

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Pekudei)

In a cattle car in Poland, in the summer of 1942, Reb Azriel Dovid Fastag, who was the composer of tunes for the Moshitzer rebbe, was headed to his death in Treblinka. It is impossible to imagine what it must have been like. Over a hundred Jews, forced to stand for days on end with only a bucket in the middle of the car for waste, no room to even sit or lie down, no food or water, in the stifling summer heat, all crammed in together heading to whereabouts unknown, for reasons they could not even imagine.

Listening to the clickety-clack of the wheels of the train, a tune sprang into his mind, and he composed the now-famous “Ani Ma’amin” tune:

“I believe, with complete faith, in the coming of the messiah, and even though he may tarry, I await him nonetheless...”

And he began to hum and then to sing the haunting melody, in the crowded cattle car full of despair hurtling into the darkness. And one by one, the Jews in the car picked up the tune and begin to hum, and then to sing with him. And when the Jews in the car next to them heard the singing, after a time, they picked up the tune as well, and began to sing along. Overwhelmed by the power of this tune, he wrote down the notes and shared them, determined to ensure the tune would survive.

Eventually, after the war, one of the young students in that car who eventually escaped and survived the war, made his way back to the court of Mozhitz now in Brooklyn, and shared the tune with the Mozhitzer Rebbe and it became the unofficial anthem of the Holocaust in the Jewish religious world...

Imagine: singing about the coming of the messiah in a cattle car on the way to Treblinka...

This week, we will conclude the second of the five books of the Torah, Sefer Shemot (the book of Exodus).

And the way in which the Torah concludes this book, which shares the story of the Exodus from Egypt, is interesting. With the building of the *Mishkan* (the Tabernacle) complete, the Torah tells us:

“When the cloud arose above the Mishkan, the Children of Israel would travel on all of their journeys, but if the cloud would not rise, then they would not travel until it rose. For the cloud of G-d was on the Mishkan by day, and a pillar of fire at night before (in the eyes of) all of Israel on all of their journeys.”

(Shemot 40:36-38)

After all of the bombastic events of the book of *Shemot*, the ten plagues, the Exodus, the splitting of the sea and the revelation of Sinai, not to mention the building of the *Mishkan*, why do we conclude this entire book with the cloud above the *Mishkan* and the system of how the Jews knew when to travel? **This** is the big finale of the book of the Exodus: *traffic control*?

And there is an interesting detail which begs a question: When it was time for the Jews to journey again the cloud would rise up and go before them to lead the way, so why does the last verse suggest

the cloud was **on** the Mishkan on their journeys? If it was on the Mishkan that meant they were encamped?

So **Rashi** explains that since each of their encampments was part of the journey, they too were considered part of the journey.

What does this mean and why is this the conclusion of the entire book of Shemot?

Fast forward to the beginning of the book of Yehoshua (Joshua). After forty years in the desert, Yehoshua is getting ready, with the Jewish people and an army of six hundred thousand men to enter and conquer the land of Israel and decides to send two spies to spy out the land. It is difficult to understand why Yehoshua would choose to do this, especially after the debacle of the spies nearly forty years earlier, but even stranger is the mission itself.

The two spies cross the border and head straight for ... a brothel! (though some suggest it as an inn) And they are discovered almost immediately. (*One can only imagine two individuals who just spent forty years receiving Torah from Moshe in the desert, eating the holy Manna every day and protected by clouds of glory, walking into a Canaanite bar with their big Yarmulkes and tefillin on debating which blessing to make on beer; wonder how they got caught so fast ...*)

But *Rachav* the righteous innkeeper (who was just a brothel owner...!) hides them on the roof under bales of flax. She then advises them to escape westwards up into the mountains, as the King's men will look for them to the east. Heeding her advice they indeed hide for three days in the hills before subsequently making their way back east over the border.

And then comes the most incredible part of the whole story: rather than apologize for their failed mission they clearly (Yehoshua 2: 23-24) feel they have succeeded!

"... Hashem has given the land over into our hands" (ibid. v. 24)

This, despite not getting much further than the underside of a pile of flax on a rooftop?!

So there is a unique phrase the two spies employ when they report to Yehoshua and describe the events of their mission:

"kol ha'motz'ot otam" (ibid v. 23) which literally means 'all that found them'.

We find this word again at the end of the book of Bamidbar (Numbers) in the portion of Massei, which literally means journeys.

There were forty-two journeys the Jewish people travelled in their forty years in the desert, and the Torah describes them as well, (Bamidbar 33:2) as *Motza'eihem* ; literally 'what found them'.

Because the places described in these forty two journeys are not really places; a rock or a sand-dune in the middle of the wilderness is not really a place such as we normally encounter; there is no town or Bedouin encampment; no hospital or lake, for the most part. *Refidim* is where 'rafu yadam', their hands became weak (and they needed water), *Di-Zahav* means gold; it is here the Golden Calf occurred; these are not places, they are rather *events*; and **we don't travel to events; events find us.**

There is a blessing we say every morning as part of the morning blessings:

“ Ha’meichin mitzadei gaver” Literally : *He who prepares the steps of man*. And the Talmud (tractate *Brachot* 60b) shares that initially, this blessing was said when we put on our shoes. Really? A blessing for putting on your shoes?

But in truth this blessing hides a deep idea: We wake up in the morning full of our plans for the day. Just remember, with all our best laid plans, who really prepares our steps for the day. We may think we are headed off for a job interview, and we certainly have to do all we can to prepare for that meeting and ensure its success. But as we put our shoes on, it behooves us to remember that what really ends up happening is in much bigger hands than our own...

Everything that will come into our lives, today and every day, are events that find us, and we can't really change those events; what we can change is how we react to them, and what we choose to do with them. Perhaps that is what the spies are telling Yehoshua:

‘We had a very different idea of how this mission would go, but these are the events that found us.’ Hashem wanted the Jewish people to see just how terrified the Canaanites were of them, and He planned the mission as it actually transpired.

And maybe that explains the end of the book of Shemot. Even when we encamp, we are always on a journey; and everything that happens comes to us for a reason; it’s all part of the journey.

So how do Jews in a cattle car, headed for Treblinka, find the strength to sing about Treblinka?

Perhaps in the same way the Jewish people survived two thousand years of bitter exile: we somehow understood that every event, or encampment, was really just part of a much larger journey, and it was never about controlling the events, it was always about deciding what we are meant to do with them and who is really planning them.

All of which will lead us to the third book we begin next week: **Vayikra** which literally means ‘*and He called*’; the recognition that hidden in all of the events of our lives is always ... a calling.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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