

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Noach)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality From Rav Binny

There are moments that seem to hang in time, lasting a life-time; moments that stay with you forever.

Dani was such a moment. His twinkling blue eyes beneath wavy, blonde hair still look across the hall at me, enjoying watching my mouth drop open...

I had just recently completed my first stint of infantry and tank basic training and Sergeant's course in the Israeli army, and was enjoying a six-month leave before returning for Officer's course. Dani was definitely one of the reasons I made it through. A couple of years earlier, he had taken this green, gullible, American kid and taught me the ropes, making sure I got to know all the guys I would be serving with, forcing me to break my teeth and learn Hebrew, without which I don't know how I would have survived basic.

The Yeshiva program I was in, allowing boys to study before and during their army stint, was full of guys like him; larger than life, boys who wanted only to sit and explore their Jewish roots through the study of Torah, and yet willing to put it all on the line in the Israeli army. He stood out as one of the best of them.

I still remember accepting his offer to study together at 1:30 every day, fully appreciating that he was one of the most popular and sought after study partners in the class, and thus willing to sacrifice my 1:30- 3PM break every day, the only time we had to relax in a very long daily schedule, only to discover he meant 1:30 in the morning, the only time he had free!

I still remember the seemingly endless hours of discussion and challenge, late into the night and the wee hours of the morning, as I broke my teeth on Hebrew to debate, challenge, explore and journey together in Jewish philosophy and bible, Talmud and ethics.

But most of all, I remember that moment, passing by the phone in the hallway, seeing Dani, obviously talking to a girl on the phone, and seeing his eyes twinkle in amusement, as my mouth dropped open in realization of the fact that he was speaking perfect English!

"Why did you make me break my teeth in Hebrew all those nights, if you speak perfect English?" I recall asking, a few moments later, when he got off the phone.

"How else would you have learned Hebrew before the army?" he responded... And I remember the feeling wash over me of what it meant to have a friend who cared that much.

Those memories come pouring back now and again, especially when I see the picture of him that marks the place we sat and learned together, in the hills of Gush Etzion, so long ago.

Dani was killed in an ambush in Lebanon, during our second stint in the army, in 1984, but he has never really died. He is with me still...

Loss; such a powerful word. What is Loss? Why is it so powerful? And how do we respond? Why do we feel so painfully the loss of a friend? And even more, why are we at times so challenged, so grieved by the loss of those we may not even know?

Jewish tradition teaches us that every human being is a world, and the portion we read this week, Noach, presents us with the first world we ever lost, in the aftermath of the flood.

The verse tells us

"Va'Yishaer Ach Noach..." "Only Noach remained." (Genesis 7:23)

Interestingly, it does not say Noach survived alone, because Judaism believes, with faith, we are never really alone. G-d, Hashem, is always our silent partner.

Yet, Noach was, really, the ultimate Holocaust survivor. It is hard to imagine how deafeningly silent it must have been, when Noach first stepped back on to dry land, to discover that everything was gone. No one was left; no people, animals, even bugs, anywhere, save those whom Noach had brought in to the ark.

The *Mishna* in **Ethics of the Fathers** (1; 6) teaches us that a person must strive to acquire a friend. **Maimonides** explains, in his commentary on the *mishna*, that one cannot achieve one's potential for improvement without a friend. Hence the Torah tells us at the beginning of our creation, that "*Lo Tov Hayot Ha'Adam Levado*", it is not good for man to be alone. This is actually the only instance in the entire Bible that anything is described as being "*not good*", because to build the world, which is our purpose here on earth, we need partners.

Maimonides actually defines three different types of friendship.

Some friendships are really based on necessity and expediency. Practically, we need someone else to help us accomplish whatever the need of the moment requires. A pitcher needs a catcher, just as a wedding videographer needs the fellow holding the sound mike...

Sometimes we have friends who satisfy our social needs. Man, after all, is a social animal, and we need someone to talk to, to share our experiences and hear our pain.

But sometimes we discover that very special third type of friendship. A friendship that is not about each partner's needs being met, which after all, is based on self. Rather, this is the friend we discover who can help us build.

There is nothing wrong with friendships we have based on need, but in the end, they can never reach the level of this very special type of friendship, which is not about me, but about everyone else. And this is what friendship is meant to be. A true friend is someone who helps me to build the world. And the loss of such a friend means I have lost someone who is my partner in building the entire world. And so, the world can never be as whole.

This is what Noach must have felt; he had to start building the world all over again, all on his own.

In truth, every human being, everywhere, even though we may never have met, is our partner in building this world. And if we really understand that, then somehow, when someone dies, our world cannot be the same, because we have, all of us, lost our partners.

It is fascinating to see how Noach begins the long path of re-building after the flood.

First, he builds a *Mizbeach*, an altar. Remember what we have lost; hold it, and them, with us always. Because if Dani's twinkling eyes are still there, then in every thing I do, he will always be my partner, and he will never really be gone.

All those we may have lost, are still with us, all of us, as long as their memory still inspires us to the pursuit of excellence, to re-build a better world.

And then, Noach plants a vine. What an amazing moment the Torah records. After all that destruction, all that loss, Noach begins to plant.

Yes, there are moments that will live forever. Such is true of the moment when a man, long ago, having witnessed the epitome of all destruction, rather than remaining the last victim of that destruction, chooses instead to have faith, deciding that there is a value in planting, in the future, in beginning again.

We need to look around us, and see all those who are really already our partners, and find ways to build together.

May Hashem give us the strength to plant seeds of hope and peace together. And may we continue to be partners in building a new and better world.

Shabbat Shalom
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