

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Nitzavim)

It was a narrow winding road, barely paved, and I was definitely nervous; the constricting alleys of Beit Romano, deep in the heart of Hebron, is not my normal comfort zone.

As I drove deeper into the largely Arab populated villages, I passed the occasional Israeli soldiers on guard in their guard-posts, and I had the sense they thought I was mad. But I was on a mission. Our youngest son Yair, who at the time was in his initial training in the regular army (he is now a Paratrooper Commando Officer in the reserves), along with his commando squad of paratroopers, had been sent to spend Shabbat guarding the roads and back alleys of Hebron, and they had a short window in which I could find them all before they headed out for guard duties and patrols.

One of the boys' parents had managed to get and send us all some photos, taken by one of the commanders, of their insane week of combat training in the hot desert sun. One image of Yair carrying a fellow-soldier (who seemed to be twice his size) across his shoulders as they simulated a retreat under fire, kept playing through my head; the sheer exhaustion on his face seeming to be incongruous with the smile and determination in his eyes... he had 'celebrated' his birthday just two days earlier with all-night treks and running, combat exercises and no sleep, so I wanted to spoil him and his unit with a little birthday spirit; they had all earned a little pampering.

The look on his face and the grins from ear to ear on all of his fellow soldiers' faces when I showed up with a trunk-full of cold cans of soda, nosh, home cooked food for Shabbat and especially a cooler full of his favorite Ben & Jerry's ice creams was simply indescribable.

After a precious half an hour hanging out with him, he had to go back on duty, and I was left with my thoughts as I navigated the narrow alleys again and headed home for Shabbat.

The whole way back I wondered what motivated these boys to put their lives on hold and choose such a difficult course of service as an elite unit within the already elite paratroopers. It seemed like just yesterday he was four years old playing with his friends in the pool in Boca Raton where we spent a few years on shlichut (educational mission) in Florida, or with his cousins in the summer playground in Efrat or New Rochelle, and today, no less than five of them (!) are all serving in the paratroopers. Where does that level of commitment and service come from?

It can't be the result of growing up in Israel; three of these boys grew up in the States. And I don't think it's the result of a religious upbringing (whatever that means) as one look at a photo of Yair's commando unit (most of whom have no kipot on their heads) would make abundantly clear; so what is it?

There is a fascinating detail in this week's portion, *Nitzavim*, which may suggest a way of understanding this phenomenon.

This week's portion is viewed by many as the consolation of G-d for the difficult verses in last week's portion, *Ki Tavoh*. After hearing all of the calamitous events (the "*Tochacha*" or curses", see chapter 28 of *Devarim*) that will occur to the Jewish people in the event they stray from their mission, this week, suggests **Rashi**, Moshe comforts and assuages the pain of the Jewish people by telling them:

"Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kulchem Lifnei' Hashem Elokeichem...."
"You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your G-d...." (Devarim 29:9)

No matter what you will or may go through, and how you may disappoint G-d, He will always love you, and you will remain (standing) close to Him.

Which is what makes the verses that follow this encouraging opening so difficult:

*"You have seen the abominations (of idolatry) in Egypt... perhaps there is amongst you a man or woman... whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, to serve the gods (idols) of other nations... lest there be amongst you a **Shoresh Poreh' Rosh Ve'Le'anah**, a root flourishing with gall and wormwood... G-d will not forgive him (such a person)...."* (29:15-19)

This is comforting? In the midst of telling the people that despite it all, there will always be a close relationship between G-d and the Jewish people, Moshe adds what awful consequences will befall (29:19-28) anyone present who does, nonetheless, stray again towards idolatry (and all of its practices). Hasn't G-d already made the point? How is this meant to be, as Rashi (29:12) suggests, a comfort to the Jewish people?

Rav Avigdor Nevehnsahl, in his *Sichot Le'Rosh HaShanah*, suggests that the comfort is nonetheless, that despite it all, we will eventually come back to G-d, and home to Israel, as the verses continue in chapter (Perek) 30: "*Ve'Shavta' Ad Hashem Elokecha'...*" The day will come when "you (we) will return".

But this remains difficult; how are the consequences of a person's straying from the true and narrow path, not to mention the suggestion that someone present is still preparing to do such things, a comfort to the Jewish people (as Rashi suggests)?

One verse in particular suggests a point worth considering:

*"Lest ("Pen") there be amongst you a **Shoresh Poreh' Rosh Ve'Le'anah**, a root flourishing with gall and wormwood...."* (29:17)

This cannot mean that there is still someone who is actually an idolater, standing amongst the Jewish people prior to their entry into the land of Israel. After all, everyone who had followed the pagan path of Baal had already been excised and was long gone. (Devarim 4:3) So, this verse must not be speaking of someone who has actually done anything wrong, but rather refers to what a person might be thinking!

Further, it is not even that there is an active process that has already consumed a person's thoughts, but rather, simply the root of such thoughts. The beginnings, or stirrings of curiosity or desire, seem to be the target of Moshe's challenging words here. If this is true, as Rav Nevehnsahl suggests here, then we are not speaking of actions, we are rather referring to *character traits*.

This is why the verse speaks of a person “*Asher Le’vavo Poneh*”, “*whose heart is turning*”, (29:17) as well as describing this phenomenon as a **root**; because we are speaking here of the beginnings of something which will lead a person down a path that will eventually result in disaster.

As an example, witness the story of the revealing of the imminent birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah, who are respectively 100 and 90 years old. (*Bereishit* 18:12-15).

Hashem reveals to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son born to them a year later. And Sarah (verse 12) laughs inside (“*Va’Titzchak Be’Kirbah*”, (meaning there was no visible action, but rather an internal disbelief.)). But when Hashem tells Abraham that she has laughed, Sarah denies it!!

“*VaTe’chachesh Sarah Le’mor: Lo’Tzachakti, Ki’ Yere’ah....*”
“*And Sarah denied (laughing), saying: “I did not laugh”, for she was fearful.*”

This is nothing short of incredible! According to Jewish tradition, Sarah herself was a prophetess, so how could she deny something that G-d says she did? Unless of course, she really didn’t do it. But then why is Hashem saying she *did* do it? And, even more to the point, if there is something Sarah didn’t do or even did, why is Hashem, in the midst of giving them such joyful news, giving Sarah (who obviously has earned such a miracle, so must herself be on a fairly high and spiritual level) such a hard time?

The truth is, here too, Hashem is not saying Sarah actually physically laughed; she didn’t. Which is why, perhaps misunderstanding the question, Sarah emphatically points out that she did not laugh. In point of fact, she did not actually laugh, “*Ki’ Ye’reah*”, read not that she was afraid but that she was a *Yere’ah*, someone who sees things on a different level (from the same root as *Livot*, to see.). Precisely because she was a woman filled with the awe of all of G-d’s wonders, she was capable, upon discovering that she would have a child at the age of 90, of not actually laughing.

But that is not what Hashem is referring to. Hashem is speaking about that slight aberration, un-noticeable to all but G-d, of surprise or even disbelief, hidden deep inside of Sarah. In fact, this thought might have been so deeply hidden inside Sarah’s thought process that she herself might not have even been aware of it. But G-d was, and He let her know just how dangerous the raw and bare beginnings of such a process might be.

This is a crucial lesson, directly from G-d.

Most people presume that what matters is what you do, not what you think, or feel, and that ethics is measured only in behavior, and not in thoughts and feelings.

But the Torah is telling us that ‘*it just ain’t so*’.

What we actually do, matters. We can pay as much lip service as we want to charity; if we don’t actually **give Tzedakah**, it does not mean a whole lot. But good actions also begin with good thoughts, and all negative and unhealthy behavior has at its roots, unhealthy and negative character traits (*middot*) that need to be examined and corrected.

Hence **Maimonides**, in his *Hilchot Teshuvah* speaks not only of *Teshuvah* (getting back or undoing) for our actions, but for our character flaws as well.

“... *Chovah Le’Pashpesh Gam Be’De’ot HaRa’ot.*”
“...*We are obligated to examine our negative character flaws as well.*”
(Laws of Repentance 7:3)

Sometimes, a character flaw may be so small, and so unnoticeable that the person does not even know it is there. But what the Torah is saying here is that if we are willing to struggle with the introspection necessary to take a hard look at ourselves, we can catch these character flaws before they become the actions we so regret later in life. And this is the comfort Moshe offers the Jewish people here at the beginning of our portion.

Know that deep inside each of one of us are the sparks for good and evil, love and hatred, kindness and judgment, love and lust. And the raging fire of feelings and emotions that can consume us can also be the beacons of light that illuminate a better world. The decision is really up to us.

These incredible boys, thousands of them wearing the green uniforms of the IDF elite combat units, who as you read these words, are putting themselves on the line with every ounce and fiber of their being, long ago had a spark, a glimmering of will to give, to make a difference, and to do so in a way that would allow them to become the best they could be.

And somehow, their families, schools and communities cultivated those sparks, in Jewish classrooms and summer camps, in bar and bat-mitzvah trips and Shabbat morning Synagogue sermons, until they burst forth in a storm of will and passion to make a difference.

And we, the Jewish people, are riding on their shoulders.

This year, as we approach the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, let us hope that we succeed, each in our own way, in finding the passion and will to do good and to contribute, deep inside ourselves, along with ways to cultivate such desires until they become an unstoppable force for good.

And at the same time, let us isolate the barely discernible negative character traits, the desire to complain, to see things through negative lenses, and to judge others harshly, and quench such flaws before they ever have a chance to become issues we struggle with.

May the soldiers stay safe, the hostages soon come home, the injured healed and the families of the fallen be comforted. And may we all, soon know and see easier times ... Shanah Tovah!

Best wishes for a sweet, happy, healthy and above all peaceful New Year.

Be’Virchat Ketivah’ Ve’Chatimah Tovah,

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