

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Pinchas)

I can still remember the exact moment and his words, thirty years later. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z"tzl, our Rosh yeshiva (head of Yeshivat Har Etzion where I was studying) was giving his advanced Talmud lecture to a group of about sixty students and as he was wont to do, looked up from his books scanning the students, and you could feel the tension in the air.

*Most students, myself included, were terrified of this moment. The word genius does not do justice to who Rav Lichtenstein was; beyond being one of the greatest rabbinic leaders and Talmudic minds of our generation, he was uncompromising in his pursuit of truth and his determination to arrive at a full and accurate understanding of every topic and every question we studied. Often, he would call on a student to read which would usually result in a series of questions that tested the students' knowledge of the topic at hand and put him to the test as to whether he could extrapolate what we had been obligated to prepare, often with questions that seemed to undermine some of the ideas our preparation seemed to have indicated. (Any Har Etzion student who ever sat in on Rav Lichtenstein's lectures and ever saw the scene in the movie **The Paper Chase**, watched the Harvard professor grilling his students and immediately thought of his experiences in Rav Lichtenstein's shiur (class)).*

There was no shortage of students who would make sure to sit in the back rows and duck when Rav Lichtenstein looked up in order to avoid being called, but I was in the second row, and apparently, this was my day.

Two words from Lichtenstein filled the air: "Binny Tomar": 'Binny: go ahead and say (read) the piece ...' I could feel the sweat running down my back as we began, and the memory of a boy who had been mercilessly grilled a week before was still in my head. (As it turned out, this boy had the misfortune of getting back to yeshiva late Sunday afternoon - we were expected to be back in Yeshiva latest by 9am Sundays if we were away for Shabbat - just as Rav Lichtenstein was driving out the main gate. The next day that boy was called on and I'll bet he still has nightmares about the experience ...)

But when it was all over, more than the intensity of the experience, and the exhilaration of having survived and answered all of Rav Lichtenstein's questions, was something even more powerful which took me a while to identify. I realized that was the first time I knew for sure that Rav Lichtenstein knew my name, and thirty years later I am still humbled by that knowledge, and it still arouses in me both the melancholy feeling of a beautiful moment long past, along with being deeply moved to this day by the simple fact that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein knew my name. And I still have a deep sense of gratitude to my chavrusa (study partner) at the time (DS) who learned the topic with me and without whom I am quite sure I would never have been prepared for that moment. (I can even still remember his infectious grin and high five after class 😊)

So why was it so meaningful to hear Rav Lichtenstein say... my name? What really is in a name?

In this week's portion of Pinchas we are told of the untimely demise of Tzafchad (Bamidbar (Numbers) 27:6-10) who "dies of his own sins and had no sons".

In what some would like to seem as the first feminist moment, Tzafchad's daughters come before Moshe demanding a portion of the land as their inheritance. "*Give us a possession of land among our father's brothers*". Interestingly, Moshe seems perplexed by the question, brings the question before G-d Himself who ultimately responds: "The daughters of Tzafchad speak correctly." And thus deserve a portion of inheritance "among the brothers of their father."

One wonders why Moshe needs to bring this question before G-d without resolving it himself; after all, Moshe received the law at Sinai including the laws of inheritance, and it's hard to imagine this would not include an event as obviously possible as a man dying with only daughters and no sons. (The question of why inheritance laws differ for sons and daughters has less to do with gender equality and more to do with Tribal lineage following the male descendants, as opposed to Jewish identity following female ancestry but that is a topic for another time ...)

In fact, considering how many levels of the Judiciary were established by Yitro all the way back at Sinai (see Exodus (*Shemot*) chap. 18) one wonders why Moshe himself was even involved.

A careful look at the case however reveals that the real issue at the core of the story here is not about a simple land grab; rather Tzafchad's daughters' real concern was for their father's name: "*Why should the name of our father be omitted from among his family because he had no son?*"

What does it mean that they were concerned for their father's name? Interestingly, this is not the only time the law is concerned with ensuring that a man's name not be forgotten: the Torah discusses what happens when a man dies with no children; his brother, or closest offspring, must marry his widow in what is called a levirate marriage (*yibum*) designed to ensure that the name of the dead brother is not lost or forgotten: his children will carry his name

What is so important about a person's ... name? Interestingly, in the story that defines this week's portion the Torah takes the time to tell us that "... the name of the man Pinchas, it was Zimri..." Zimri was a prince of the tribe of Shimon, who cohabitated as part of an act of idolatry in front of the entire Jewish people before the Tent of Meeting. One would be hard pressed to think of a more brazen and rebellious act than this one. And Pinchas, seeing that something needed to be done grabs a spear and kills them both on the spot.... It was for this willingness to put everything on the line and defend G-d's honor that Pinchas is rewarded with the Priesthood and the reason for which our portion bears ... his name. Why was it important then, to know the name of such a flagrant and blatant transgressor of G-d's law?

Interestingly such heinous acts which transgress G-d's law are not called a transgression against G-d, but rather a *Chilul Hashem*: a desecration of G-d's *Name* ... And even more powerful is the fact that when we refer to G-d we often use the term Hashem: the Name. And yet, there is a very strange tradition that we have, that we do not actually freely pronounce the actual name of G-d and often use euphemisms (such as Hashem meaning 'the name') or substitution of letters (such as saying *Elokim* instead of *Elohim* which is the actual pronunciation of that particular name of G-d...). There is even a name of G-d called the tetra gammon which according to the Talmud is a 72 letter name that we no longer know how

to pronounce, which was uttered only on Yom Kippur, and only by the High priest.... Why would we have a name we cannot pronounce?

The first time we encounter a discussion in the Torah that centers on *The Name*, is the story of the Tower of Babel. In the world after the flood, the people who survived the flood find their way to a valley to dwell therein and decide to build a great Tower that will reach the heavens. G-d seems to find fault with this project ultimately scattering the people to the four corners of the earth. But a careful look at the verses tells us their real aim (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 11:4) was “let us make for ourselves a name ...” So one might suggest then that the real issue which their desire to make for themselves a name; why was that problematic, and what does that even mean?

There is an ancient book ascribed to Rabbi Akiva (2nd century C.E.) known as the *Sefer ha’Otiot*: the book of letters, which describes the meaning of the letters. The word ‘name’ is comprised of two letters the shin, and the mem, which together form the word *shem*, or name. And the *Sefer ha’Otiot* explains that the letter ‘shin’ comprised of three legs rising in different directions, represents chaos: going in all different directions. And the letter ‘mem’ which is the almost perfect circle, represents harmony and perfection. Indeed, the Hebrew word for peace: *Shalom*, starts with a shin representing chaos, and ends with a mem representing wholeness and harmony, because that is what peace is all about: when chaos becomes wholeness, unity, and harmony. And that is essentially what a name does. When you walk into a room and don’t know anyone’s names, there is a degree of chaos and unease. But as soon as you learn people’s names, there is a sense of calm and a feeling of being more ... whole. A name simply brings chaos into harmony.

And that was the mistake of the people who built the Tower of Babel: they wanted to be the source of all peace and harmony; they wanted to be the source of order in the world. But there is only one source of order in the world, and that is G-d whom we call Hashem (the name) which reminds us not to delude ourselves into imagining that just because we can name G-d, does not mean we have fully understood and identified G-d. Everything is hidden in the name, which is why we cannot pronounce G-d’s name: because we can never fully understand G-d.

Indeed, when Adam first encounters the animals (*ibid.* chap. 2:19-20) he gives them each a name, because he understands their purpose and their essence...

And it is also interesting that two central letters of the word *neschama*, referring to the soul, are also the *shin* and the *mem*.

In fact, *Chassidut* teaches that the essence of who we are is hidden in our name, and the Talmud suggests that when a child is named, the couple are vested with Divine inspiration, which is what allows them to pick the right name.

Such that we would be well advised to learn the true meaning of our names, (particularly as Jews) our Hebrew names, which are a window to understanding who we are and who we are meant to be....

In wanting to ensure that a person's name is not forgotten, we are trying to ensure that a person's purpose, and their essence is not lost. And there is nothing more beautiful, nothing purer than trying to preserve a person's purpose and essence in this world.

But how to know whether the daughters of Tzafchad were trying to ensure their father's purpose and mission was not lost as opposed to just a desire to acquire land, which is the antithesis of what our true purpose really is?

For this reason, Moshe asks for Hashem's help: because only G-d can determine what a person's true motivation is. Only when G-d says the daughters of Tzafchad should inherit their father's land is it clear that their motivations are pure...

As we go through life encountering all the different things that seem so significant in our lives: the houses and cars and things we 'own', we would do well to remember that what really lasts are not the things we think we have, but the purpose we live up to.....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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