

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Shavuot)

Few things in this world are as beautiful as the night sky in the desert. Most people rarely get the chance to see this beauty, far away from the bright lights and cacophony of sounds in the city: the black velvet of a dark night sky full of stars that seem so close you can reach out and touch them. It never fails to fill me with a deep sense of awe.

In the army, no matter how challenging the particular situation, I was always able to take comfort from the familiar constellations and quiet power that seem to emanate from the stars at night.

I remember the wave of relief that would wash over me as the big dipper rose high in the night sky, making it easy to find the North star, the most constant point of reference for navigation at night.

No matter where you are, if you can find that star, you can always find your way home. It was the beacon of the underground 'railroad' used by the runaway slaves in the south, heading north to freedom, and it is and has always been the silent friend of every soldier who ever needed to find his way in the darkness.

When I became an officer, I was somewhat obsessed by the need to always know where I was, and where I needed to go, and my greatest fear in the army was the prospect of losing my way; not so much for fear that I would get lost, but because I dreaded the thought of getting an entire unit lost along with me.

This fear emanated from the events that led to the capture of four Israeli soldiers, including a close friend, Zack Baumel, in the battle of Sultan Yaakob in the Lebanon war in June of 1982.

In the middle of the night, going on three straight days of intense combat and no sleep, the men of Zack's battalion were sent on a mission to capture and hold the Sultan Yaakov crossroads, deep in the Bekaa Valley in Eastern Lebanon.

Intelligence had it that there was as yet no serious enemy opposition in the area, so they drove full speed without the normal routine of night movement which demands no lights, radio silence, and slow speeds to reduce noise.

Unfortunately, intelligence was wrong. Easily spotted by a Syrian battalion of T-62 tanks with anti-tank missile support, they drove right into a perfect ambush, coming under heavy fire from the Syrian tanks above them.

Caught deep in the ravines of the Sultan Yaakob range, their guns were practically useless as they could not elevate them high enough to hit the enemy, and their shells simply resulted in a hail of boulders pouring back down from the cliffs above.

It took until morning for the Brigade to find their unit and lay down an artillery smoke barrage to help them get out, and in the midst of the confusion of the evacuation, Zack's tank was hit by an anti-tank missile and burst into flames.

With their tank disabled, the four crewmembers, Zack Baumel, Tzvi Feldman, Aryeh Lieberman, and the tank commander Chezi Shai, tumbled out deep in enemy territory.

With Israeli artillery smoke shells, along with Syrian tank and mortar shells and the incredible noise and confusion of battle, the men could do little but watch as their unit drove further and further away. They had been the last tank in the line, so no one even realized they had been hit.

I cannot even begin to imagine what that must have felt like; to watch your unit, some of whom are your closest friends, disappear in the distance leaving you behind to face an entire Syrian battalion.

All four of these men were captured, and the piece of this story that has most impacted me, we know from Chezi Shai, the commander, who along with the body of Aryeh Lieberman, was returned in a prisoner exchange two years later.

Shai admitted that in the confusion and overwhelming pressure of that moment, and especially given that it was daylight and there were no stars to navigate by, he had no idea which direction they should head in, so he decided to split into two pairs, in the hopes that someone would make it home.

As it turned out, none of these men were headed in the right direction, instead walking straight into the arms of Syrian troops.

All of which is why I was so determined to never get lost in the field. And which is probably why the night stars are such a comfort to me. No matter where you are, if you can find the North Star, you can always make it home.

I remember one particular night in the southern Tzin desert during a spate of all night navigations, when I thought I was really lost. More than in any other terrain, in the desert, you really rely on the stars to help you find your way, because there are fewer distinct landmarks. Particularly in the area we were in, which was a wide flat panhandle with no visible mountains or landmarks, the stars made it much easier, yet suddenly, out of the blue, a cloudbank rolled in and completely obscured the stars.

We were practicing navigation without a compass, so that was not an option, and for an hour I slowed us down while trying to get a sense of the direction of the stream bed (Nachal) we were in, and relate it to the image on the map I was supposed to have memorized earlier.

After an hour, just as quickly as they came, the clouds moved on, and suddenly the lights of the most beautiful stars I have ever seen twinkled through the disappearing clouds. And the North Star, my old friend and guide, was again there to bring me home.

This week, we celebrate the festival of Shavuot, commemorating the day, over 3,000 years ago, when we received the Torah at Mount Sinai. It seems that as a people, we have somewhat lost our way; is there a 'North Star' we are somehow missing? And can we find a way to reconnect with it?

On the morning of Shavuot, after the traditional all-night learning which has become the custom in Jewish communities around the world, we will read the Ten Commandments given us by G-d at Sinai all those years ago.

A brief look at the first of these 'Commandments' may perhaps shed some light on what we seem to be missing today, and perhaps even offer some thought towards a remedy for the malaise we find ourselves in.

"Anochi Hashem Elokecha' Asher Hotzeiticha' Me'Eretz Mitzrayim, Mi'Beit Avadim."

“I am Hashem your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.” (Shemot 20:2)

What exactly is the commandment here? Unlike the second commandment, which seems to clearly prohibit idolatry, or subsequent commandments mandating remembering the Shabbat, or respecting one’s parents, the nature of this verse is unclear. What exactly is Hashem commanding here? It seems more like G-d is just introducing Himself:

“Hello! I’m G-d! Remember me? I’m the one who took you out of Egypt...!”

But of course, that’s ridiculous. How could G-d, the same G-d who just split the Sea, not to mention the ten plagues, feel He still needs an introduction to the Jewish people?

And if indeed, this verse is some form of introduction to G-d, why does Hashem need to mention the Exodus from Egypt? Who *else* could have done that? And why mention anything at all? Was G-d in need of a resume? Was He afraid we would have already forgotten how we got to this lonely desert mountain after 200 years of Egyptian bondage?

And if, for whatever the reason, G-d indeed needed to stress some of His achievements, is this the best He could do?

If you wanted to pick the single most impressive achievement G-d had to His credit, would it really be the exodus from Egypt? Why not simply point out that Hashem created *everything*? If you’re going to talk impressions, it doesn’t get any better than that! So why does G-d point out, to a generation that has witnessed the miracles of the exodus from Egypt first hand, the obvious fact that it is G-d who is responsible, and why does Hashem choose not to point out that He is not only responsible for their freedom, He is in fact responsible for *everything*?

Maimonides, in the very first mitzvah in his *Sefer HaMitzvoth* (Book of Commandments) points out that:

“The first mitzvah of the positive commandments is to know that there is a G-d, as it says: “I am Hashem your G-d....” (Sefer HaMitzvoth Positive Commandment 1)

This verse teaches us that there is a positive commandment to know that Hashem exists.

Which raises a very interesting question: how can one be commanded to believe in G-d? As **Rav Elchanan Wasserman**, in his *Kovetz Ma’amarim*, (a collection of lectures he gave in the Kovno Ghetto prior to his death at the hands of the Nazis) points out, belief is a psychological state of mind.

If a person does not believe in G-d, no commandment will bring him to do so. And if he does believe in G-d, there is no necessity for the commandment. So, what is this commandment all about? And why does the Torah present this mitzvah as a statement, (or introduction) rather than as a commandment, given in the imperative form like the other commandments?

Perhaps the key to this question lies in the word “*Anochi*”, meaning “*I am*” used as G-d’s self-introduction. This word is very different from the word ‘*Ani*’ meaning “*I*”, and while English translation does not do justice to the difference, a contextual view of where the word *Anochi* appears may shed some light on the questions we have raised. Where have we seen this word before?

As an example, when Yaakov, disguised as Esav (his twin brother) comes to his father to receive the blessings, his father Yitzchak says (Bereishit 27:19) :

“Here I am, who are you, my son?”

What an incredible question! Can you imagine what it must feel like to realize that your own father doesn't recognize you?

And Yaakov responds: “...**Anochi** Esav Bechorecha', Asiti Ka'Asher Dibarta' Elai.”
I am Esav, your firstborn; I have done that which you spoke to me.” (27:20)

So Yaakov, paragon of truth, is now lying through his teeth to his own father. **Rashi**, seemingly troubled by this blatant ethical lapse suggests that Yaakov is saying this in a way that isn't an outright falsehood: '*Anochi, I am (Yaakov), and Esav is your firstborn*'.

But Rashi can't be suggesting Yaakov is not lying, because Yaakov then says, “*I have done that which you spoke to me*” which is clearly a lie. (Yitzchak did not ask Yaakov to bring him food; he asked Esav....) Obviously, Yaakov is very uncomfortable with what he is doing.

Imagine what a challenge this must all be for him: His father says: your voice is the voice of Yaakov, but your hands are the hands of Esav. And his mother tells him to dress up and behave like Esav. Perhaps it is Yaakov himself who is wondering just who he is? Maybe this story is not about the struggle between Yaakov and Esav; maybe it is about the struggle between Yaakov and Yaakov. Maybe Yaakov is wondering: who am I? Am I Yaakov, who sits in the tent, and cares not for the machinations and struggles of this world, or am I Esav, who has to be willing to fight for what is his?

In other words, Yaakov is struggling with who he really is. And this is crucial, because if I don't know who I am, how can I hope to become all that I am meant to be?

This struggle of Yaakov is represented by the word *Anochi*. This word is not the same as the word *Ani*, used elsewhere in this story; *Anochi* is a very specific word, which does not appear all that often in the Torah.

Earlier, Adam uses the same word when he responds to G-d's equally strange question: “*Ayekah?*” “*Where are you?*” Here too, G-d knows where Adam is, but he wants to know if **Adam** knows where he is? The question, again, is not where are you, but *who* are you? And Adam's response:

“*Va'Ira Ki Erom **Anochi**, Va'Echaveh'.*” “*I was afraid... and I hid.*” (Bereishit 3:10)

And again, if Adam thinks he can hide from G-d, his struggle isn't with G-d, his struggle is with who he himself is.

Which brings us back to the beginning of the Ten Commandments and what is alluded to in that most famous of all *Anochi*'s:

“**Anochi** Hashem...” “**I am** the Lord your G-d...”

Perhaps Hashem isn't telling us who He is, maybe we are meant to learn something about who we are. Because the greatest gift Hashem can give us is to realize that there is a piece of G-d inside each one of us.

And this is the hidden message of the first Commandment. Perhaps G-d is telling us that the first step in discovering a relationship with Him is to discover a relationship with ourselves. Ultimately, there is a little bit of G-d inside each one of us, if we will only choose to work hard enough to find it.

It is the challenge we each face every day to hear the inner voice that comes from G-d, calling us to discover who we really are, so that we can begin to achieve all that we are meant to give to this world.

This *mitzvah* is not given as a commandment, because it is all about accessing a part of myself, something which is not a commandment, so much as an imperative. Hashem is not necessarily commanding me to do *something*, as much as we are given a message here as to how we are meant to do *everything* in this world.

The creation of the world introduces the idea that there is a G-d. But at Sinai, Hashem introduced to the world the concept of a G-d that cares. G-d is saying to each of us, "I care so much about you, I love you so much, that I am willing to do all this, just for you."

And when you lose your way, know that I am your North Star, hidden and waiting deep inside of you, if you will only look to find me.

Ultimately, finding a piece of G-d inside of me is really about finding myself. And that is the true *mitzvah* we were given at the foot of Sinai so long ago. The magnificent invitation to take a journey of self-discovery on the road towards becoming a true partner in the building of the world as it was meant to be.

So many people get lost in the night; but deep inside each one of us is the North Star, waiting to guide us home, if only we will be willing to look up, and in, to see it.

Best wishes from Jerusalem for a Chag Shavuot Same'ach: a festival full of joy and peace.

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