

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Nitzavim)

There is a mystical idea which suggests that hidden within every fire of destruction, is the spark of redemption. Such, for example, was the case on August 3rd, 1492, which was also the Ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples in Jerusalem. On that day in 1492, one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Jewish people came to a head, as two hundred and fifty thousand Jews, faced with the impossible choice of baptism or death, were expelled from Spain. Thus began a series of expulsions and inquisitions that would force the Jewish people to wander from country to country, culminating in the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust five hundred years later.

Many do not realize that on that fateful August morning in 1492, the very day eighty thousand Jews followed Don Yitzchak Abarbanel across the border into Portugal, and thousands of boats filled the harbor, setting sail with the better part of the Jewish community, there were three boats, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, sailing out of the harbor to discover a new world, which would one day save the remnants of the Jewish people in that very same Holocaust.

And just as the fire of destruction hides within it the spark of redemption, so too, the fertile fields of victory hide within them the potential dust of defeat. Thus, it was the mood created by Israel's lightning victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 that bred the overconfidence, allowing for the debacle of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Yanosh, and the story of the Seventh brigade, is a case in point.

As the summer of 1973 wound down, the Seventh brigade, one of the legendary Israeli armored corps units whose battles in 1948 are the stuff of legends, was stationed on the Bar Lev line, along the Suez Canal.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the brigade was given a week's leave for the holidays, and as was often the case back then, left behind a minimum skeleton crew for base guard duty. As the men of the Seventh headed off for some R&R all over the country, Yanosh, the Brigade Commander, stopped off in the General Staff base in Tel Aviv on his way home. For Yanosh, a full bird Colonel, it was an ingrained habit to keep abreast of the intelligence reports on the borders as part of his command duties of one of Israel's finest front lines Brigades.

What he saw alarmed him: Egyptian and Syrian troop buildups along the Canal and in the Golan Heights, a high increase of Arab military radio traffic, and an unusual amount of activity in the Arab airfields. Two weeks before that fateful Yom Kippur, Yanosh became convinced the country was headed for war. He immediately went to the Central Command radio room and put in a call to his Division commander, advising him of his opinion, and asking for a first-stage general call up of critical reserves, and the recall of all the troops that had been given leave that very afternoon.

But that is a lot of work, and intelligence reports can be interpreted in different ways, so the Division Commander disagreed. Yanosh had somewhat of a reputation as an impulsive firebrand, and didn't give up easily, convinced as he was that his country was in grave danger, and going over his commander's head, he appealed to the Commander of Central command, then the chief intelligence officer of the I.D.F.,

and finally the Chief of general staff himself, commander of the entire Israeli army at the time, Dado Elazar.

But no-one wanted to listen; flushed with the success of the '67 war, when Israeli forces had wiped out the much larger Arab armies facing them, no-one seemed capable of imagining that these same Arab armies might be poised to destroy the State of Israel, and so the phone calls were not made, the highways remained silent, and Israeli troops going on leave continued to depart for the holidays.

In retrospect, one opinion in the intelligence community is that the Arabs wanted to see over the Rosh Hashanah holiday whether a major troop buildup would cause the Israelis to keep more troops on alert. The results were the last stage of the Arab decision to go to war. And the Israelis were still sleeping....

Yanosh finally concluded no one was listening, but the continued reports of major troop buildups would not allow him to let it go. Finally, he decided that at the very least he commanded his own brigade and that was better than nothing. The situation in the North, along the Golan Heights was in one respect much more tenuous than in the South, as there was no buffer zone in the North. If Yanosh was right, and Egyptian troops came pouring across the Suez Canal, at least they would still have the desert to negotiate before arriving at Israeli cities and towns. In the Golan, half an hour on tank treads from Tiberias, Israel had no luxury.

So Yanosh decided to rotate his brigade up North to the Golan Heights, and eventually, figuring it would be easier for them, the high command acquiesced.

Recalling an entire Brigade, spread out on Holiday leave all over the country, getting them all the way down to the southern tip of the Sinai, and then transferring an entire armored Brigade the length of the country north up into the Golan heights was no easy task. Everyone thought Yanosh was mad, and this move did not bolster his image in the eyes of his men, who had just lost a week's leave. But this single Brigade Commander's determination and conviction brought an entire Brigade on line in the North, three days before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war. And when two thousand Syrian tanks poured across the border on the afternoon of October 6th, 1973, instead of 75 tanks (of the 188th), there were 150 on line, something that made all the difference. Hidden in the brilliance of the Six-Day war victory, was the spark that would blind so many to what was coming a short six years later. The same character traits of pride and conviction, which blinded so many, were also the seeds of conviction that had one man in the right place, at the right time.

Is there a thematic lesson here?

This week's portion, *Nitzavim*, 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?

Indeed, not only does Moshe point out (again) what awful things will befall any person who does stray after all the previous descriptions, he adds the fact that Hashem will *not forgive* such a person!

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)?

And what, incidentally has Moshe (or rather Hashem, the real source of Moshe's words) so worried about, at this juncture, as to feel the need to raise the troublesome specter of this possibility?

The truth is, we often assume that what will comfort a person when confronted with pain and challenge is the opportunity to be distracted from the entire experience. But Judaism suggests an entirely different approach.

I recall, one summer when I was in High School, a fellow I became friendly with during the course of a summer job. Trying my hand at being a runner on Wall Street, I got friendly with a couple of fellows who were doing the same thing, and in between messenger runs we would hang out in the mail room. One of them, an Irish Catholic named Peter, lost his father during the course of the summer. Not being entirely comfortable attending a Catholic service in church, I went to the wake that afternoon instead. It was an entirely new experience for me. Immediately after a Jewish funeral, close friends and relatives sit with the mourners and share memories and stories. There is a special meal, called a Se'udat Havra'ah, where all the food is provided according to a set regimen, and the mourners have nothing else to do but concentrate on their loss.

Not so (at least in this particular experience) at an Irish Catholic wake, which was a very different experience to say the least. The liquor flowed, and jokes abounded; it seemed everyone was trying their best to keep Peter's mind off his loss. This was so different from the Jewish mourning experience, where mourners even desist from certain mitzvot immediately following their loss, so as to focus only on their pain. For seven days after a death of a closed loved one, Jews sit Shiva (literal word meaning “seven”), and focus completely on the person they have lost, and the pain they are experiencing. One does not even say hello to a mourner sitting Shiva before the mourner addresses you, so as not to intrude on his thoughts. When one visits a Jewish house of mourning the idea is to be there for the person if he or she needs you, and the process allows it to be about the mourner, not the visitor.

So imagine my surprise when the next day, Peter showed up for work. I asked him why he had come in to work the day after his father's funeral, and his response was:

"What else am I supposed to do, sit home and think about it?"

One of the ideas behind this focus on pain and loss, before beginning the process of letting it go, is how much one can learn from facing such pain directly. Perhaps this was Moshe's intent so long ago on the banks of the Jordan River, speaking to the Jewish people.

The real comfort he could offer regarding all the difficult potential calamities described in last week's portion, was not to avoid them, or change the subject, but rather to assess their cause. By taking a closer look at this painful process, perhaps the Torah here is offering us an understanding of what causes this painful process, or at least what we might be able to contribute to preventing it.

This, incidentally, would explain why the verses here speak of an individual turning away, and not the entire Jewish people as expressed previously (in last week's portion in Devarim 29). Because if each of us as individuals can explore how we can avoid those pitfalls and change who we are, then perhaps the entirety of the Jewish community will never arrive at such painful situations.

Incidentally, this is not to say we are attempting here to explain *why* such challenging events occur; such speculation is presumptuous at best. But we do have the right to understand a process as described in the Torah, and decide what we each can do to change the sum totality of the picture.

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 long and ugly path, to actions that will eventually result in disaster. Such a description cannot refer to actions, whose consequences are clear, with an empirical formula.

Whether it is idol worship or murder, theft or slander, the Torah has on numerous occasions made very clear how to define such actions, why they are wrong, and what the resulting consequences will be. So if the Torah takes the time to lay all of this out here, we are speaking not of actions, but of the character traits that breed those actions.

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, unnoticeable 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 might be a crucial lesson, directly from G-d, that relates to the essence of who we are meant to be as a people. (This would explain why Hashem shares this message here, prior to the birth of Yitzchak, which represents the first instance of a parent with a Jewish child to transmit that lesson to.)

The prevailing understanding might have been 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*’.

In the end what really counts is what you do, and not just what you say and believe. You can pay as much lip service as you want to charity; if you 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 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.

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 making the world we impact a little better, and a little brighter.

Perhaps then one day soon, we will merit sharing that light together, in the streets of peaceful Yerushalayim.

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

Be'Virchat Ketivah' Ve'Chatimah Tovah,

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