

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Pinchas)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

This week's Torah thought is dedicated in the memory of Naftali Frenkel, Eyal Yifrach, and Gilad Sha'ar who will remain teenagers forever. Yehi zichram baruch , veheyu lanu melitzei yosher ... May their memory be for a blessing and may they be spokesmen for all of us on high.

The heat was unbearable, but no-one was thinking about the heat that day; there were 150,000 people who had gathered in the sun and the heat, to pay their last respects. Bus after bus unloading dozens, then hundreds and then thousands of people, they came from every part of the country ; secular Jews with earrings in jeans shorts and cut-off T shirts, and ultra-Orthodox Jews in long black coats and side curls; Jews with large knitted kippot (skull caps) alongside those w baseball hats and soccer shirts. It was the middle of the Mondea'l, the world soccer tournament in Brazil, but no one was thinking about soccer that day and none of the teens who had come by the tens of thousands were laughing or even smiling.

Naftali's mother was speaking and a man started crying.

"Did you know any of them?" asked a teen of someone in front of him;

"No, did you?"

"No. None of us did; but he was my brother; our brother; they were all our brothers ..."

How many people after all, really know any given teenager? And yet, they came by the tens of thousands, because these three teenagers had captured our hearts; they were our sons and our brothers, and their families recaptured something many had thought was being lost: a love of the land, and of life, and of all the principles we hold dear.

They embodied the right of every Jew anywhere to live and breathe this land we love; the land of Israel. And yet, they embodied as well the terrible price we have sometimes had to pay for that love.

This week's portion of Pinchas contains a fascinating story of a few young women whose love for the land of Israel seemed to know no bounds, despite never having been there. And there is a fascinating detail to this story that is most often missed, and yet holds a powerful message worth noting.

The five daughters of **Tzlafchad** (Machla, Noah, Chaglah, Milkah and Tirtzah) come forward before the entire leadership of the Jewish people: Moshe, Elazar the high priest (Aaron has passed away already) the princes and the entire congregation (Numbers 27:2) and explain that their father has died with no sons. Given that his inheritors are all daughters they want to be given a portion of the land, that their father's name not be lost in the land of Israel.

It is a bold request, for up until that time it seems the men would inherit the land of their fathers and share that land and live on it with their wives. And yet, in the merit of these five women and their bold request, Hashem himself proclaims that these women will inherit the land and carry on their father's names as will any women who have no brothers to inherit. Interestingly, it is very clear this story is not about people who want land, it is about women whose love of their father and desire to uphold his name, along with a deep love of the land of Israel merits that a mitzvah in the Torah be in their honor.

So who was Tzafchad from whence came all this burning idealism and love? Incredibly, the daughters themselves (27:3) expressed that while he was not killed in the insurrection of Korach, he did die of sin:

“*Ki becheto’ met*” “*For he died in his sin (mistake)*” (*ibid.*)

Rashi points out that he differed from Korach in that (as implied by the words of the verse) he may have made a mistake and sinned, but he did not cause others to sin; he was alone in his mistake.

So what in fact was his mistake? **Rashi** quotes two opinions from the Talmud:

Rabbi Akiva suggests he was the gatherer of sticks (the *mekoshesh eitzim* in Numbers 15:32-36 who was put to death for gathering wood on Shabbat in the desert) and **Rabbi Shimon** suggests he was from the group of *ma’apilim*, who stubbornly arose following the sin of the spies and, against Moshe’s command, were determined to fight their way to the land of Israel (Numbers 14: 40-45) . They arose on the morning after the sin of the spies and went forward alone (while Moshe and the Ark stayed in the camp with the Jewish people) and were all massacred by the Amalekites and Canaanites in the desert.

All of which leaves us with a number of questions: What is the nature of this debate as to who Tzafchad was and what his sin was? And what is the connection between his mistake and his daughters’ great merit?

Interestingly both of these stories (the *ma’apilim* and the *mekoshesh eitzim*) occur in the portion of Shlach, and follow immediately after the sin of the spies. And both of these tragic mistakes involve an individual or a group separating themselves from the people for their own purpose, beliefs or desires.

The *ma’apilim*, despite the heavenly decree that this generation (which had sinned with the spies in not being ready to enter the land) could not enter the land, removed themselves from the entire congregation in attempting to fight their way into the land of Israel.

Their mistake was that the land of Israel is only meaningful as a home for the entire Jewish people; it is the place where we can show the world what it means to be a light unto the nations. And it is only because we believe that G-d has promised us this land and that this is where G-d wants us to be, that it makes any sense to be here at all. Being in Israel as an act of separation from the Jewish people and from G-d makes no sense.

Indeed, if it was not for a belief dating back thousands of years to the Bible itself, it really would make no sense at all for us to be here. Uganda would probably have been a much better move. Surrounded by Arab enemies on every side, in a tiny piece of land most people cannot even find on a map, Miami makes a lot more sense doesn’t it? Unless we are here for something greater than our selves; unless being here is about everything but ourselves; in fact it’s even bigger than being a part of the Jewish people; it’s about being a light for the whole world. So Rabbi Shimon says he who died alone in his sin is by definition one of the *ma’apilim*.

(Interestingly, the **Baal HaTurim** points out that the gematria or numerical equivalent of *va’ya’apilu* in this story (Numbers 14:44) is Tzafchad!)

And what of Rabbi Akiva, who believed Tzafchad was the *mekoshesh eitzim* who gathered sticks on Shabbat? Why would a person gather sticks on Shabbat? Either for firewood, or to build shade (a *sukkah*) in the desert, both things one does for *oneself*. There are actually differing opinions as to which category of labor was violated by gathering sticks on Shabbat. One opinion in the Talmud is simply that he was carrying the sticks. When I carry something I essentially make a statement that it is mine; but one day a week, on Shabbat, we remember that nothing is really ours; all the things we have in our lives are simply on loan to us in this world; Hashem gives them to us and the question is whether we know what to do with them. (Interestingly, in Hebrew

there is no word for ‘having’; we say ‘yesh *li* ‘ which really means ‘ it is to me ‘ describing my relationship with an object...)

Indeed Shabbat is a day which is all about seeing the larger picture, learning to be in the moment, taking the time to think about why we do all that we do and what all the work of our week is really about... Shabbat is a day when we think about our role in the context of the larger community and even the world. We sing of being a nation amongst nations.... So Rabbi Akiva says he who sinned alone must have been the one who gathered sticks on Shabbat.

And the daughters of Tzafchad, determined to undo or ‘fix’ this great mistake, come before the entire Jewish leadership and the entire congregation (27:2) in their desire to be a part of the Jewish people and include their father’s name amongst the inheritors. **The response to the mistake of separating oneself, is inclusion; community, togetherness.**

If there was ever a wave of one-ness, of togetherness that has swept the Jewish people , the tragic story of these three boys, our three sons and brothers and fellow Jews Naftali, Eyal and Gilad is it. For the past three weeks our enemies have done everything they can to bring us down, to isolate and separate us. They want us to be afraid to travel and to come together, so they murder our children, shoot missiles at our homes and throw rocks at our cars. They do not understand that being together , doing together, learning and singing, praying and dancing together, and yes, even crying together is who we are. It is our greatest strength and when we forget that, Hashem sends our enemies to remind us. It is why they have never broken us; they only make our resolve stronger. It is nothing short of incredible, that while we are burying our teenage sons we are still longing for and calling for peace with our Arab cousins. This too, is one of our greatest strengths. Sadly, we will only find that peace when our Arab cousins want it as much as we do, and it does not appear we are there yet.

Lastly, we do not know yet all the details of exactly how Mohammed Abu Kheider, an Arab teenager was murdered last week. But it should sadden us and cause us pain because whenever a human soul, created with all the potential a life has to offer, is extinguished, it should cause us pain.

Equally horrific is the fact that this crime seems to have been perpetrated by a fringe group of Jews who are then to be likened to that same wood gatherer; they have separated themselves from what the Jewish community is all about and have misunderstood who we really are. And that should deeply challenge us and cause us pain as well. It goes without saying that such a horrific crime must be condemned by any and every Jew indeed every human being everywhere, leaders and every Jew alike.

Such a murderous act has not only destroyed a family, but is an offense as well against the entire Jewish people and cannot be allowed to happen. We need to do some soul searching as to how such a thing could have happened and what we can do to ensure it is never repeated. (If the Arab community was doing the same soul searching after the kidnapping and murder of our three teenage boys, we would be in a different space; unfortunately that does not seem to be the case....)

Obviously, we still have a lot of work to do as Jews in this world. The Hebrew word for peace is Shalom, from the root *shalem* or whole. True peace is when we all feel, know and behave in a fashion, that as long as any of us is broken, all of us are broken, no matter their ideals and beliefs or the color of their skin.

These are yet again, trying times for the Jewish people. May Hashem bless us with peace soon, and the wisdom to find the best path to get there.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem, and the hills of Gush Etzion,

Binny Freedman