

## ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

### **From Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Shemot)

*It is more than twenty years now, and yet it seems like yesterday. There are moments you can taste, even smell, forever.*

*Forty yards, or perhaps it was only thirty? Time has a way of coloring the details. We had come under heavy fire, and we were doing everything right; by the book. The force was split up and the cover position was already in place laying down heavy suppressing fire, while we moved into place to charge their position. Six of us, trained and experienced, we were running in a straight line up the hill.*

*In such moments, you discover whether all the training had really been worth it. In the movies, they always make it seem like the officer is a hero, cool under fire, and wise enough to know exactly what to do. But in reality, the training just takes over. It isn't bravery, nor is it that the officer is gifted enough to know exactly what to do. You just let the training take over, and do exactly what they have ingrained into your psyche again and again, ad nauseum. In such a moment, you discover how right they really are. So the cover fire was doing its job, and with an enormous amount of fire pouring into the terrorist position, you shout "Kadimah, Histaer!" and you lead five men up a cold, lonely hill. And every one of them is with you, moving in synch; not too slow, nor too fast, just all in a line pouring more fire up the hill as you get close enough to see their heads when they pop up...*

*You have no fear, because you have no time to think about it; you are doing too many things at once, making sure none of your men are ahead or behind, so they can all fire without hitting each other. You glance at the radio man to your right to be sure his ear is near his mike, in case orders come in that you are missing something. The medic has already opened his stretcher at the bottom of the hill in case you need to evacuate wounded, and battalion H.Q. is fully apprised of the situation.*

*They tell you, in all the courses, again and again, that when you are running there is no point in firing; it is a waste of bullets, because in such situations you can't hit the side of a barn. In fact, you recall the painful demonstration you received in Officer's course, when ten cadets, after a grueling run up and down the side of a mountain, could not get a single shot into blank white pieces of paper with a full cartridge each, from fifty to ten yards while running. And those were stationary targets, without enemy fire. So you are under no illusions about your ability to hit those terrorists now twenty yards away. Especially considering all the fire –power pouring into them from the cover fire unit only seventy-five yards away to your left. With heavy machine gun fire, hand-held anti-tank shells, an M-203 grenade launcher, RPG, and additional M-16 fire, it would not matter if you were walking up the hill with a bouquet of flowers. They are probably cowering behind their little mound.*

*But even with all that, the pure terror that grips you, when you run out of ammo in your clip half-way up the hill, is almost paralyzing. Every Israeli soldier worth his salt always has two clips taped to each other for just such a moment, and it takes less than a second to switch the empty cartridge for a full one. But it is the longest moment of your life. You can't hit the ground to switch cartridges, you are in the middle of a charge, and all your men are looking to you for support and leadership. And you can't exactly ask the terrorists for a brief time-out. So you let out something between a scream and a roar and it carries you up the hill for the half a second it takes to switch the cartridge...*

What is fear? Why do we experience terror, even when we know, the fear is completely illogical? Over these past years, I have met people afraid of so many different things. Fear of traveling, or flying, fear of going to Israel, even just fear of the future. What is the nature of this fear? There is something illogical at the root of such fears. After all, statistically, it is much more dangerous to get in a car on any major highway, than to get on an El Al plane to Israel. People become terrified on a roller coaster, although they have made a conscious and logical decision to get on the ride to begin with. How do we explain such moments of fear?

This week's portion, *Shemot*, contains just such a moment, and a closer look may shed some light on this challenging question.

Hashem comes to Moshe at the burning bush, and begins an amazing dialogue with him (Exodus 3:1-4:17), the end result of which is the emergence of Moshe as the redeemer of the Jewish people in Egypt.

In the midst of this discussion, Moshe, doubtful of whether the Jewish people will really accept him, voices his hesitations:

*"And they (the Jewish people) will not believe me, nor listen to my words, saying 'G-d has not appeared to you'."* (4:1)

To which G-d responds: *"What is that in your hand?" "A staff (Mateh)"*, says Moshe.

G-d commands Moshe (v.3) to cast the staff to the ground, and it changes into a snake, at which point Moshe runs from it! So G-d tells Moshe to grab it by the tail, and when he does, it becomes a staff again.

This, says G-d, will be the sign to the Jewish people that Moshe has been sent by G-d.

What is going on? First of all, why does Hashem ask Moshe what is in his hand? Why not just tell him to throw the staff in his hand to the ground?

And most amazing, Moshe, the greatest leader the Jewish people ever knew, runs in terror, and all this, *in the middle of a conversation with G-d*? How could you be afraid of anything if you are in the presence of G-d?

And then, incredibly, Moshe, at G-d's command grabs this same snake, which so terrified him that he ran from it even in the middle of a conversation with G-d, by the tail, which causes it to revert to being a staff! What is this little game G-d is playing with Moshe? And why is this *Mateh* (staff) the sign to the Jewish people that Moshe is indeed G-d's messenger? Certainly, G-d could come up with a variety of signs to achieve this purpose.

Additionally, once considering the nature of this *Mateh*, it is important to take note of its significance throughout the story of the Jewish people's exodus from Egypt. This same *Mateh* becomes the focal point of the first major struggle between Moshe & Pharaoh. Moshe and Aaron, his brother, come before Pharaoh and at the command of G-d, throw the staff to the ground and it becomes a snake. Pharaoh and his advisors promptly do the same thing, at which point the staff of Moshe swallows the Egyptian staffs (snakes). Amazingly, Jewish tradition teaches (based on verse 7:12) that the *Mateh* swallows the Egyptian snakes *after it reverts to being a staff*! What can this mean? And why is the staff used again and again, at the beginning of many of the plagues, and again at the splitting of the Sea, and throughout

the desert, causing water to flow from the rocks it hits. What is this *Mateh*, and why is it necessary? Wouldn't it be a much greater miracle without this staff? Why not just yell, "snake!" and have a snake appear? Now *that* would be a miracle!

Also, there is something paradoxical, it would seem, in the nature of this *Mateh*. The same staff, which *punishes* evil, by setting the plagues into motion, actually *becomes* evil (the personification of evil is the snake). And the same staff which will cause the Jewish people to believe that Moshe is their redeemer is also the instrument of punishment to Moshe for suggesting the Jewish people will not believe! And more, the same staff that will cause the water of the Nile to become undrinkable blood also causes water to pour forth from rocks, and bitter water to become sweet, so the people can drink!

The key to this question may lie in noticing that the *Mateh* becomes a snake only when it is cast to the ground. In His original query to Moshe, Hashem points out that what is in Moshe's hand is a *Mateh*; it only becomes a snake when it is on the ground.

Perhaps what is at issue here is the nature of evil. How does evil come in to the world? We are quick to blame G-d for all the evil that exists in the world, but maybe we need to look a little closer to home. We hold the potential for good and evil in our hands. When we take that potential and hold it up high, then we bring goodness to grow in the world, However, when we cast that same staff of truth and goodness to the ground, representing the base, animal side of the physical world, then it becomes evil.

*Mateh* is related to the root *Nateh*, which means to bend. Indeed, a *Mateh* is really a branch from a tree, hewn by man to be a staff. And the nature of a branch is to bend away from its source, the tree. So this is really the challenge. There is something very powerful about a bend in the road. As I walk along my journey, a bend in the road represents the unknown, the hidden future. Yet it also contains potential and promise; untold treasures, secrets and adventures lie just around the bend in the road.

There is also, however, a danger hidden in the bend in the road. You see, the more the road bends, and twists and turns, the easier it is to get lost. As long as my road is straight, I can always see my destination, and I can turn around and see my source.

But when the road bends I can get so lost, I can even forget my journey altogether, and the destination is hidden from view.

Originally, rabbinic legend tells us, Adam possessed the *Mateh*. Perhaps this is because Adam was born into a world where everything was clear. It was all so straight, and so obvious. But then we distanced ourselves from the source of all reality; and the road took on many bends. As the staff was cast to the ground, it became a snake, with all its twists and turns.

Our challenge, perhaps, is to grab hold of that same snake, representing all our doubts and fears, so that we can lift it off the ground, above the realm of the physical, limited world, so it can become a staff again.

This may be the hidden meaning of the struggle of snakes in Pharaoh's court. Ancient Egypt represented the ultimate distortion of reality. The vehicles of goodness, given by G-d, replaced G-d, and the Nile was no longer a river, but the source of all sustenance. Egypt was the world of bent, distorted reality par excellence. Moshe came to bring the world back to the truth of *Mateh*. That ultimately we are all vehicles of G-d and our ultimate challenge in this world is to learn how to see straight again.

In the end, fear is the unknown; it is the darkness of the bend in the road. And conquering our fear is the ability to see around the bend, with straighter vision. This we call *Yir'at Hashem*. Misinterpreted, this can mean fear of G-d. But who would want a relationship of fear? On its highest level, *Yir'ah* means to see G-d. (from the root *Lir'ot*, to see...) If I can see that Hashem is everywhere, and in every thing, then I am seeing straight.

If I see G-d in every human being, I could never sink to the depths of evil which allowed ancient Egypt to make men into beasts of burdens, or modern-day Egypt to turn them into numbers in camps sixty years ago.

In fact, **Rav Dessler** points out that our very name, *Yisrael*, is really made up of the words, *Yashar El*, or *the straight one of G-d*. Our purpose in this world is to learn how to see straight again. And when you see things straight, then you know, and are no longer afraid.

How do we, in the end, conquer our fears? Grab the snake by the tail, and hold it aloft, and we will see it for what it really is: part of Hashem's creation. When we lift up our own snakes, they become, once again, the *Mateh* they are meant to be.

But this ability to see, this knowledge is never a gift; it has to be earned. It takes a lot of hard work to learn to see again. Thus, even Moshe, speaking with G-d, can allow himself to see a snake instead of a staff. Indeed, to see the snake on the ground, you have to be looking down, which may well have been G-d's point to Moshe...

May we all discover within ourselves the strength we most certainly possess to find our own *Mateh*, so that instead of running from our snakes, they will be running (or disappearing) from us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman