

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman
(Portion of Nitzavim)

In July of 2018, in a widely publicized story, twelve boys, aged 11-16, members of a junior soccer team, were discovered and rescued along with their twenty-five year old coach, in a daring cave rescue in Tham Luang, Thailand. They entered the cave as part of a field trip but were trapped inside after heavy monsoon rains flooded the cave entrance, blocking their way out.

Efforts to find the boys were hampered by rising water levels and strong currents and it took a week until two British divers finally found them on an elevated rock four kilometers from the cave entrance; incredibly all were found alive.

They were eventually rescued in a massive effort involving an international team of over 10,000 people, including over 100 divers, representatives from about 100 governmental agencies, 900 police officers and 2,000 soldiers, as well as ten police helicopters, seven police ambulances, more than 700 diving cylinders, and the pumping of more than a billion liters of water out of the caves.

Sadly, there was one fatality, Saman Kunan, a 37-year-old former Thai Navy Seal, who drowned while returning to a staging base in the cave after delivering air supplies.

Later, in an interview, the coach who was rescued with them and had managed to keep them all alive and hopeful for a week in the dark cave with almost no food, water rationed, and flashlights turned off to conserve batteries, described the moment he knew they were saved. At first, seeing a dim light far away and below in the water, he thought he might be imagining it but after a few moments he could see two lights coming towards them and that was when he knew they were found.

Technically nothing had changed; they were still trapped, without a realistic way to bring all the boys out especially without diving experience, and the danger of additional monsoon rains. But they were no longer alone and seeing that light, in that moment, changed everything.

This week we read the portion of Nitzavim, which begins with a rather strange exhortation from Moshe:

“You are standing today all of you, before G-d...” (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 29:9)

It's interesting that we are described here as standing; generally, nothing in life stands still; we are either moving forwards or backwards; up or down. And it is precisely the road we travel that is so important. Why then does the Torah here, especially in this portion which always falls right before Rosh Hashanah, suggest we are standing still.

This month, the Hebrew month of Elul, we traditionally add a psalm at the end of the morning and evening prayers (Psalm 27) which begins with the phrase:

“Hashem (G-d) is my light and my salvation...”

One would think that only when Hashem has saved me do I see Him as my light; so why does the verse suggest that only when Hashem is my light do I see Him as my savior?

The **Alter of Novahrdok, Rav Yossele' Horovitz** (1847-1919) who was a devoted follower of Rav Yisroel Salanter, suggests (in his **Madreigos ha'Adam**) that before we can be saved we have to see with clarity, that Hashem is the source of our light.

Only when the path is lit and we can see clearly which direction we need to take, are we ready to find our way out. Which brings us back to the value of standing still; sometimes we need to pause to consider where we are heading and if that is really where we want to go. The Rambam in his *Hilchot Teshuva* (Laws of repentance 1:1) suggests that there are three stages of repentance; three steps towards *teshuva*, which literally means to return or go back; it is the process whereby we go back to being the person we always wanted to be.

The first stage is *hakarat ha'chet* or recognizing our mistake. Before you can fix something, you have to recognize it's a mistake. If a person doesn't think there is anything wrong with cheating on his taxes, how likely is he to ever change?

The second stage is *charata*, or regret; it has to bother you. Plenty of people know how dumb it is to smoke, but they don't stop because it doesn't bother them enough.

But it's the third stage that is really the critical one: *Kabbala le'Atid* : deciding the future will be different. This is all about creating a plan, with metrics and accountability and the ability to track one's progress to determine whether we are succeeding or failing.

Imagine a person wants to lose weight. The first thing he has to do, is to weigh himself. But it's not enough to know how much he weighs; what if a fellow weighs 79 lbs and wants to lose weight? He may be suffering from Anorexia and it could kill him!

He also has to determine what he is supposed to weigh. In other words, we need to see where we are, and where we want to be, and then we need to create a plan in order to get there.

Imagine I find out based on height and age that I should weigh 150 lbs., and after stepping on a scale I discover I am 200 lbs. So I have to lose 50 lbs. So now I know where I am and where I want to be. But I still need a plan to get there. If I try and lose 50 lbs. in a week, I'll fail; so the goals have to be realistic. And most importantly, I need to be able to measure if I am succeeding.

People often have magnificent goals but have no way of knowing if they are succeeding, which is often the recipe for failure.

Every year at our yeshiva in the Old City, Yeshivat Orayta, I try to meet with each student at the beginning of the year to get to know them. And I always ask them what their goals are for the year. After all, having travelled 6,000 miles to live and study in Jerusalem, it's important to know why you came and what you hope to accomplish, right?

And they have beautiful answers and magnificent goals. Some want to develop a deeper relationship with their Jewish identity whilst some want to develop their study skills and still others want to mature and become more ethical, or learn how to develop a relationship with Hashem (G-d). It's not a simple discussion, as it is quite remarkable how many students come to study in gap year programs without ever having defined and determined exactly what their goals for the year are.

And when they have finished relating what their goals are I always ask them the next question which is: 'How do you know if you are succeeding? After a month how can you determine if you are 10% closer to your goals?'

And 95% of the students have to pause, because they have not considered this question. But if you have no metrics to measure success, you are certainly much more likely to fail.

Every plan needs two things: something to track and metrics that can display results.

The best way to progress in losing weight, for example, is to write down everything you eat and weigh yourself every morning. If I find out tomorrow morning I have gained 3 lbs., I can take a look at what I ate today and learn that three pieces of schnitzel for dinner = 3lbs gained in the morning. And the next time I debate whether to eat that schnitzel for dinner I will simply have to decide if it's worth the extra lb. And I can figure out I'm failing when I've gained 6 lbs, instead of waiting a few months to discover I can't get into my wedding suit...

Everything can be measured and one can create metrics as part of any plan, it just takes some thought. Imagine I want to get more in touch with my Jewish identity. First I have to ask myself: what does Binny as a more identified Jew look like in 6 months? (i.e. what do I want to/ should I weigh?) Then I have to take an honest look and see where I am now; (what do I weigh now?) and then I can create a plan to move in the right direction.

If Binny with a weak Jewish identity never studies or reads about Judaism and Torah, 6 months from now I might hope to be studying ten hours a day and experiencing inspirational moments in prayer and study and whilst fulfilling mitzvot like Shabbat. So I can track how many meaningful moments I experience in a week and see if that number improves. And I can measure how many hours I am learning and see that grow as well.

And that is what *Kabbalah le'Atid* means: If I want the future to be different I have to create a plan to get there. Perhaps that is why our portion begins with the Jewish people **standing**. Moshe is speaking to the second generation of Jews who are about to enter the Promised Land after two hundred and fifty years. Maybe he is telling them to pause and consider their goals: why are we entering the land? Who is it we want to be and how can we get there? What is the plan and the goals?

As we enter the days of Awe and prepare for the New Year, we, each of us, can decide what will be different this year. Who is the 'me' I really want to be, and how can I get there and be that person?

And with the clarity and light that accompanies such vision and purpose, we can truly put ourselves into bigger hands, to help us get there.

Wishing all a Sweet happy and healthy year and a Ke'tivah ve'Chatimah Tovah!

From Yeshivat Orayta in Yerushalayim,

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