

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Naso)

Many years ago, I read a story regarding Rav Yitzchak Eisenbach from Jerusalem.

As a young boy, Yitzele' was walking to the Kotel (The Western Wall) through the Jaffa gate one Shabbat afternoon, in a section of the city which was densely inhabited by Arabs. As he walked through the narrow, unpaved streets he passed numerous Arab-owned cafes in which young and old folks were milling around. Suddenly Yitzele noticed a gold coin on the sidewalk. The value of the coin was such that it could support a family the size of his own for a month! The poverty in his home was wrenching, and he was thrilled at the prospect of being able to help his parents in their struggle for their family's survival.

However, because it was Shabbat, he would not pick up the golden coin. Instead, he put his foot on the coin to hide it from view, and decided to stand there until nightfall when Shabbat ended so he could take the coin home to his family.

After Yitzele had been standing immobile in the street for more than an hour, an Arab teenager approached him and asked, "Why don't you move on? Why are you standing here like a statue?"

At first Yitzele didn't answer, but when the larger and stronger boy persisted, he replied innocently, "I have something under my foot that I can't pick up because it is the Sabbath today. I'm watching it this way, so that after the Sabbath I can take ..."

Before the last words were out of Yitzele's mouth, the Arab boy shoved him to the ground, swiftly bent down, plucked up the coin and ran off. Yitzele lay in the street, stunned. By the time he got up, the culprit had long since disappeared over a fence, and Yitzele knew it would be hopeless – perhaps even dangerous – for a Jew to chase an Arab in that neighborhood.

Late that afternoon a dejected Yitzele' made his way back to the synagogue of the Chernobler Rebbe, Rav Nachum Twersky (1840-1936), where his father prayed Minchah (the afternoon prayers) and ate the third Sabbath meal. Yitzele usually helped set up the chairs and tables and put out the food for the men who sat down to eat with the Rebbe, but today he sat in a corner by himself.

The Rebbe, who loved little Yitzele, realized that something was amiss because the chairs and benches were in disarray. He looked around for a moment and then saw Yitzele sitting in a corner by himself, downcast.

The Chernobler Rebbe approached the child and asked, "What's wrong? You look so unhappy. We all need you at the table."

Yitzele told the Rebbe what had happened earlier that afternoon, and explained how he felt about the opportunity he had lost. The Rebbe listened intently, then, taking Yitzele by the hand, he said, "Come to the table with me now, and after Shabbat come into my house."

After the Shabbat, Yitzele followed the Rebbe into his home, which was connected to the synagogue. The Rebbe opened a drawer and removed from it a golden coin similar to the one Yitzele had seen near the

Jaffa Gate that afternoon. "Here, this is yours," said the Rebbe. "However, I am giving it to you on one condition: that you give me the reward of the mitzvah that you did this afternoon."

The startled young child looked up at the Rebbe. "The Rebbe wants the reward in exchange for the coin?"

"Yes," the Rebbe said. "You made a great Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of God's Name) by not picking up the money because it was Shabbat. I just want the reward for such a great mitzvah and I'll pay you for it with this coin."

Yitzele was astounded. Was the mitzvah that great? Was it really worth so much? He looked at the coin and thought fleetingly about what it could buy for his family. He looked up at the Rebbe and said, "If that is what the mitzvah is worth, then the mitzvah is not for sale."

The Rebbe bent and kissed the boy on his forehead.

(Rabbi Pesach Krohn, In the Footsteps of the Maggid, pp. 116-118)

What are our relationships with the things we accrue in this world? To what do we attribute value?

This week, in the portion of *Naso*, we read of the *Birchat Kohanim*, the Priestly Blessing, traditionally recited by the Kohanim (Priests) as they bless the people and customarily recited by parents who bless their children on Friday nights.

There is a fascinating yet oft-missed question in the text of the blessing.

The blessing is comprised essentially of three lines:

"May G-d bless you and keep you.

May G-d shine His face upon you and be graceful to you

May G-d turn His face toward you, and grant you peace."

(Bamidbar (Numbers) 6:24-26)

The first line which speaks of blessing is generally considered to be a blessing of material wealth. In fact, the blessing implies that there are dangers to material wealth, such that included is a blessing that Hashem (G-d) will protect us from the negative side effects of wealth such as greed, cruelty, ingratitude, callousness being spoiled, and the like.

The second line speaks of almost the exact opposite: That we should be blessed with a meaningful relationship with Hashem, including *Chen* which is the inner beauty that comes from a deep spiritual relationship with Hashem. In fact, one understanding of Hashem shining His face upon us, is that we merit to reach the level where people feel connected to Hashem through us. Literally, that the light of G-d shines from us.

Which begs the question: If the first line is a material blessing, whereas the second line is a spiritual one, why does the material blessing precede the spiritual one?

It is interesting that in many ancient religions these two ways of life, the spiritual and the material, were at odds with each other. As an example, the Church considered a person to be holier when he eschewed material needs, preferring instead a more ascetic existence.

Perhaps this is why the *Birchat Kohanim* (the Priestly blessing) is in the same portion as the laws of the Nazirite, who retreats from the physical world only to conclude his Nazirite period with a Sin offering suggesting that stepping away from a material existence is not the Jewish ideal. We are meant to impact the world and elevate it, from within. That said, there is a danger to the material world, as it can easily lead to arrogance and ingratitude and distance us from the spiritual without which life becomes a hollow meaningless shell.

Thus the material blessing is followed by the spiritual perhaps to suggest that while we embrace the world we must take care we are bringing it up as opposed to it bringing us down.

Indeed, it is not an accident that the Kohanim bless us; they who have no land of their own and therefore are most likely to have a healthy relationship with the physical world.

Do we remember that the things we accrue are *vehicles* towards our mission of being partners with Hashem in making a better world, or do we lose our ideals in the pursuit of pleasure?

All of which leads to the third line: G-d's blessing of peace; of being whole, and at peace, content and fulfilled.

The *Birchat Kohanim* is very much about our having a healthy relationship with money and materialism and the world around us, while not losing sight of the importance of the world within us. May we be so blessed....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman