

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Passover)

(Why) Does G-d test us?

Yom Kippur; the Jewish day of Atonement; we must have needed a lot of atonement that year, because over those dark days of October in 1973, over two thousand of our boys would be the sacrifices the Jewish people offered to atone for ... what, exactly?

The position on Mount Bental had a commanding view of the entire Northern Golan Heights, and the Syrian forces that overran the Israeli positions on the Yom Kippur afternoon were well aware that capturing this position was critical to a successful advance in the Golan Heights.

After an overwhelming and unabated Syrian artillery barrage that forced the small contingent of Israeli soldiers manning the position to take cover deep in the underground bunker, the men in the bunker suddenly heard shouts and dialogue in Arabic above their bunker, and realized their position had been captured. Seven men, including one who was seriously wounded from the artillery barrage managed to barricade themselves inside an interior area of the bunker quarters (a small area with two three-tiered bunk beds) with a thick iron shelter door they closed and locked from the inside.

Banking on the fact that with so many Israeli bodies and wounded men up above the Syrians might not realize they were there, they decided to maintain absolute silence in the hopes that eventually Israeli troops would rally and they would be rescued.

With no supplies, they remained inside the bunker throughout the long night and into the wee hours of the morning. One of their number, who would later be awarded one of the Israeli army's highest awards for bravery, succeeded in sneaking out of their hiding place to get two jerry cans full of water, but other than that with no radio, no medical supplies and no food, they had nothing to keep them going but pure hope.

I heard this story one year on Memorial Day on a television broadcast, and distinctly recall as the camera focused on the face of the fellow telling the story, seeing a tear form in the corner of his eye as he recounted the horrible circumstances of that long night.

At one point the wounded soldier who had been terribly wounded and lost a lot of blood, began to moan and cry out. Terrified of being discovered (they all knew what it would mean to be an Israeli soldier captured by the Syrians), the ranking soldier (a sergeant) told one of them (the fellow now retelling the story in the documentary I was watching) gave an order to silence the wounded man at all costs.

Everyone understood what that meant; with hundreds of tanks having over-run the Israeli positions and no re-enforcements in sight the chances of this terribly wounded man making it through the night

were next to impossible. But if his cries alerted the Syrians to their position, all seven of them would be tortured terribly and then most probably killed.

Faced with an impossible choice, the man lying next to the wounded soldier squeezed in on the same bunk bed, pleaded with him, hugged him, even tried to cover his mouth begging him in a whispered voice to be quiet but to no avail; after a moment or two the sergeant said simply: use a pillow and make it quick... and all of them understood exactly what that meant.

But to let your brother, the fellow who served next to you who you knew would have your back die?

So instead, our soldier telling the story climbed on top of the body of the wounded soldier, pulling him further down the bed until his head was under the soldier on top's stomach. And by arching his back he managed to create a small pocket that allowed the wounded man to breathe while nonetheless muffling his cries....

After an hour in this position the soldier's back began to ache, and then to burn as if it was on fire and he desperately wanted to roll off but each time he said to himself 'just ten more minutes' what if we are saved in ten minutes? Will I ever be able to look myself in the eye if we lose a human being, an Israeli soldier, for ten minutes?

How long he managed to stay like that he was not sure but it was certainly hours. Eventually, sometime in the morning they heard loud explosions and shooting; clearly there was a battle going on above.

Eventually the re-enforced door they were hiding behind was blown open; imagine the surprise on the faces of the Israeli soldiers who retook Bental upon finding seven live Israeli soldiers hiding right in the midst of a company of Syrian Commandos.

As he told this last part of the story the camera began to pan out and the screen widened to include a fellow sitting next to the speaker and smiling and as the camera panned out further I became aware of several young adults sitting on the bench next to these two veterans, and then smaller children running around and the second fellow, who had been that wounded soldier lying underneath, began to introduce his five children, and many grandchildren....

It is hard to imagine the test of such a night on any human being, but easy to see the incredible results of its successful conclusion.

Why does it seem we are always being tested? Why does it always seem to get worse before it gets better? This week, as we prepare for the Pesach (Passover) festival and the larger than life story of the Exodus from Egypt, it is fascinating to take a closer look at Moshe's own drama in attempting to free the Jews from Egypt. After all, G-d does not really need Moshe to get Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go free, and if Moshe is being tested, at first glance he seems to fail the test with great fanfare.

Initially Moshe and Aaron speak with the elders and the Jewish people who seem to readily believe Moshe and accept that the time has indeed come for the Jewish people to finally leave their bondage and go free. (4:29-31)

But when Moshe presents his mission to Pharaoh, things do not go quite as smoothly; if anything, things go from bad to worse. No longer given straw with which to make their bricks, the Jewish people anguish under the added burden and Moshe, seemingly confounded, beseeches G-d, trying to understand the purpose of his mission (5:22-23) if he is only causing the Jews more suffering....

What is the purpose of G-d sending Moshe to Pharaoh only to fail, again and again? For nigh on a year, Moshe (G-d) will bring plague after plague on the Egyptians only to meet disappointment again and again, as Pharaoh refuses to allow the Jews to go free.

At the end of the story of the Binding of Isaac, which is the first time the Torah mentions the concept of being tested, known as *nisayon*, just as Abraham is ready to fulfill this most horrible of commands, an angel calls out in a heavenly voice “*Don’t send out your hand to the lad... for now I know (“Atah Yadati”)* that you are truly in awe of G-d (“*Yareh’ Elokim*”). (22:12)

What does this mean? How can G-d (even speaking through the voice of an angel, whatever *that* means...) *now* know something? Doesn’t G-d know everything, always?

The **Ramban** (Nachmanides) suggests: “*Al Tikri’ Ya’dati, Elah’ Ho’dati*”; in a play on words, the Ramban says “*Don’t read that G-d now knows, but rather, G-d has now made known.*”

In other words, somehow, Avraham achieves something here that only G-d knew he was capable of. Until this moment the Avraham that ‘passes’ the test of the binding of Isaac, existed only in potential; now, through this episode, that potential was transformed into reality. And there are many who suggest that this is indeed the entire basis for the concept of trials and tribulations in this world: that through our struggles we live up to the potential of all that we can be.

Indeed, this may be the understanding of the word *nisayon* itself, which has the same root as the word *Nes*, or miracle. What is the miracle of the test or *nisayon* that we experience in the darkest of times?

It is interesting that the command G-d gives Abraham, from Abraham’s perspective, makes no sense. G-d tells him to kill (from his perspective) his only son whom he loves so much. The same son G-d has already promised will be the inheritor of everything Abraham has built, who will create a people, the Jews that will one-day change (bless) the world. So, that is impossible. It is impossible to kill the son who will live to have children and children’s children, just as it is impossible to love a G-d who can take away the only son, whom you love so much.

And if Abraham were having that conversation with G-d, G-d would most probably tell him ‘you’re right. It is impossible. Now do it anyway.’ And that is the miracle of Nisayon. And one needn’t go back four thousand years to understand this concept; we need only look over our collective, national shoulders.

Seventy years ago, a small group of people were given just such a challenge, by the same G-d of the binding of Isaac.

And one can almost hear G-d's command: 'It's time to come home. I want you to build a state to bring my people home.'

They might as well have been hearing the voice out of a burning bush!

'You want us to build a what? In that desert? Surrounded by two hundred million Arabs?'

The test of 1948 was completely impossible, as any historian of the day would have readily agreed. Outnumbered fifteen to one at best, surrounded by seven Arab armies, with almost no tanks or planes to speak of, and just three years out of the ovens of Auschwitz, oh, and with almost no money either? Impossible!

'Yes, you're right. It is impossible. Now do it anyway.' G-d must have replied. And here we are. And in embracing that impossible dream, amidst one of the darkest periods in human history, we decided as a people, to choose life, and we offered ourselves up on that altar of life, so that the world could become a better place.

And maybe that is the challenge the Passover story presents us with every day: (and perhaps part of why we mention it so often in the Jewish day): *believe in the impossible*. Because in achieving the impossible we discover that Hashem (G-d) is always with us, helping to make the impossible possible.

Every day, indeed, every moment, has its own special challenge. And in choosing to live up to that moment, we discover, in what seemed to be the loneliness of total darkness that we are never alone, Hashem is always with us; and that deep in the darkness is often the greatest of light.

And this what freedom and the Exodus from Egypt were all about to live up to the miracle that is us, every single day.

Shabbat shalom, and best wishes for a wonderful Pesach, from Jerusalem,

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