

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Nitzavim)

The banging on the door was a shock, but everyone knew what it must mean.

There were three of them standing in the darkened stairwell when they opened the door, in their signature long leather coats. It was the summer of 1938; not an auspicious time to be Jewish in Berlin. Yet Hans was not Jewish; or at least he was not Jewish any more. He had been named Joseph at birth, but had long since forgotten the Jewish grandfather after whom he had been named. His mother had been Jewish but had married a Christian German businessman and had eventually converted to his faith, and Joseph, himself married to a non-Jewish woman had never really considered himself Jewish. But apparently the Nazis begged to differ.

Someone had informed the authorities that he had been born of a Jewish mother, and his presence was kindly requested at Police headquarters. He was told he need not bring any belongings; it was simply an invitation for routine questioning. But there was no mistaking the nature of this invitation; he was not being asked; he was being ordered. And seventy years later, his daughter still remembers the fear in his eyes and the tremble in his voice when he gave her a hug and told her to go back to sleep.

They never saw him again. From eyewitness accounts after the war, they know he was taken to Gestapo headquarters and beaten and tortured for two days, though it remains unclear what exactly they wanted of him. On the third day he was sent to Dachau where he eventually died of exposure when a Nazi guard forced him to run and jump naked in the snow for an entire afternoon ...

Fast forward some seventy years; again, the middle of the night. Surrounded by Arabs in the ancient city of Shechem (Nablus) a small group of Jews has come to pray at the ancient gravesite of ... Joseph.

Although it is a somewhat dangerous proposition for Jews to enter the Arab city of Shechem deep in the heart of the Palestinian Authority the army allows it under certain circumstances, once a month, in the middle of the night, when there are presumably no Arabs on the streets. Joseph, Yaakov's beloved son in the Torah, has come to represent the Jew in exile, both for his ability to maintain his Jewish identity as a lone Jewish slave in the heart of ancient pagan Egypt, as well as for the fact that his sons, Menashe and Ephraim, were the first Jews born in exile.

And this night, no one is afraid, for this is a very special group of people. Known as the B'nei Menashe, they hail from India and Nepal, and believe they are descended of the lost tribe of Menashe son of Yosef (Joseph).

Exiled as part of the great exile of the ten tribes twenty seven hundred years ago, when Assyria conquered Northern Israel, they are fulfilling a twenty seven hundred year old dream; this night they are re-uniting with their long lost ancestor Joseph after nearly three millennium of dreaming

What makes us Jewish? Is it a shared system of beliefs? What if someone chooses not to adopt or adhere to those beliefs? Can a person decide not to be Jewish? Twenty five hundred years ago, seventy years deep into the Babylonian exile, the sage Ezra chastises the Jews for wanting to be more Babylonian than the Babylonians:

“What is in your mind will never happen; the thought: ‘Let us be like the Nations...’...”

It seems the Jews do not want to be Jews; they want to remain Babylonian. And that, says Ezra cannot, will not ever be. But why not? Maimonides makes it very clear (Hilchot *Teshuva* chap. 5) that one of the essential principals of Judaism is Free Will; despite G-d’s Omnipotence, we were created with the freedom to choose. And we are held accountable for those choices. And yet, it appears we cannot choose not to be Jewish.

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 44a) makes it quite clear that no matter what mistakes a Jew makes and whatever his transgressions he or she remains a Jew.

This week, our portion Nitzavim, makes reference to this question.

Moshe, in sharing his final words with the Jewish people reminds them (renews?) of the Covenant they accepted at Sinai, explaining:

*“It is not with you alone that I am making this Covenant, but with whoever is standing here today, and with **whoever is not here with us today** ...”*
(*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 29:13-14)

And since the entire Jewish people at the time were present, the sages conclude it was a covenant made for every Jew that will ever be born! But how can we be held responsible for a promise made by our ancestors before we were ever born??

And why does G-d, as the great sage Ezra suggests, promise we will never be able to hide; we will always be the Jewish people?

Jewish tradition suggests that we actually **were** all at Sinai. The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 28:6) tells us that the souls of every Jew yet to be born, were actually present at Sinai, thus, we actually did accept the covenant out of choice when we said (Exodus chap. 24) “*Na’aseh ve’nishma*”; “*We will do and we will understand...*”.

But what does this actually mean? There are two parts to who we are. There is the body, the physical reality we each occupy in this world. And then there is the soul; our spiritual reality. The definition of all things physical is that they are limited. Hence, as Maimonides suggests, G-d cannot be physical, because G-d has no limits. Everything physical eventually ends, hence the body will eventually fail us, and will return to the ground from whence we were created, the phenomenon we call death.

Yet, there is also a spiritual aspect to who we are; all the aspects of our selves which have no limits: the capacity to love and to give, to care and to share, which have no limits. And there is no reason to assume this nonphysical endless part of our selves has to end.

Most people who share this belief think of this idea in terms of each person having a soul. But a person does not *have* a soul; a person *is* a soul. The essence of a soul is our will, or *ratzon*, and this will, cultivated properly, is what allows us all to be who we are meant to be. And it is the soul that we are, that drives the physical aspect of ourselves to make a difference in this world. Perhaps there are two aspects to being a Jew. There is the system of beliefs and behaviors every individual Jew is responsible to uphold. But there is also the driving force that represents the wellspring of the Jewish people and the essence of our ability to change the world, and this, suggests Jewish tradition, will never cease. Because the world needs this will, and this message to become the place it was always meant to be.

A Jew can choose not to behave as a Jew and he or she can mask the physical role they play so that they are barely recognizable as a Jew. But no Jew will ever cease to be a Jew, any more than a person can cease to be artistic, or musical, or a child born in France. And recognizing that reality is what allows us to become the force for good and meaning in this world we were given the opportunity to be.

Indeed, this is at the heart of the days of awe that are soon upon us.

Maimonides (Hilchot Tshuva 1;1) suggests that the central Mitzvah of teshuvah (repentance) is Vidui: to be Modeh, before Hashem. Le'hodot is to be thankful, which is the same word as to be Modeh which is admission or confession. Sometimes people have a hard time saying thank you because they do not want to be beholden; to woe.

But in truth we all are in debt, and we all owe. We owe all those who have given so much that we might live the lives we live, and we owe our creator the life we have given. Which also means we owe our selves; we owe the selves Hashem (G-d) has created us to be. We owe it to ourselves to become the best selves we can be, because the world needs us to do that.

May Hashem bless us all to live up to our selves so that this year can be filled with the peace and joy, love and harmony we all yearn for .

Wishing you all a sweet happy and healthy new year,
Best wishes for a Ktivah vechatimah Tovah,
Binny Freedman from Jerusalem