the world expects us to be better. We are somehow supposed to do a better job. It is irrelevant whether Judaism believes this to be true. The world certainly seems to think that this is so.

The question is, do we expect this of ourselves? Do we truly value who we are as a people, and do we recognize the true value of every action of each and every one of us.

And if indeed *why* we do things influences *how* we do them, then that suggests enormous significance not only to our every action, but also to our every thought.

We live in challenging times, and at the root of all the challenges we are experiencing as a people, is this very issue.

We love to put things and people into nice, neat little boxes, and we tend to define each other by labels: 'religious' and 'secular', right wing or left. But in truth, the same issue challenges us all, if from different sides of the same coin.

So many Jews, who have become distanced from Judaism, often connect it to the fact that the dry ritual observance seems so devoid of spirituality and meaning. Indeed, **Dr. Laura Schlesinger** publicly announced the fact that she envied her Christian friends because they have a religion of love, while Judaism is a religion of laws. And this was **Spinoza's** chief contention with traditional Judaism; in his *La' Etica*, in which he posits as well that Moses gave us laws without love.

As for those Jews who affiliate themselves with the 'religious' camp, so many Jews today go through the motions of Judaism, but are missing the meaning behind the ritual. They come to *shul* (synagogue) every morning, and find everything in the right place – the *bimah* (lectern), the ark, even the rabbi's parking spot, – but something is missing.

Many Jews know all about Judaism, but do they love it? Perhaps many have become comfortable with Judaism, but have lost in the process their passion and inspiration.

This is not just tragic by virtue of how empty Judaism has become for so many; it is tragic because it just isn't true. Judaism was never meant to be about laws alone; it was always meant to be about love. If we fulfill the actions, without accessing the meaning and the motivation they are designed to inspire, then we have lost the point of the entire process.

Indeed, it may well be that this was at the root of the struggle that became the story of *Chanukah*. So many Jews had lost their love for their tradition, because Judaism had become just so many laws. The Jewish people were searching for beauty, and thought they could find it more easily in the beauty of Greek art and sculpture, not to mention philosophy and body worship.

The **Sefer Ha'Chinuch**, in his discussion concerning the mitzvah of giving *tzedakah* (alms to the poor), points out that the reason we have a mitzvah (and are obligated) to give *tzedakah*, is not because poor people need money. If the point of the mitzvah was only to ensure that the poor would have money, G-d could give them the money directly without any help from us.

The reason we are commanded to give *tzedakah* is not for the poor; it is for ourselves. We become better people by virtue of giving *tzedakah*. If we give, however all the *tzedakah* in the world, without ever using the experience to become better people; if we don't understand why we do what we do; we will have lost the point of the entire exercise.

And the same is true for our relationship with any mitzvah, including belief in G-d itself.

While many Jews may believe that G-d exists, it may be a long time since they have had a deep and meaningful relationship with Him.

The truth is you don't really find G-d; G-d, like love, has to be experienced.

And this may well be at the core of Re'uven's struggle. Re'uven was doing the right thing, but he wasn't motivated enough by the right reasons. And once the act of removing Joseph from the pit was more about Re'uven than about the mitzvah of honoring his father Yaakov, then that made all the difference. Because had Re'uven been filled with the joy and the challenge of saving Joseph in order to honor his parents, then nothing could have stood in his way.

Ultimately, the most important ingredient which enables us to achieve our goals in this world, is how strong are our convictions, and how deeply we draw on the reservoir of our willpower. And it is only if we understand what we are doing and thus why we are doing it, that we can really succeed in achieving its goals.

Indeed this may be why the essence of Chanukah is about beautifying the mitzvah.

The miracle of Chanukah is based on the fact that all the oil in the Temple (the Beit HaMikdash) was impure, and it took eight days for new, pure oil to be processed and transported.

But the truth is, if there was no pure oil, they were technically allowed to light the Menorah, even in the Temple, with **impure oil**.

The Talmud (Pesachim 77a) points out that:

*“Tumah’ De’chuyah’ Be’Tzibur” “Impurity is secondary to the needs of the community.”*

So, just as when a high priest becomes impure on Yom Kippur he continues the service because the needs of the community come first, here as well, they could most certainly have lit with impure oil. Except for the fact that this was the source of the entire conflict. Even though they could technically ‘get away’ with the mitzvah on a lower level, their challenge was how to become accustomed to making the mitzvah beautiful. Thus, unlike any other mitzvah, the entire Jewish people have taken on *Me’hadrin Min Ha’Me’hadrin* (a beautification of a beautification of the mitzvah).

Namely, rather than the head of every household lighting one candle each night of Chanukah, which is the basic mitzvah of Chanukah candle-lighting, and rather than each Jew in every household lighting one candle each **night** of Chanukah, which would be *hiddur mitzvah* (beautification of the mitzvah), we choose *Me’hadrin Min Ha’Me’hadrin*, and every Jew in every household lights one more candle each night resulting in eight candles on the eighth night of Chanukah.

That is the entire point: Chanukah was about re- educating the Jewish people to see the beauty of the mitzvah. Even the war was not about conquering Jerusalem, but about cleaning up and uncovering the beauty hidden in a defiled temple.

Our greatest challenge is to re-educate an entire generation of Jews about the beauty one finds everywhere when one really looks in Judaism.

And if we succeed in imbuing all that we do with the deep sense of mission and willpower such noble goals deserve, then we will quickly discover that nothing stands in our way but our own inadequacies, and we will ultimately achieve all of our dreams.

Now that would make for a very bright Chanukah indeed....

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman