

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Nitzavim)

Last year, on Yom haShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), we were privileged to hear the story of a Holocaust survivor, Mrs. Marlit Wendel, who shared her incredible story with the Orayta students. Sometimes, it is the small details of a story that are the most powerful....

Marlit, her mother and older sister were able to survive Auschwitz and the war together. Their arms were actually numbered with three consecutive numbers.

Born in 1930, she was eight years old in October of 1938 when three Gestapo agents burst into their home in the middle of the night waking and terrifying her and her siblings and their babysitter. Her parents were out late, and upon seeing all the lights on when they returned understood the Gestapo was probably in the house. So her mother came upstairs and her father ran; they never saw him again.

After the war they found out he had been caught in a roundup in a shul and sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp; in 1942 after Himmler was assassinated the Nazis lined up all the Jews and shot every tenth Jew; he happened to be the tenth in the row....

Marla and her mother and siblings were deported to Poland with thousands of Jews of Polish descent. She did not know a word of Polish; imagine being put into a school at the age of eight with no friends, not even knowing the language

They were eventually sent to Auschwitz but after endless miracles, somehow survived and managed to get to America.

One of the students asked her if she had any regrets. Aside from the obvious loss of her family, she said she wished she could go back and see her old house. "Can you imagine?" she asked our students; 'we were told by the Gestapo not to take anything with us, they said we needed only our papers; that we would be back later that evening. But we never saw our house again, and by the time the war ended, someone else was living there.'

She had left all the precious toys and memories of her childhood in that house and wished only she could go back to her childhood room from which she had been so cruelly torn at the tender age of eight. But can we ever go back?

This week's portion *Nitzavim*, sees the sequel to the journey of pain and exile the Torah foretells in last week's portion of *Ki Tavoh*.

"And after all these things shall come to pass: the blessing and the curse... and you will return from amongst all the nations wherein the Lord your G-d has exiled you... and the Lord your G-d will return the remnant of you and gather you in from amongst all the nations where you have

been scattered...for this mitzvah (commandment) ... is not hidden nor distant from you, it is very near to you... to perform..."

(Deuteronomy (Devarim) 30: 1-14)

No less than eight times does the word **la'shuv**, to return, appear in this section....

And you will return... and G-d will return you ...

Is this a promise? A prophecy? A challenge or command?

The **Ramban** (Nachmanides) suggests it is a mitzvah: to do teshuva: often translated as repentance; literally to return....

What is the nature of this mitzvah, so central to Judaism, and to the days of Awe that are soon upon us?

Interestingly, it makes sense that we call this process 'returning (*la'shuv*), because the Torah seems to suggest that the consequence of our mistakes is exile; we are sent away. Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden after transgressing and eating of the forbidden fruit (Genesis (Bereishit) chap. 3); Cain (Kayin) is forced to wander in exile (Bereishit chap. 4) after he murders Abel (Hevel) and of course the Jewish people are punished for their transgressions once again, with exile.

The Torah tells us (Bereishit 1: 27) that when Hashem created Adam he was formed as both male and female and Jewish mysticism suggests that we were originally created as one being comprising both man and woman.

And yet, soon after (ibid. 2:18) the Torah tells us that G-d declared 'it is not good for man to be alone '. How was man alone if he was created as one?

Tradition teaches we were created as one, but then, we were separated (*nesirah*), and became other. This of course begs the question: if we ended up as other, why create us as one in the first place?

The **Sefat Emet** (the Gerrer rebbe) suggests that because we were once one, we know what we are missing; we know what we are looking for. And we see this theme repeated throughout the Torah: we wander as a people in the desert, so close to and connected to G-d, with manna falling from heaven and clouds of glory surrounding us. And then we enter the land of Israel, and the miracles stop. Because we have not earned them yet. But because we tasted what being so close to G-d was like, we know what it is we are looking for.

Exile is not a punishment; it is a consequence. The result of ignoring G-d is that we become distant from G-d, just like we become distant from each other when we ignore each other.

Our challenge is to recapture that one-ness; to go back to the world as it was meant to be: every human being in total one-ness with every other human being. That would be like returning home.

Indeed, Maimonides describes (*Hilchot Teshuva* 1; 1) the different stages of teshuva and suggests first one has to recognize he is making mistake. After all, if a person does not think he is doing something wrong, how can he hope to change?

And then, a person has to **regret** that mistake (*charatah*).

What is regret all about? Regret is seeing a situation for what it is, recognizing how different it could be, and being troubled by the disparity between the two. To know you are overweight, for example, to know what it would be like to be a healthier weight, and to genuinely want to change and become that better person. This desire to go back, to become the person one knows one could be, is what teshuva is all about.

And when we as a people truly see where we are, know where we could be, and genuinely desire to get back to that ideal, then perhaps we will be ready for the next stage in teshuva: to actually decide to change the future and make a better world....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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