

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Re'eh)

I can still see the terrified look on his face, as we both realized, in the same moment, we had been set up.

We were in the midst of a month-long stint of IDF army reserve duty in Ramallah, during the first intifada, where daily stone throwing and Molotov cocktails had become the norm. We were into the second week of our tour, and the frustration had already begun to set in, particularly on this particular stretch of road alongside El Bireh; a 'refugee camp' on the outskirts of Ramallah. Every day while on jeep patrol we could get calls that rocks had been thrown by Arab youths, at Israeli cars driving along the road, but by the time we got there, all we would find was the rocks strewn on the road, often along with shattered glass, and the perpetrators long gone. Until this particular afternoon; We happened to be only a few hundred yards down the road when the call came over the radio and as we came around a curve in the road, a young boy, probably no more than ten or eleven years old, was actually throwing a stone at a passing vehicle. So without a thought, as the jeep screeched to a halt two of us jumped out, to give chase, while the driver stayed behind with the vehicle.

We were in such a hurry to finally catch one of these kids, that I had not even grabbed my web pouching with extra ammo & first aid, and we were both running with only the ammo in our guns, with no radio, but all that was just a distant thought in the back of my mind as we were clearly gaining on this boy as we entered deeper into the back alleys of this Ramallah refugee camp.

Finally, we appeared to have him cornered as he ran into a door in a courtyard and threw it shut behind him, seconds before we arrived and began banging on the now locked door. A second later, Shmuel, the reserve soldier who was with me, let out a yell as the sound of a cinderblock exploding a foot behind us filled the air. As we turned around, we saw another huge cinderblock flying through the air from four or five stories up, and I realized we had fallen into a well-planned trap. We were at one corner of a rather large courtyard, surrounded by five story buildings on all sides, with the only exit diagonally across this wide-open space. And as we looked up we saw two masked men on the rooftop above us; one had another huge cinderblock held high above his head, with only the upper part of his torso visible, and the other was picking up another block, both next to two large piles of additional cinderblocks... and we had no way out.... The look of sheer terror on Shmuel's face is ingrained in my mind to this day.

Fortunately, the driver had automatically called in the incident, and our deputy battalion commander who arrived on the scene (based on the gunfire he heard) found us in time to avoid serious consequences, but the memory of that experience is still with me. And one of the questions which later gave me much food for thought was how I felt about that ten-year-old boy, who in retrospect was clearly part of a well-organized plan... to kill me.

Unfortunately, in today's Middle East, and certainly in our little corner, this is a story which repeats itself pretty much daily. Much has been said and written about the use by Hamas and Hezbollah of children as human shields, but the ethical dilemma does not change much, even when such children are

used as combatants on the field of battle. Can a seven-year-old boy in Lebanon really be held accountable when he is trained from age four to fire an RPG at oncoming tanks, and as a Commander you have to choose between your men in the sites of an anti-tank missile, and the prospect of killing an innocent (??) seven-year-old boy? And if this boy is indeed innocent (hard to blame a seven-year-old boy...) then who is responsible?

There is a fascinating and yet challenging mitzvah in this week's portion *Re'eh*, which may seem to our modern ears a little extreme:

"You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations worshipped... You shall burn their altars... You shall destroy their name from that place..." (Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) 12;2-3)

Why was all this necessary? Interestingly Maimonides points out that this mitzvah only applies in the land of Israel, and possibly only when the Jewish people are ruling in the land of Israel. So it cannot merely be about destroying all foreign forms of idolatrous worship; there is no Mitzvah to destroy Stonehenge, the Pyramids, or the ancient temples of the Aztecs.

Rather, this was part of the Torah's recipe for creating a healthy society, based on an objective moral ethic, which could be a model for the Nations, as to how the world could be. It would seem, that as long as the Houses of Idol worship stand, the Jewish people will not have rid themselves of those pagan sacrifices involving murder, child sacrifice, and licentious amoral sexual practices. (It should be noted that none of this applies today without a Jewish high court or Sanhedrin, alongside a King and Prophet all of which act as a Divinely based balance of power and moral objectivity....)

Perhaps the Torah is suggesting just how critical the influence of our environment can be. *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) enjoins us to beware of evil neighbors, no matter who we may be and even if we have nothing to do with such neighbors; the impact of such an environmental influence cannot be underestimated.

All of which brings us back to that Arab boy throwing rocks at civilians in passing cars. Make no mistake about it: with all the discussions of rockets and missiles and armed terrorists targeting innocent civilians, a rock is a weapon, and it can kill just as easily as a missile, especially when hurled at a passing vehicle travelling at speeds of 60 miles per hour. But how can we hold a child accountable, when he is brought up in a society which preaches violence and emulates terrorists who strap themselves with explosive belts designed to butcher women and children in nursery schools and pizzerias? Until we destroy such norms, and forcibly remove them for our society, how can we ever hope for peaceful solutions to the war that has plagued us for the past century and beyond?

How can we expect to find Arabs who will represent a more peaceful ideal, as long as children are taught hatred and violence in schools and summer camps and are literally weaned on the mother's milk of terrorism? It seems all of today's military solutions and suggestions are dealing with symptoms of the problem, without attacking the root cause; hatred and violence come from education, and until we change the education *of* their children, we will never find true peace *with* their children.

General Douglas MacArthur understood this well as did the Allied forces fighting against tyranny and the dictatorships of evil in World War Two. In 1945 the Allied forces would accept no less than

unconditional surrender to end the war, and when MacArthur was post war stationed in Japan, he did not leave until he completely dismantled Hirohito's Monarchical dictatorship, replaced the educational system with a stern based education for children based on western democratic values (which still serves Japan well nearly seventy years later) and witnessed a peaceful transfer of power in a democratic Japanese election.

There will be no peaceful long-lasting solution in Gaza as long as schoolchildren there on field trips are visiting town squares named after baby murderers, and classrooms are filled with hate.

Perhaps one day it will be time to establish a Middle East based on love and peace, but sometimes before we can make peace, someone needs to win the war, and introduce a system of education that will prepare us for such peace. This week's portion begins with the command to see ("*Re'eh*"), and while we should never stop of dreaming of the world as we dream it could be, we should also be careful not to stop seeing the world as it still is....

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman