

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Naso)

Take a drive up the south side of the Golan Heights, and you will see one of the most incredible vistas in Israel. As the road winds up the side of the Golan cliffs, the panoramic view deep into Syria is overshadowed by the Russian made Syrian Bunkers that bear silent testimony to the near suicidal challenge that faced the Israeli troops who made their way up the mountain under murderous fire in 1967, breaking the stranglehold Syrian guns held over the Israeli towns and villages below.

Up on top of the Heights, as one drives across the open plains, one notices the occasional odd collection of trees that seem to grow in clusters above most of the Syrian positions that controlled the Heights. These trees are no accident; they are part of one of the most incredible stories in modern Israeli history, and bear witness to the fact that one man, in the right place, at the right time, can make all the difference.

In the early Sixties, after fifteen years of war and threatened aggression, the young State of Israel was still struggling for its right to exist.

Desperate for information on Syrian troop build-ups, Israel needed intelligence on the military strength and array of forces being moved in to the Golan Heights. So, Israel trained and dispatched Eli Cohen to be a deep cover spy whose job was to infiltrate the Syrian high command and report on the Syrian fortifications and troop movements.

Masquerading as a successful businessman, Eli succeeded beyond Israel's wildest dreams, cultivating the higher-ups in the Syrian Defense establishment to the point that he was being touted as the next Syrian Minister of Defense.

One fateful night, the Syrians received a complaint from one of the foreign embassies in Damascus that someone was jamming their radio frequency, preventing them from sending cables. It seems Eli Cohen had been using this embassy's radio frequency at a time early in the morning he thought no one would notice. But an embassy staffer trying to send an urgent cable uncovered the problem just as the Syrians, who had already begun to suspect that someone was leaking military secrets, were patrolling his neighborhood with a radio detection truck.

Zeroing in on the source of the unauthorized transmissions, Syrian soldiers burst into his apartment, catching Eli Cohen in the midst of a transmission, with no way or time to hide his equipment or deny the charges.

Tried for treason by a military tribunal in a lightning six-hour military trial with no defense counsel (after forty-eight hours of horrific torture,) Cohen was sentenced to death for treason, and, despite pleas for clemency from all over the world (including the Pope and the Queen of England) was hanged in the main square in Damascus while his wife could do nothing but watch on television less than 300 miles away. His bones, buried with the bones of a dog, still lie in an unmarked grave in the Damascus Jewish cemetery.

One of the most poignant memorials to Eli Cohen is the trees planted as a result of what seemed at the time like an innocent suggestion.

On one of his many tours of the Syrian front lines, noticing the many Syrian soldiers sweltering under the heat of the sun, he suggested the Syrians plant fast growing trees over all the fortified positions, to both shelter the Syrians from Israeli air-cover, as well as cause the Syrian soldiers to naturally remain at their positions, which became the coolest place to be in the summer.... He then informed the Israelis of this decision, so that in 1967, Israeli warplanes simply bombed all the tree clusters, taking out most of the Syrian positions on the Heights before a single shot was fired.

In 1967 many Israelis, viewing the Syrian troop buildup (and the diatribe on all the Arab airwaves calling for the destruction of Israel and declaring their intent to push the Jews into the sea) with alarm, were praying for a miracle. And one man, all alone and far from home, gave it to them in the guise of trees, which today sway silently in the wind on the Golan Heights.

This week's portion, *Naso*, contains one of the most oft-repeated blessings in the entire Torah: the *Birchat Kohanim*, or priestly blessing.

Every Friday night, in hundreds of thousands of Jewish homes across the world, just before we recite the *Kiddush* over wine, families pause to bless their children with this three-thousand-year-old blessing. There is no moment in my week that is more special to me than this one, as the opportunity to bless each of our children, gives me a moment to appreciate all that this child is, and all the hopes and dreams for who we hope they will be.

One wonders what this blessing is really all about, especially given the context within which this blessing is given in the Torah.

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons saying: So shall you bless the children of Israel, saying to them:

May Hashem (G-d) bless you & safeguard you.

May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you.

May Hashem lift His countenance to you & establish peace for you.

And let them place my name upon the children of Israel and I shall bless them.”

(Bamidbar 6:22-27)

Who is doing the blessing here? It seems the *Kohanim* (the priests) are commanded to give this blessing to the Jewish people, and yet at the end of this section (v. 27) it is G-d who will ultimately bless us, so why do we need the *Kohanim*?

Rabbi Yishmael in the Talmud (*Hullin* 49a) suggests that G-d blesses the Priests, who then bless the Jewish people. But if all blessings come from G-d, why are we receiving the blessing by way of the *Kohanim*?

Maybe this blessing is not just about the blessing we receive, but indeed the relationship we have with the concept of *Kohanim*. Perhaps the fact that G-d wants the *Kohanim* to offer a specific blessing (which is really G-d blessing us,) is not to portray the fact that the Priests are blessing us, but rather precisely the opposite.

Perhaps the entire point here is for us to realize that the Kohanim are indeed not the source of blessing, but merely tools of G-d, who created and continues to bless all of us, each in our own way, every day.

On one level, given the fact that a people that had just left behind the caste system of Egypt, where priests were not just vehicles for blessing, but actually often the repository for the blessings of the gods, it was certainly important for the Jewish people, right at the outset of their journey as a nation, to realize that the only true source of blessing in this world is G-d.

But of course, it goes much deeper than that. How often do we get so caught up in our own pursuit of the things we perceive to be the ‘blessings’ in our lives, that we come to think, even subconsciously sometimes, that we are really at least a part of the source of those blessings.

We think that if we are blessed with much wealth, it is because we have earned it. And if we are blessed with wisdom, we give ourselves credit for having acquired it.

Perhaps the opportunity to reflect on these blessings is actually the chance to recognize that they are gifts, which represent less what we are given, and more the challenge of being sure we know what to do with them.

And nowhere is this more apparent than in the contemplation of the marvelously wondrous blessing of children. No one can truly imagine that he or she has somehow deserved or earned on his or her own the gift of healthy children. Rather, children carry with them the enormous responsibility of being partners to some greater purpose, some majestic plan for making the world a better place. A child, more than anything else in this world, represents raw potential. And our challenge is how we allow ourselves to be a part of transforming that potential into something that makes a difference in the world.

And of course, this is why we offer this blessing on Friday night, at the beginning of Shabbat, which is a day that is all about appreciating who we are and all the things in this world we need not to take for granted. Nearly 50 years ago, one man, representing so many, gave us a gift, and as we recall the miracles of the six-day war, it behooves us to recall just how blessed we truly are and how many ‘Kohanim’ were vehicles to allow us to live in a time that is so blessed....

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman