

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Re'eh)

It was them against us; that much was clear. The only question was who would break first. I can't even remember exactly what it was we were supposed to have done, and what it was that had so enraged them, but our sergeants were on the war path, and it was clearly going to be a long afternoon...

They called it a 'misdar amerikai' (American inspection), and none of us knew the origin of the term, but its meaning was clear enough. This had all started out as just another inspection. Six months into our army service, having completed basic infantry training followed by tank school we were now on maneuvers out in 'the field' where we were meant to learn how to assimilate all we had learned and begin to function as effective tank crews in battle-worthy battalions.

It was Friday afternoon, and after a week of intense maneuvers with very little sleep, followed by the weekly servicing of our tanks all night long (referred to in the army as 'white night' every Thursday night in the armored corps...) we were exhausted.

Our tanks had passed inspection, finally, and, full of oil and grease, and having gone without any sleep since early Thursday morning, and without a shower since Saturday night, all that stood between us and Shabbat was one last inspection of our barracks.

Blankets drawn tight across beds, boots polished to a black shine, gear stowed regulation style beneath the foot of the bed, guns cleaned and oiled, and floors mopped shiny clean we could practically taste the showers and Shabbat food that awaited.... (Though stuck in the army, no maneuvers are allowed on Shabbat in the Israeli army....)

And then something went dreadfully wrong and amidst screaming sergeants, flying blankets, and beds tipped over, we were given seven minutes to re-do the entire inspection... outside on the base perimeter in front of the tanks!

It is hard to imagine, much less describe a company full of tank crew men carrying bunk-beds full of gear all the way out to the area in front of the tanks and trying to re-make the beds and stow the gear all while making sure the guns stayed clean.... And then they started screaming at us all over again... we had forgotten our boot lockers....

And finally, as the sun dipped lower on the horizon, realizing most of us would not get the chance to use the phones to call home (at the time I was with a Hesder unit: Yeshiva students who did their army service together, all of whom would not dream of using the phone lines once Shabbat came in...) and getting more and more depressed, that last final demand: "thirty seconds around the tanks: MOVE!!"

We were expected to run around the line of tanks and get back in line within thirty seconds, a hopeless task. And then we were made to run with our beds, and then with our boot lockers... all the while watching the sun dip lower and lower....

I don't know how it began, though I am pretty sure it was Roni Redman (he of the quick wit, with a funny one-liner always handy to cut us all up, who put up a sign in our tent at one particularly difficult point

in training: “kach et ha’basa’ be’sababa’” loosely translated as: ‘Take the tough knocks with a smile...’), but someone started to laugh.

We were behind the tanks so the commanders couldn’t see us, and pretty soon the entire company was in hysterics. We did our best to put a straight, agonized face back on once clearing the tanks and coming back into view of our commanders, but they could see most of us were smiling, which of course only infuriated them more....

With time on our side (they had to end all this before Shabbat) we all came to the same realization that our enjoyment was also our victory; we would not break. Of course, in retrospect that may well have been the point of the entire exercise, (to mold us as a unit), but at the time, the pure joy of recognizing we had nothing more to lose, and we might as well laugh about it as cry, was a powerful experience that stays with me still.

But as much as I still smile, recalling that experience, it nonetheless leaves one with a compelling question: how do some people succeed in smiling in the face of adversity?

Rav Nachman of Breslev is quoted as having said:

*“Mitzvah gedolah le’hiyot besimcha tamid”
“It is a great mitzvah to always be happy”*

Sounds nice; but seems to be beyond most of our reach, no? How do we (can we / should we?) keep a smile on our faces even when the most horrific things sometimes come our way?

This week’s portion, *Re’eh* (literally: ‘See!’) is all about learning to see the world through different eyes. This may explain why the particular mitzvah of being joyous on the festivals, occurs in this portion.

Specifically, on the festival of *Sukkot*, the third of the *regalim* (biblical festivals wherein every Jew was meant to come up to the temple in Jerusalem to rejoice in the midst of the entire Jewish people) we are commanded:

*“Ve’hayita’ ach sameach”
“And you shall be completely joyous” (Devarim 16:15)*

We have discussed previously the nature of this joy and the idea that joy is all about purpose, but our question here is not defining joy (*simcha*), but rather how one achieves it?

How does a person develop the skill-set necessary to being a happy person? And can one (how can one) maintain such joy in the face of the inevitable adversities life always seems to throw our way? Indeed, what is it that prevents some people from being happy, whilst others seem to have happiness ingrained almost into their body chemistry?

Take for example, the story of Aaron, (Moshe’s brother,) who, as part of an enslaved people in Egypt, caught in the depths of the most evil and cruel empire the world had ever known whom we might have expected to be quite miserable. Yet, he is the only individual in the entire Torah who is described as being happy! No less than G-d Himself tells Moshe that Aaron will, upon seeing Moshe (just arrived back in Egypt after forty years), “rejoice in his heart”! (*Shemot* (Exodus) 4:14).

In the midst of all that pain and suffering, after being enslaved as a people for over *two centuries*, Aaron succeeds in focusing on the positive and is able to rejoice in his heart at his brother's return. What is the secret to being happy? How does Aaron do it?

On the other hand, take a close look at the story of Haman, who seems to represent the opposite extreme in the spectrum.

Haman, chief advisor to the king (Ahashveirosh) of the entire Persian Empire, Haman is essentially the second most powerful person in the entire world. He is happily married (albeit to a wicked woman), with no less than ten sons who seem to idolize him and want only to follow in his footsteps, and every subject of the Persian empire who crosses his path must bow down to him. And yet:

"Ve'kol zeh einenu shaveh li"

"All this is worthless to me" (Esther 5:13)

Simply because there is one Jew (Mordechai) who will not bow down to him! And this, after the Jewish people have already been sentenced to death as a people, such that the issue with Mordechai is soon to be solved regardless! And yet, Haman is miserable; he cannot see all the good he has because he is so focused on what he doesn't have....

Herein, perhaps, lies the key to happiness: Haman cannot focus on all that he has because he is stuck on what he does *not* have.

What prevents a person from rejoicing in life? Only the feeling that he or she is *missing* something.

Indeed, being happy is not really about how much we *actually* have, it is rather about *appreciating* how much we have. It is only through appreciation that we really have things at all....

In the end, poverty is really a state of mind: you are poor if you think you are.

And it gets deeper, because if happiness is all about purpose (hence people who feel they have no purpose are depressed, whether they be financially well of or not, and people who are imbued with a sense of purpose have much joy in their lives...), there is no true purpose unless we are created. If we are a random accident in a G-dless world, then of course there is no real purpose to our being here in the first place, which of course is very depressing....

But if we are created, and obviously G-d has a reason for creating all of us, so we all have purpose, then by definition I must have what I need, always! Whatever I have, and whatever skills I was born with are, by definition, all I need to accomplish whatever my purpose is in this world. And being happy is simply based on my ability to see that, all the time.

Even in the midst of the servitude of Egypt, as soon as Aaron sees Moshe, he knows Moshe is coming into his life again because somehow, he needs Moshe to help him achieve his purpose. Otherwise, why would G-d have sent Moshe to him after all these years? And of course, if I need Moshe in my life to achieve my purpose in this world, then it is only natural that seeing Moshe again after forty years will fill me (or in this case Aaron...) with joy.

This is really secret of life itself. Sukkot, the festival on which we are commanded to rejoice, is the third of the three festivals, and, after the magnitude of the *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* experience, seems at most an afterthought; a vacation of sorts after the long hard work of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

But *Sukkot* is actually the goal, hence it is known as the festival of the harvest. All the other festivals ultimately lead to *Sukkot*, economically as well as theologically.

Happiness is actually the goal because the reason we are here in the first place is to become vehicles for bringing G-d into the world (a.k.a. Kedusha or holiness...). And we succeed in doing that by tapping into what we each feel our purpose is meant to be, which of course is what joy is all about...

Incidentally there is another character flaw which seems to lie at the root of unhappiness: and that is pride.

Haman when asked by the king (Ahashveirosh) how to pay homage to a person the king wants to honor, immediately assumes the king is speaking of none other than Haman himself. (Esther 6:6: "*Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?!*")

As opposed to Moshe who, upon being told by no less than G-d that he must go to speak with Pharaoh, says "*Mi anochi ki eileich el Pharaoh?*" (*Shemot* (Exodus) 3:11)

For Haman it is all about Haman, but for Moshe, it's all about G-d and the Jewish people. Moshe sees himself as a tool in something much greater, whilst Haman considers himself the goal of all that he does. And a person like that always feels he is missing something....

Too much pride will make you miserable. Because what is pride all about? Pride suggests that its all about me, but true joy is about recognizing I am just a vehicle to a greater and higher purpose.... (Hence a prophet can only prophesy in a state of joy....)

Several years ago at a memorial evening for my cousin Benji (H"YD, killed in action in Lebanon just a few short weeks after he married his High School sweetheart), his father said something I have not been able to let go of.

The custom at a child's bris (circumcision) is to say:

"Ke'shem shenichnas labrit, ken yi'kanes le'Torah, le'Chuppah u'le'maasim tovim."

"Just as he enters the covenant (of circumcision) so may he enter the world of Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds."

Benji, it seems, needed that one last piece: to stand under the *chuppah* (wedding canopy), before he could complete his journey in his world. In other words, he had and did all he was meant to do so that now he could move on. The sadness in his loss is what we feel we are all missing with Benji gone. But the joy that waits around the corner is all about being able to see, in the life he lived all that we have and continue to be given....

May we all succeed in finding joy in our lives by learning to see all we have, and finding the clarity to decide, as individuals and as a nation, what we are meant to do with it all....

Shabbat Shalom, from the Old City of Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman