

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Shemini)

Decision Moments: What Makes a Person a Leader

Explosions; gunfire; the sounds of battle; 'lashab': (lechima be'shetach banui) urban warfare: fought in close quarters; no place to hide, nowhere to run, very little room to maneuver, and no time to think.

There are many things the army teaches you, especially in officer's training. One of the most valuable is the ability to make decisions, often of life or death, in seconds. Such was the moment Lieutenant Eitan (full name with-held for security purposes) of the elite recon unit of the Givati Infantry Brigade found himself in the summer of 2014 in Gaza.

The point reconnaissance squad (Palsar Givati), led by Company Commander Benayah Sarel, had just located the entrance to a Hamas tunnel, on the edge of Rafiach in the Gaza strip. Almost immediately the men came under heavy fire from Hamas terrorists who most probably had been lying in wait, waiting for a patrol to come across the exposed tunnel.

In the ensuing battle company Commander Sarel was killed, as was first sergeant Liel Gidoni. Arriving at the scene amidst heavy fighting, Eitan quickly ascertained that Lieutenant Hadar Goldin was missing.

Under fire, despite clear orders to the contrary, Eitan made a field decision to enter the tunnel along with his command squad, and give chase to the terrorists, in the hopes of preventing what he thought might be the kidnapping of a fellow IDF officer.

Without a clear picture of how many terrorists were in the tunnel, and no intel on whether the tunnel might be booby-trapped, Eitan followed the terrorists for hundreds of yards deep into the tunnel, retrieving evidence and remains of lieutenant Goldin that mercifully would allow the IDF Chief rabbinate to declare him dead and saving his family and the nation enormous heartache.

The IDF's subsequent inquiry would later find Eitan's bravery and heroism worthy of the highest commendation a combat officer can receive, parallel to the medal of valor.

A moment; a life or death decision; the stakes could not have been higher; no amount of training can fully train you for such a moment. In addition to all this, the subsequent discovery of a dead Hamas terrorist (killed in the firefight) in full IDF uniform, made it clear this Hamas unit was about to use the tunnel to enter Israel dressed as Israeli soldiers, a potential disaster prevented at the last moment.

Did Lt. Eitan have time to consider his enormous decision? Or did he just trust his spontaneous instincts and hope it was the right decision? Clearly, things could have ended very differently; the tunnel could have been booby trapped, the Hamas terrorist could have been waiting and kidnapped three more soldiers There is, after all, good reason that standing orders are not to enter such tunnels under those circumstances.

Far be it from me to question the decision of an IDF officer under such difficult combat conditions, especially given the fact that his actions were examined by the IDF and found commendable.

But this incredible story does raise the question: are such spontaneous decisions acceptable?

It would seem from our *parsha* (weekly portion) that spontaneity is not commendable at all. The Torah tells us (Lev. 10: 1-2) that Aaron's sons, *Nadav* and *Avihu* offered an "unauthorized fire before the Hashem (G-d)", which they had not been instructed to offer. As a result, "Fire came out from the presence of G-d and consumed them, and they died before Hashem".

And although there are many different explanations regarding this story, the clear implication here (and in *Bamidbar* 3: 4 and 26: 61), is that they acted on their own initiative.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that they let the moment of sheer joy (of the dedication of the Tabernacle) carry them away, and their enthusiasm got the best of them. Apparently, the service of G-d and spirituality are not meant to be spontaneous. Indeed, this is not the first time spontaneity ended badly; way back in the beginning *Kayin* (Cain) spontaneously offers the first recorded offering, which does not end well. G-d does not seem pleased (*Bereishit* 4); leading ultimately to disastrous results as *Kayin* perpetrates the first murder of his brother, *Hevel* (Abel).

And when *Aaron*, at the foot of Sinai, impulsively suggests that the people bring their gold, the result is the tragic debacle of the Golden calf.

And yet, sometimes, such seemingly impulsive behavior is exactly what is called for: When *Pinchas* is confronted with the brazen licentious behavior of a prince of the tribe of *Shimon* (*Zimri*) with a Midianite princess; he impulsively kills them both on the spot and is rewarded with no less than the blessing of G-d himself!

Indeed, Moshe's entire career begins with such an apparently impulsive moment, when Moshe kills the Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jewish slave, and concludes on the same note, as **Rashi** on the last verse in the entire Torah (Deut. 34: 12) shares the Midrashic comment that again has no less than G-d Himself commending Moshe's decision to shatter the *Luchot* (Tablets of the Law) at the sight of the people worshipping the Golden Calf. It would be hard to find a more impulsive and spontaneous act than this in all of Jewish history!

So, when is spontaneity a good thing, and when must we subscribe to the orders and tradition we have been given?

Indeed, this is the ultimate dilemma with which every IDF commander must eventually contend, and for which he or she is trained: On the one hand, particularly in a post Holocaust world, no Israeli commander can ever fall back on just 'following orders'. And yet, an army where commanders do not obey orders cannot possibly function. So how does one navigate this conundrum, and how do we determine the distinction that will allow us to arrive at the correct conclusions?

Perhaps we can take a cue from Martin Luther King's battle for civil rights in America. One of King's principles in advocating for civil disobedience was that a person has an obligation to disobey a law he or she feels is unjust, but a responsibility to accept and pay for the consequences of his or her decision.

As such King felt it incumbent for black people to sit wherever they wanted on buses and in diners (regardless of signs suggesting ‘whites only’ seats) but they then had to be willing to go to jail until the law could be changed.

As an Israeli officer, on those rare occasions when you felt an order was mistaken, you knew you would be held accountable **both** for disobeying an order, **as well as for fulfilling it**, if it turned out to be incorrect or unethical. Indeed, for me the take-away message was that we would **always** be held accountable. In fact, in the IDF this holds true not only for Commanders but for every soldier as well. If a soldier is given an unethical order, he or she is actually bound to disobey it, which is a pretty scary thing to do, because he or she will absolutely subsequently be held accountable for that decision.

Perhaps the Torah here is teaching us a powerful message regarding our spiritual journey to connect with Hashem. It is so easy to lose our selves in the euphoria of a spiritual moment, particularly when such a journey is conducted with the understanding that said person is not the goal of the journey, but merely a vehicle who is part of a much bigger picture. But if each of us is created in G-d’s image, then the inner voice that tells us when something is right or wrong, is also part of Hashem’s voice which we must heed.

Judaism suggests that the balance of my own inner voice and journey, alongside how that voice and journey serves a bigger picture of the Jewish people, and the entire world, is what distinguishes us as Jews and human beings in the service of a greater good.

Nadav and *Avihu*, suggests Rav Hirsch, got too caught up in the spiritual journey of *Nadav* and *Avihu*. Moshe, on the other hand was all about how he could be a vehicle for the greater good and journey of the Jewish people, and the whole world. And that is what should guide all of our decisions, all the time.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem

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