

# ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

## **From Rav Binny Freedman**

### **(Why) Are the Jews meant to suffer?**

*His name was Attila Petschauer and his tragic story captured my attention. What sort of a Jewish family names their son Attila? In 1904 in Hungary, most probably one that was fiercely proud of being Hungarian. Attila was born in 1904 to a prominent family and eventually became one of the world's greatest sabre fencers, at a time when sabers were the macho weapon of the day. Winning the silver medal (and team gold) at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, gold medals in the 1930 and 1931 World Championships, and again as part of the gold medal team at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, he became a national hero, and was even dubbed "the new d'Artagnan".*

*And then the black cloud of Nazism spread over Europe and with the passing of the anti-Jewish laws in Hungary in 1938, Jewish men were conscripted to labor battalions often clearing mines literally by walking through them and blowing up. Tens of thousands of these Jews were killed and died in horrendous suffering.*

*Petschauer actually was given an exemption due to his status, but one day, out for a walk having accidentally forgotten his exemption papers at home, he was rounded up off the street in a routine check in 1943 and deported to the Davidovka labor camp in the Ukraine.*

*At Davidovka Petschauer recognized a fellow Olympian (Kalman Cseh, from the 1928 Olympics) who was now a Hungarian Military Officer and made the mistake of calling out to him. Witnesses would later testify that Cseh immediately turned to one of the camp guards and told him to "make things hot for the Jew".*

*The guards shouted "You! Olympic fencing medal winner! Let's see how you can climb trees! " It was a bitterly cold winter day, January 20, 1943, with snow and ice on the ground, and they forced him to undress and climb naked up a tree and then sprayed him with water until he fell, frozen to the ground. He died the next day.*

*It is safe to assume the Petschauer family was a deeply patriotic family and Atilla was probably more Hungarian than Jewish. But to the Hungarians, he was just a Jew. His is one story of six million stories, one tear in an Ocean of pain. Why, for thousands of years, have the Jewish people suffered so?*

This is the time of year when we are busily preparing for and anticipating the Pesach (Passover) holiday, which of course celebrates the great miracles Hashem (G-d) wrought for us when taking us out of Egypt. After two centuries of hopeless suffering and servitude; we were finally free.

But one of the questions we seem to gloss over is why we were slaves in the first place? Generally most of us will trace this back to the senseless hatred between Joseph and his brothers which is how they all ended up down in Egypt in the first place. As such Egyptian servitude becomes a moral lesson in the need for Jewish unity and love, in hopes of creating a better world.

But is this really true? A closer look in the Torah (Bereishit (Genesis) 15; 13) clearly reveals that Hashem promises Avraham that his children will be "*strangers in a strange land where they will be enslaved and suffer greatly....*"

So what gives? Why was it part of the Jewish destiny almost from Judaism's inception that we would suffer so? Why did there even need to be a Pesach holiday? Why not just let us grow naturally as a people in the land (Canaan) we had already begun to make our home?

The Talmud (Tractate Berachot 5a) suggests the land of Israel is only acquired with travail; why?

It is important to point out that we are not seeking an answer to this question but rather a response, or direction. In the study of Mitzvoth Jewish tradition teaches us that there are in fact three different types of Mitzvoth (though they are often given different names).

Some mitzvot (commandments) generally known as *Mishpatim* are easily understandable, and in fact many traditional sources suggest that these are the laws we would most probably have intuited even without receiving them in the Torah. **Not to steal** for example, is an obviously important injunction, necessary for society to function.

Then there are mitzvot like **Shabbat** (known as *Torot* or *Mitzvoth*) which we might never have intuited, but once given them as Commandments actually make a lot of sense; it makes sense to take a day off every week and to have the time to focus on what really matters.

But then there are those mitzvot, known as *Chukim*, whose purpose and understanding often eludes us, such as the strange ritual of the **red heifer** (cow) whose ashes purify those who are made impure by contact with death. This is a mitzvah even the most wise Solomon felt far from understanding.

And yet Maimonides points out (at the end of *Hilchot Meilah*) that one should nonetheless attempt to explore the mitzvot ("*rauy le'hit bonen bahem*") even when one cannot discern a meaning.

Such an endeavor would seem to be an appropriate description of this topic. I am not at all sure we are meant to understand why we, or for that matter, anyone suffers in this world. But we must nonetheless attempt to at least find a direction for the struggle.

**Elie Weisel** once said that after the Holocaust a Jew could deny G-d, or he could affirm G-d, but he could no longer ignore G-d. With that in mind, how can we relate to this idea that the Jewish people were meant to suffer, all the way from the beginning?

It is interesting to note that it is the people who seem to have suffered the most in the world, who are perceived to be the most sensitive and ethical in the world. It would be difficult for rational objective people witnessing the way in which the Israeli army, as an example, functions in combat to reach anything but the conclusion that this is the most ethical army on the face of the earth.

Think about it: In 1982, *twenty thousand* Israeli troops crossed the border into Lebanon in a war that began as a response to Katyusha shells falling on the children in the North.

For the better part of twenty years an estimated close to a quarter of a million men spent significant time, whether in the regular army or the reserves, in Lebanon. Yet, in all that time *there was not one single reported case of rape*. Not one incident of a Lebanese woman claiming she had been raped by an Israeli soldier; not one. Not even by the Arab **Red Crescent Society** run by no less than Yasser Arafat's brother. Perhaps there is a connection between the tremendous suffering our people have endured and the sensitivity we regularly try to display.

Perhaps only a people that lost freedom so many times, values it enough to cherish it even for others.

Just like a person who really appreciates being able to walk on the day he gets the cast removed from his broken leg, we as a people cherish freedom precisely because we have lost it so many times. And we value life precisely because we have stood in the valley of the shadow of death on so many occasions....

And perhaps this is why we are so committed to the freedom and lives of so many others and the reason medical aid in world calamities seems to always arrive first from Israel, that tiny Nation that could .... And most important of all, the more sensitive we are to the people and world around us, the closer we get to demonstrating that we have all finally, as a people, gotten the message.

This Pesach (Passover), as we celebrate our Freedom, perhaps we can take a moment to appreciate just how precious that freedom really is, and how easy it would be to lose it ....

Wishing all a Wonderful Pesach and a Chag Kasher ve'Sameach,  
From Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman