

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Purim)

*A few weeks ago, I joined about 35 students from **Yeshivat Orayta** for a week in Poland. We had a remarkable guide named Rav Yitzchak Rubenstein who shared the following story with us:*

The Nazis understood the power of hope. They always left the glimmer of a possibility that it might get better, perhaps because it often kept the Jews from risking it all in rebellion. (In the army, they teach you in Officer's course to always leave the enemy an avenue of retreat; you don't want him to feel he has to make a last stand....)

In the ghetto, this meant that work was life. If you had a job (and the papers to prove it) that was deemed vital to the Nazi war effort, you were exempt from the transports to the East; no one really believed it was desirable to be on board one of those transports....

Before the war there were 250,000 Jews in Lodz, which was 40% of the city; but there are no Jews there anymore; barely a handful (mostly old and getting buried...) remain.

In 1943, the Nazis were emptying the ghetto of Lodz, and Jews by the thousands were being rounded up and forced onto cattle cars.

There was a Jewish woman, a housewife in the ghetto, whose husband was in charge of a work detail in an important factory which was contributing to the Nazi war effort. So she had papers that allowed her to live in the ghetto with her baby, and she was exempt from the roundups, while he was essentially part of a slave labor battalion in the factories.

One day, her baby started crying and could not be calmed. She knew of a black market store down the block where for the right price she could get some milk for her baby. Desperate to get there before it closed (there was a curfew) she ran out in her bathrobe... and forgot her papers. She got to the store just in time, and after bargaining with the owners for some milk, came back outside... to find the street full of SS soldiers.

They had closed off the block and were rounding up all the Jews for the transports, and she realized to her horror she had forgotten her papers. She tried to explain to the Nazis that she had papers and was exempt from the roundup, but these were Lithuanian SS who could not speak Polish; imported by the Nazis precisely in order to make the Jews feel more like strangers....

"My baby! My baby!" she kept repeating; but no one was listening; those who understood may well have thought she was mad; perhaps the Nazis had just murdered her child; such things happened every day in the ghetto....

Desperate, she tried to explain that she had to get her baby, to no avail.

“My baby! My baby!” she kept repeating; but no one was listening; she was herded into the umshtagplatz (the central square) with everyone else and eventually forced onto one of the cattle cars. And as the cattle cars pulled out of the station her cries filled the air:

“My baby! My baby!” she kept repeating; but no one was listening....

We turned around a corner in the Lodz train station and actually stepped inside one of the actual cattle cars the Nazis had used to take the Jews of Lodz to their deaths first in Chelmno, and later in Auschwitz. We were stuffed in a third of the cattle car at one end, so we could try to imagine how crowded it must have been as they forced sometimes as many as 120 people inside, for days; and I kept thinking about that woman, being taken further and further away from her baby, crying out for her baby though no one was listening having completely lost control of her life....

Did anyone ever go and find that baby, crying and eventually screaming, in a now empty room in an empty apt. building on an empty block in the Lodz ghetto....?

It was a moment; just a split-second decision to run out of the house to get some food for her baby... I wonder how many times, over and over, that woman must have torn herself up, if she could only have that moment back, to simply take her papers with her when she went out the door....

Moments that change everything, they come in an instant, and you have to grab them, because if they pass you by, they don't come back. Sometimes we miss them and don't even realize they were there, until it's too late ...

I actually remember such a moment in my life quite vividly. My brother and I were riding our bikes up Broadway; I was in the sixth grade and my brother must have been in 8th; two kids having fun on a lazy Sunday afternoon. We were at a traffic light when suddenly we found ourselves surrounded by a gang of kids mostly around our age; there must have been ten or fifteen of them at least. Two of them were holding my bike's handlebars and a couple more were holding me or pushing my back; they were laughing and I heard a couple of anti-Semitic slurs, and realized they were trying to push us onto a side street so they could steal our bikes and who knows what else.

I was terrified, but my older brother, with a little more presence of mind yelled at me not to let them steer us off Broadway; there were plenty of people on the street, so there was a limit to what they could do there. I guess my face must have given away how terrified I was, because a jogger running by stopped and started at yelling at these kids and I realized they had loosened their grips on my bike; we took the opportunity and pushed away, biking as fast as we could, all the way home. I can still hear the sounds of those kids yelling as they ran, trying to keep up with us, their voices falling further and further behind.... That was the day I decided to listen to a good buddy of mine who had been saying I should join him in a local Tora-Dojo to study Karate.

And the subsequent years of studying the Martial arts through High School most probably led me to the decision to stay in Israel after a year of yeshiva study and join the army, eventually becoming an officer....

It was, looking back, absolutely a seminal moment in my life though I had absolutely no clue at the time just how significant a moment it would prove to be. On that Sunday afternoon in the seventh grade, with Hashem's help, I took control of my life. As a kid, I had been beaten up countless times in the Wild West that was New York City in the seventies, and looking back I guess that was the day I got tired of being afraid....

I am actually writing this article on a plane headed home to Israel from South Africa where I was privileged to share in a magnificent experience the South African Jewish Community has labelled ***Sinai Indaba***. Five thousand Jews came together in the city of Johannesburg to share and study Torah and there are no words to describe the passion, excitement, warmth and the inspiration we all shared for 24 magnificent hours.

One of the speakers, Charlie Harari, shared an idea that really got me thinking: This coming week we will read the book of Esther and celebrate Purim. It's interesting that we call the story of Purim the book of Esther, because Esther is a pretty unlikely heroine, to say the least; if there was ever a person not in control of her life, it was Esther.

At the start of the book (really the Scroll) of Esther, she seems to have absolutely no will of her own; in fact her name Esther comes from the Hebrew word *seter*, which means hidden; she is as far under the radar as you can imagine.

When the Persian King *Achashverosh* has the Queen executed and decrees he will inspect all the women of the land to find a new Queen, all the other beautiful Jewish women go into hiding. After all, this is not simply a talent interview, this means being sequestered for six months in the King's harem, until he has a chance to 'sample the goods'. But Mordechai (her Uncle?) suggests she should go sign up so she... goes. No argument no debate just: "ok"!

Then *Hegai*, who is responsible for getting these girls ready for the King is trying to figure out which perfumes and oils and beauty treatments Esther wants, and her response seems to be 'whatever'!

Her attitude seems to be: 'who me?' One senses she's not quite sure what she is doing there but certainly does not consider herself worthy of winning the contest...

And then when she is actually crowned queen with Mordechai watching from the sidelines (in satisfaction?), she just... disappears; we don't hear a peep from her; she is a non-entity; she is just ... hidden. Even when the wicked advisor Haman gets the king to decree that all the Jews be murdered in a single day, Esther, who is the ***Jewish Queen***, does ... nothing! And even when Mordechai tells her she has to go save the Jewish people and speak with the King, Esther's response is basically: 'who me?' not much I can do; not allowed to barge in on the King after all; her plan is to do... nothing?!

And yet the next thing we know, it all turns around; Esther not only petitions the King at risk of her own life, she confronts the most powerful Advisor in the realm, in the process revealing herself as a Jew and puts everything on the line! She will then tell her Uncle what ***he*** should do ("Go and gather all the Jews..."), and even subsequently suggest to the King himself: the Jews of *Shushan* need another day ... to Kill more Persians!

And she will ultimately decree to the Jewish leadership what the Jewish people should do... forever!

So how, asked Charlie Harari (whose presentation will soon be available on the Sinai Indaba U tube channel), does hidden quiet meek malleable Esther, become the powerful Queen who will change the course of history and become ensconced in Jewish lore forever?

Quite simply put: she has a 'moment'.

Mordechai comes to the front of the palace in sackcloth and sends Esther a message: 'We need you! Go to the King!' And Esther seems horrified, even embarrassed: Mordechai is a mess, so she sends him nice clothes and it is his response to her (Esther 4:14) which changes everything:

*"And if you will now remain silent, salvation will come to the Jewish people from some other place and you and your family will be lost; Who knows but that **for this moment you have reached the Palace?!**"* (Esther 4:14)

This, says Mordechai, is your moment, and you need to grab it. Because once it passes, it will not return. In this moment you will make your mark, you can change destiny, if you will but confront your greatest fears.

You are living, says Mordechai, a life of mediocrity; swept along by the different forces that come your way. You need to seize control of your life, because the Jewish people and even the world, deserves better. It's time to come out of hiding; it's time to shine.

It is interesting that we call the book of Esther a *megillah*, a scroll, not a book. The word *megillah* also comes from the word *nigleh*: revealed; Purim is all about the hidden-ness becoming revealed. That's why we unroll the whole scroll and it's all laid out when we read it, because Purim is all about revealing the hiddenness. Hashem (G-d)'s name is not mentioned in the story of Esther because we have to find G-d even though he seems to be hidden; we have to see Hashem's hand in history though it may be hard to discern.

And lost in the culture of Persia, the Jewish people's greatness needs to be revealed as well.

And most of all, we need to find the hidden greatness within ourselves....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman