

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Pinchas)

Nineteen hundred and forty-two years ago, this week, (on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz) the end finally began. After two and a half years of siege, the Roman Legions broke through the ancient walls of Jerusalem and began their savage rampage of pillage and looting through the streets of Jerusalem. Although the walk from the city walls to the temple mount is a short ten-minute stroll, it would take the Romans three weeks to actually set fire to the Temple and end the battle for Jerusalem. Amidst the fire and destruction, Rav Yochanan Ben Zakkai smuggled himself out of the city, realizing the war was lost, and preferring to begin the long and tortuous process of assuring the Jewish people's survival in the exile.

Nineteen hundred years later, the Jews of Jerusalem again faced that most awful of challenges: to stay and fight, or leave and live to fight another day.

In her book Forever My Jerusalem, Puah Shtainer describes the awful moment as a child, when her parents decided they could no longer risk their children's lives for the sake of their own ideals. Perhaps they too saw the writing on the wall. Surrounded by tens of thousands of Arabs, the two hundred Jewish fighters, defending fourteen hundred civilians inside the Old City, were in desperate straits. Out manned, outgunned, and completely surrounded, it no longer seemed a matter of whether; it was only a matter of when.

On the 28th of May, in 1948, just two weeks after the declaration of the State of Israel, the Jewish quarter finally surrendered, and as the Jewish community was led out of the Old City, Rav Goetz, who would one day return to become the rabbi of the Kotel, turned and saw the beautiful Tiferet Yisrael Synagogue in flames. Falling to the ground in agony he cried out the age-old adage: "If I forget thee Oh Jerusalem, let my right arm wither...."

And for nineteen years, again, the Old City walls mourned her Jews, who could not come home.

Today, Jewish children once again play and laugh amidst the walls of a rebuilt Jewish quarter, and one wonders how it is that we have merited this miraculous return. Perhaps it is because the Jewish people's longing for Jerusalem and the land of Israel has never been about land and acquisition. Perhaps there is something much deeper at the heart of it all....

This week's Torah portion, *Pinchas*, includes an interesting story regarding the daughters of Tzlafchad.

There are two major lines of inheritance in the Jewish people: our Jewish identity, which follows the mother (Jewish tradition teaches that only if the mother is Jewish, are the children born as Jews), and the tribal lineage, which follows the father (one's tribal identity follows the tribe of the father).

The story of the daughters of Tzlafchad seems to be all about the laws and the principle of the individual inheritance of the land of Israel, which apparently follows the tribal lineage from son to son. Tzlafchad's daughters are concerned with their rights to inherit a portion of the land of Israel, given that their father had no sons.

It is interesting to note that inheritance might just as easily have followed the lineage of Jewish identity, apportioning sections of the land of Israel to every Jew based on his Jewish lineage. Yet, somehow, it is important for the Jewish people to inherit the land of Israel as tribes.

This story, at first glance seems to be all about a few people wanting the opportunity to ‘get their fair share’, not exactly the stuff of inspiration. One wonders why the Torah takes the time, then, to include this vignette.

It is interesting to note that the Torah uses the phrase:

“Va’Tikravna’ Benot Tzlafchad”

“And then came forward (close) the daughters of Tzlafchad” (27:1),

- But does not finish the sentence. We do not discover whom they came close to, or why they are coming forward until after an interruption of tribal lineage.

Further, why the need to mention the entire lineage of these women all the way back to Joseph? Even if it were necessary to note what tribe they are from, would it not have been enough to say they were from the tribe of Menashe? Why the need to mention Joseph? Not only is the question of their inheritance of the land a function of their being of the tribe of Menashe and nothing to do with Joseph (the Torah does *not* mention that Joseph was the son of Yaakov), but also we hardly need to be reminded that Menashe was the son of Joseph!

The tribe of Menashe was unique, in that its portion straddled land on the both sides of the Jordan River. Indeed, the tribes of Gad and Re’uven chose to live on the Eastern side of the Jordan (see next week’s portion Numbers 32:1-42), rather than enter the land of Israel due to its rich farm and grazing land, and the prospect of economic prosperity.

And as a result of the granting of their request, Moshe ultimately splits the tribe of Menashe, with half the tribe residing on either side of the Jordan River. Generally, the rabbis view this as an assurance that the two sides of the Jordan River will remain part of one people. And the tribe of Menashe, which had no intention of living outside of the land, would also be an influence for maintaining the love of the land of Israel even on that side of the Jordan River.

Ultimately then, the daughters of Tzlafchad had the opportunity to receive rich land on the other side of the Jordan, where all the technical conditions of inheritance in the land of Israel based on tribal lineage did not apply.

Perhaps then, the real motivation of the daughters of Tzlafchad was a burning love for the land of Israel. Indeed, this was their true tribal inheritance. Joseph, despite spending most of his life in Egypt, dies with one wish in his heart: to be buried in the land of his forefathers, the land of Israel. Perhaps this is why these women’s tribal lineage is listed back to Joseph. And Menashe is in fact the first Jew born in the exile. Yet, even as a child born in Egypt he never gives up on the dream of returning home. Indeed it is the tribe of Menashe whose members, according to the Midrash (Rabbinic legend) miscalculate the end of the exile, and in their zeal, attempt to conquer the land of Israel too soon, a story that ends in disaster.

The daughters of Tzafchad represent then, this same idea, namely a case that has value because the motivations were pure. Perhaps for this reason it was important for this case to come as a result of their desire to see their struggle through. "*Va'Tikravna*", "*And they came close*" It was precisely because they decided that they wanted to live in the land of Israel and be close amongst the people that this story is so important. In order for them to eventually arrive before Moshe, they had to go up through the entire system of the courts until they finally arrived before Moshe. Only a burning love for the land of Israel motivated them to such a high degree.

Today, thousands of years after Joseph's bones were brought home and the daughters of Tzafchad merited building homes in the land of Israel, we are still struggling for our right to live and love in the land of Israel.

For two thousand years we wandered the face of the globe and today, ours is the generation that has merited the privilege to put our real motivations to the test. Each of us, in our own way, has to decide what this country and this magnificent city mean to us.

Who we are as a people is a function of what we do and why we do it. And where we choose to be, and why we choose to be there, will ultimately determine whether we become who we are meant to be.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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