

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Naso)

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

Sometimes, the meaning of life is all about getting the right perspective. Take the story of the sixth ladder company firefighters on duty on the morning of September 11th.

Minutes after the first plane hit the towers, they were rushing into 1 World Trade Center to try and reach the survivors on the floors above. On the twenty-seventh floor, they heard and felt the other tower collapse, and the captain, Bill Jonas, decided they needed to get back down. Clearly, they needed to get out; if one tower could collapse, then so could the other.

Somewhere around the 14th floor, they met a middle-aged woman named Josephine Harris. She had walked down from the 73rd floor and was totally exhausted.

Bill Butler, another of the firemen, folded her arm around his neck and kept moving.

"I could hear the clock ticking in the back of my head", Captain Jonas said, as he told his men they had to keep moving. Leaving Mrs. Harris behind was out of the question, but she was clearly slowing them down. People kept passing them by and disappearing out of sight down the stairs.

Near the fourth floor, Mrs. Harris collapsed. Bill Butler implored her to keep moving, if not for her own sake, then for her children and grandchildren, but she was too exhausted to move on. Captain Jonas scoured the fourth floor for something they could use to carry her in, a portable chair or board, but was unsuccessful.

Finally, he returned to the stairwell. Picking her up, with each of her arms around the necks of two firemen, they began to move, when they suddenly felt an incredible rush of wind. Jonas urged everyone to move faster, and then the tower collapsed.

Dust, smoke, debris everywhere, and tremendous noise. Matt Komorowski, the last in line, was thrown down two flights, ending up in front of everyone else.

Caked in dust, covered in cuts and bruises, as the noise subsided, the men began to call out to each other, discovering, incredibly, that they were all still alive.

They tried to open the stairwell door, but it was full of debris and there was no point. They could not proceed below the second floor, for the same reason; the lobby had completely collapsed.

Not fully comprehending what had happened, Captain Jonas realized things were bad when, thirty minutes later, upon finally establishing radio contact with another fire unit and telling them they were in the North tower, the dispatcher responded by asking where the North tower was.... No one in the

stairwells above the fourth floor at the time of the collapse is known to have survived, and no one still below the second floor at the same time survived either.

Desperate to save Mrs. Harris and hurry out of the building, she collapsed and saved them instead. Had they been a little quicker, they would most probably have been in the lobby with all the others who had passed them on the way, and had they been a little slower they would have been higher in the building....

Six firefighters heading down the stairs of a tortured building refused to give up on a woman they hoped they would carry to safety. But as it turned out, she was also carrying them.

There are many burdens we carry in this world. The challenge may well be in how we choose to carry them. This week's portion, *Naso*, contains a case in point.

“Ki Avodat HaKodesh Aleihem Ba’Katef Yisau” “For the holy (items of) service they shall carry upon the shoulder...” (Bamidbar 7:9)

There was a special mitzvah regarding the transport of The Holy Ark, which held the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Ark was to be borne on the shoulders of the Levites, until it arrived at its destination.

Why was it so important that the Ark be carried upon their shoulders?

It is interesting to note that **Maimonides** includes this mitzvah as one of the 613 mitzvot listed in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, (see Positive Commandment 34), where he describes and explains each of the 613 commandments in the Torah. This is especially interesting as Maimonides has a principle only to list those commandments, which are “*Le’Dorot*”, or forever, something that does not seem to apply to the carrying of the Ark. After all, once the Jewish people arrived in the land of Israel, and built the Temple, the Ark was given a permanent place and there was no longer a need to transport it. So why is this listed as a mitzvah which means it somehow still applies (or PG will apply) today?

Often, to really understand Maimonides' point in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, it is worthwhile to see how the same mitzvah is presented in his compilation of Jewish law, the *Yad HaChazakah*.

In fact, **Maimonides**, in his *Laws of the Temple Vessels (Klei’ HaMikdash 2:12)*, based on the aforementioned verse, delineates this commandment:

*“Ba’Et She’**Molichin** HaAron Mi’Makom Le’Makom, Ein **Molichin** Oto’, Lo’ Al Ha’Be’hemah, Ve’Lo’ Al Ha’Agalot, Elah’ Mitzvah **Le’Notlo** Al Ha’Katef.*

*U’Le’fi She’Shachach David Ve’**Naso**’ Al Ha’Agalah, Nifratz Peretz be’Uzzah.*

*Elah Mitzvah **LeNaso**’ Al HaKatef, She’ne’e’mar: “Ki Avodat HaKodesh Aleihem Ba’Katef Yisa’u”.*

*“When **transporting** the Ark from place to place, one does not **transport** it by setting it upon a beast of burden, nor on a wagon; rather it is a Mitzvah to **take it** upon the shoulder.*

*And because (King) David forgot (this injunction) and **carried it** upon a wagon, the debacle of the wrath that burst forth against Uzzah, occurred.*

*Rather, it is a mitzvah to **carry it** upon the shoulder, as it says (Bamidbar 7:9): “For the holy (items of) service they shall carry on the shoulder”.”*

Strangely, Maimonides, normally a stickler for the details exactly as they appear in the Torah, here seems to deviate from the original commandment as it appears in the Torah. The Torah speaks of the mitzvah of carrying the Ark upon the shoulders, yet Maimonides includes an injunction, seemingly from nowhere, that forbids transporting the Ark on a wagon, or an animal. One would have thought an obligation to carry the Ark upon the shoulders, implies one should not transport it upon a wagon or a donkey.

Even more interesting, Maimonides does something in this particular law that he normally does not do, at least in the text of his legally focused *Yad HaChazakah*. He takes the trouble to recall the story of Uzzah, which occurred in the time of King David. One wonders, why the interest in this particular story? Normally, Maimonides simply states what the obligation is in Jewish law, without any stories or explanations.

Further, while normally very careful not to allow his text to become redundant or repetitive in any way, here Maimonides seems to repeat the mitzvah at the end of the paragraph, stating again what has already been made clear, that it is a mitzvah to carry it upon the shoulders; what is the need for this repetition? Is it simply for the sake of emphasis, or is there some deeper idea?

Perhaps Maimonides, in noting the story of Uzzah, is telling us that this story is the key to unlocking the nature of this mitzvah. After all, if Maimonides was simply looking for an example to support the obligation of carrying the Ark on the shoulders, he could simply have mentioned the verses showing the Priests carrying the Ark across the Jordan River into Israel in the book of Joshua....

So what exactly happened to Uzzah in the time of King David?

The book of Samuel (II; 6:5-10) shares a short but powerful vignette, which is troubling, to say the least:

The Holy Ark is finally being brought up to Jerusalem; two hundred years after the Jewish people conquered the land of Israel in the time of Joshua. King David, along with thirty thousand people, is accompanying the Ark on its journey amidst much dancing and celebration. The verse (Samuel II, 6:5) describes all the dancing and instruments playing, and the joy of the people at the opportunity to honor the Ark on its journey; a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Suddenly, as the ox-drawn wagon carrying the Ark rounds the bend, the oxen stray, and apparently, the Ark is on the verge of being tipped off the wagon. But Uzzah, close enough to the wagon to see the disaster in the making, stretches out his hand, grabbing the Ark just in time, and preventing its fall.

Seems like one of those great moments, right? You can almost hear the wide world of sports music in the background as the video tape is replayed on the evening news: the Ark is tipping, the horror on the faces of the spectators apparent as the scene unfolds so quickly, they are powerless to prevent a spiritual

disaster. Then, suddenly, with an incredible leap, (shown in slow motion on the video replay...) Uzzah grabs the Ark just in time, saving the day. You can almost hear the crowd roar....

And you figure Uzzah must be a Jewish hero, right? Only G-d doesn't seem to see it that way, because instantaneously, Hashem smites Uzzah, and he dies on the spot. After all, you don't just grab the Holy Ark. You have to be purified, and charged with the mitzvah, and with the proper intent....

This course of events is so challenging, that King David himself (verses 8-10) seems to have difficulty understanding what happened. How could Hashem have punished Uzzah? After all, he seems to have been doing a good thing, in attempting to save the Ark!

Perhaps understanding what really transpired in the story of Uzzah will help us to better comprehend the message of the mitzvah regarding the transportation of the Ark.

There are really two issues here: Firstly, what was Uzzah's mistake, but even more importantly, what was King David's mistake? A careful look at the above-quoted text of Maimonides, suggests that he believed the real issue was not Uzzah, but rather King David himself:

*“U’Le’fi She’Shachach David Ve’Naso’ Al Ha’Agalah, Nifratz Peretz be’Uzzah.” “And because (King) David forgot (this injunction) and **carried it** upon a wagon, the debacle of the wrath that burst forth against Uzzah, occurred.”*

The problem in this story begins not with Uzzah's reaction to the Ark tottering on the edge of the ox-cart, but rather with the fact that it is being transported on the ox cart to begin with!

What happened to the mitzvah of carrying the Ark on the shoulders of the Levites (or priests)? How could King David 'forget' that the Ark was to be carried aloft on the shoulders of the people?

Clearly, such an obvious oversight is indicative of a larger malaise affecting the heart of the Jewish people. What really was going on?

Recall that the same law of Maimonides points out that there are really two separate injunctions regarding the Ark's transport. One was to carry it on the shoulders; the other is the prohibition against placing it on an animal or a wagon. One would have thought, in laying out these principles, to begin with the obligation of carrying it on the shoulders, and then point out that it was therefore forbidden to lay it upon a wagon. But Maimonides actually lists these two points in the opposite order, first listing the prohibition against transporting the Ark on an animal or a wagon. Perhaps because this is the principle from where it all begins.

What underlying issue is at the root of this prohibition against transporting the Ark on an animal or a wagon? It would seem there are two issues at play here: how much respect we have for the Ark and all it represents, and our perception of the need to carry the Ark in the first place.

When you think about it, we as a society, place a lot of emphasis on packaging. Sometimes this is actually negative, but it makes a point: how we package things often represents the value we place on those same things. For example, when you want to be sure your employees remember to come to a

meeting, you leave them a sticky note on their computer screen. But no one sends out their wedding invitation on a sticky note; people spend a lot of time and effort on the way the invitation looks to demonstrate the importance of the event being described in the invitation.

Remember the Royal Wedding of Prince Charles and Diana? They didn't ride out of the church on a scooter; they were in a magnificent, gold inlaid horse-drawn carriage. Because on that day, those two individuals were not just Charles and Diana, they represented an institution, and even an empire. And the people, seeing the way they traveled, received an important message. Indeed, they were actually experiencing a subconscious educational process. They were inculcating into their psyches that the institution of the British monarchy, and indeed the British Empire, was something to be respected and valued.

And that is the difference between taking the Ark up on our own shoulders, as a sign of respect and honor, and laying it down for the animals to carry. King David missed an opportunity to demonstrate how much the Ark, and the Torah it both carries and represents, is valued as an institution in Judaism.

This leaves us wondering how this rather important issue could be overlooked, unless there really was a problem in the people's perception of and honor for the Ark and the Torah.

What if, after so many years of the Tablets being kept in a tent, while Kings were living in palaces, the people's perception of Torah itself was being eroded? After nearly two hundred years of being in the land of Israel, the Ark still had no permanent place; rather it was moved from place to place, based on necessity. So how important could the Torah represented by the Ark really be?

And really, this is a problem many of us struggle with. We call ourselves the People of the Book. But how many of us spend enough time opening that book? How many Jews are there today who have never even opened the Book?

How do I treat my relationship with Torah? And how important is that Torah, really? If in my home the Jewish books are stuck in the dusty bookcase in the corner, while all eyes immediately focus on the well-lit piece of art that is the central focus of the living room wall, what am I really teaching my children, not by what I say, but much more impactful, by what I do?

If the Torah is just another book, then we are missing the whole point...

I remember, years ago in Yeshiva, a powerful moment that left a very strong impression on me. The Yeshiva I studied at had two Roshei Yeshiva, two heads of the institution, and observing how these two great Rabbis, two of the greatest Torah scholars of our generation, interacted and treated each other, was itself a lesson in ethics and humility. One year, the entire yeshiva, along with hundreds of alumni, were gathered together for a celebration in honor of Jerusalem Day. Rav Amital was speaking to a packed hall of over a thousand students, when he suddenly noticed Rav Lichtenstein standing at the back of the hall. For whatever the reason Rav Lichtenstein, had arrived late, and did not want to interrupt the flow of his speech, preferring to stand in the rear. Rav Amital, for his part, would not hear of an entire hall full of students sitting and listening, while their Rosh Yeshiva stood in the back. So he gestured to Rav Lichtenstein to feel free to come up front and sit down, at which point students began turning around to see who was standing in the back.

When they saw their Rosh Yeshiva standing up, the students in the rear immediately stood and Rav Lichtenstein, realizing the speech was already interrupted, walked to his seat at the front of the hall as quickly as he could. And as he walked down the aisle, waves upon waves of students rose from their seats as a sign of respect, not just for Rav Lichtenstein, but also for the three thousand year tradition he represented. There was no announcement, and no words were said, it was simply understood by all present, that when a Torah giant like that walked into a room, you could not help but rise in awe and respect. The experience of seeing a thousand students rise as one, without anybody saying a word, taught me what respect for Torah was all about.

This, then, is the message of the carrying of the Ark. Who we are as a people begins with what we hold dear, and what we truly value. The Ark was more than just a box for the tablets of the law; it represented the mission we have as a people in this world. And our ability to make a real difference in this world as a people begins with how we hold aloft the values, which represent our identity as a people.

If we are not clear on what our mission really is, and if we do not place its value at a premium, ultimately we will never be able to achieve our goal of utilizing the tapestry of ethics that is the Torah, to make the world a better place.

There is, however, a second idea hidden in the rubric of this story, and this mitzvah.

The real question at the heart of this issue may well be this; much like those firemen in the stairwell of the World Trade Center, do we carry the Torah, or does the Torah carry us?

What was Uzzah's mistake? Rav Kook points out that the verse says, "The oxen had strayed". Uzzah reached for the Ark, but the problem was not with the Ark, it was with the oxen. He should have reached for the oxen, to try and right them in their path.

The Talmud tells us that one of the questions we will be asked one day in heaven, is

"Kava'ta Itim La'Torah?" "Did you set times for Torah (study)?"

Most people interpret this to mean, 'did you set time aside in your day for the study of Torah?' But Rav Kook had a very different way of looking at it. Translated literally, the question becomes: "Did you set the times to the Torah?" In other words, do we set the times according to the Torah, or do we set the Torah according to the times?

Given the challenges of living a life true to the values of the Torah in today's world, it seems sometimes that we need to adjust things. Do we assume, however, that we need to change the recipe of Jewish tradition, or do we choose to assume that a three thousand year old tradition is not what needs fixing? Sometimes, we find ourselves letting the oxen dictate, which way the Torah wind will blow, and this too, stems from something that is missing in the way we perceive and respect the Torah and the traditions we have been given.

You see, before you can carry Torah on your shoulders, you first have to realize it doesn't belong on an ox-cart.

Even more, the obligation to carry the Ark on our shoulders represents a theological challenge in and of itself. We may come to assume, by virtue of the fact that we are carrying it on our shoulders, that we are needed in order for the Ark to remain aloft. But of course, if the goal was simply for the Ark to be seen high above the crowd, G-d could simply have made it float! (As the Midrash suggests miraculously occurred when the Jews entered the land of Israel, and the Ark somehow floated high in the air, carrying the priests with it...)

Uzzah assumed that the Ark would fall, perhaps not having the faith that if the Ark was falling, the issue wasn't the Ark but whether we were worthy to maintain it aloft. Perhaps this is part of the partnership we have with G-d in this world. Hashem wants us to participate, by carrying the Ark on our shoulders, while never forgetting that it is not we who carry the Torah, but the Torah that carries us.

All of which leads to one last point: clearly, carrying the ark on the shoulder wasn't just a natural way to be sure it didn't end up on an ox-cart. Rather, it was meant to be on the shoulder. Even while being carried from one place to another, the Ark had a place: the shoulders of the Jewish people.

Perhaps the shoulder represents that part of us that places something above all else. After all, the shoulders really hold up the head, the most important part of the body. In Hebrew we say "*La'sim Katef*", 'to put your shoulder to the task.

The shoulder represents responsibility, and how we carry that which we hold dear. When an item is sitting on your shoulders, it is not just that you are carrying it; it is sitting on you; you are supporting it. You become, in effect, its base... So the shoulder also represents the idea that the tradition we have remains valuable only as long as we actually value it.

Maimonides uses a number of different verbs for the word 'carry' in the halachah we have already mentioned. '*Molichin ; Le'Notlo ; Ve'Naso*': to **transport**, to **take**, and to **carry**. And yet the term used to describe the mitzvah, both in the Torah, as well as in Maimonides' text, is '*Laset*', to carry. This is reminiscent of the injunction not to **carry** G-d's name in vain, in the Ten Commandments. ("Lo' **Tisah...**")

The third commandment is not just about blasphemy; it contains a much deeper challenge. We are, all of us, created in the image of G-d, and as such carry G-d's name within us each and every day. The question is do we live up to that challenge? Every night we have the opportunity to ask ourselves - today, did I fulfill my purpose on this earth? Did the world become a better place for my having been here today? Or did I carry the name of G-d that is represented by every human being, in vain?

Perhaps the use of the same term here bespeaks a similar message. We have been blessed to receive an incredible gift that we call Torah. Thirty two hundred years ago, we were given a recipe for living up to all that we can be as a people, and making the world a better place. By carrying the Ark aloft, perhaps we are meant to consider the same idea: Am I living up to the promise that was born of that gift, so long ago?

Indeed, today we have the opportunity to experience just such a challenging moment every time we take our Torah scrolls out of or return them back to, the Ark. The laws of carrying a Torah scroll are nearly

identical to the carrying of the Ark, including the obligation to carry the Torah scroll close to your heart...

Do we fully appreciate what a gift Torah really is, and are we at peace with the relationship we have with it?

Perhaps the reason so much emphasis is put on what place the Ark is in, or on, is because so much of what Torah represents, is what place it has in my life. If Torah is 'a tree of life', our challenge is whether we water it, and ourselves, enough...

All over the world, people are exploring and re-connecting with, their roots. Yet, there are so many Jews today who have never had the opportunity to discover what a rich and magnificent heritage we have as a people. Given how long and hard we have struggled for the right to maintain our relationship with that book we call Torah, we owe it to ourselves to consider what role it has in our lives, and whether we have made enough effort to explore the beauty it may hold for each one of us.

Shabbat Shalom,

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