

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **From Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Shemot)

They were on their honeymoon, trekking the Himalayas in Nepal, as far from the stresses and challenges of life at home as one could imagine. He was a battalion commander in the armored corps, and after years serving in the IDF he had finally taken leave to get married and spend some time away, far from the rigors and dangers of the battlefield. A decorated officer who had distinguished himself in the Six Day War (in 1967), crossing the Suez Canal into Egypt, life had finally given him the chance to take a break.

Israel was still riding high on the euphoria of the lightning victory of 1967, when in six days Israel stunned the world, overcoming four Arab armies several times the size of the Israeli forces and more than doubling the size of the country.

With his battalion left in good hands, his troops well trained, and Israel's borders secured, Yossi Ben Chanan had earned a respite and was enjoying the opportunity to enjoy the magnificent vistas and peaceful tranquility of the Himalayan mountains, on top of the world.

But this was October 1973, and the world was about to change. Entering a small inn on the mountain road, expecting to enjoy a couple days of mountain air and sweet sunshine, the innkeeper noticed that they were Israeli and asked them if they had heard about what was happening in Israel.

This was the world before internet and social media; if you did not have a radio and a place to plug it in you were simply off the grid. Noting their puzzled expressions, the innkeeper explained to them that Egyptian and Syrian Armies had simultaneously attacked the tiny country, and were apparently overwhelming the meager Israeli forces that had remained on station for the holy day of Yom Kippur.

So, what do you do if you are thousands of miles away from home, on your honeymoon in the middle of nowhere upon hearing your country is under attack? Truth be told, what can you do? Most of us would grimace, worry and try to get the papers or find a radio station that would tell us what is going on.

But if you are Yossi Ben Chanan, indeed if you are a Jew, and your fellow Jews are in danger, you know they need you; so, you drop everything and head for home.

After hitching, begging, and borrowing rides out of the mountains they eventually got to the airport in Mumbai even abandoning their heavy packs so they could sprint across the airport to make that day's flight home to Tel Aviv.

Picked up by Yossi's dad at (then) Lod airport, Yossi's first question was 'how bad is it?'. His father's face told the rest of the story.

Six hours later with the Himalayas and his honeymoon forgotten, Yossi was already in the turret of his tank on the Golan Heights surveying the impossible situation, desperately rallying his men to stop the Syrian assault, against impossible odds.

This week we begin the second book of the Torah, with the portion of *Shemot*. Named **Exodus** by the Christian world for the famous story of the Jewish people's miraculous Exodus from Egypt, this week's story follows the meteoric rise of a Jewish baby, abandoned to his fate on the Nile River who will eventually stand before the Pharaoh himself and demand freedom for his people.

One of the most curious parts of this story is Moshe's struggle with G-d at the burning bush

After forty years of shepherding his flocks in the deserts of Midian, G-d appears to Moshe through the image of a burning bush and charges him with the mission of returning to Egypt to redeem the Jewish people from slavery.

“And now, go and I will send you (Lecha' ve'eshlachecha) to Pharaoh for I will take the children of Israel out of Egypt” (Shemot (Exodus) 3:11)

Interestingly, Moshe's first question to G-d at the burning bush is not 'who are You?' but rather, 'who am I?'

Most commentaries seem to consider this a question which expresses Moshe's great humility: Who am I that I should go before Pharaoh? Am I worthy to be the vehicle that will take the Jewish people out of Egypt? Indeed, **Rashi** on the verse suggests as much when he comments: *“How am I important enough to speak before Kings?”*

Later, (ibid. v. 13) Moshe will ask how he should respond when the Jewish people ask who (or by what name) sent him, to which G-d will respond “I will be that I will be...” (ibid v. 14). And much of the opening verses of G-d's charge to Moshe responds to the unasked question Moshe might be thinking of 'who are you?'

Indeed, G-d tells Moshe he is the G-d of his forefathers Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov (ibid v. 6), and that he will redeem the Jewish people.

But it seems Hashem never actually answers Moshe's first question: *Who am I?*

Perhaps this is a question Moshe has to answer for himself. And perhaps there is an alternative way to view this question which all of us struggle with at one point or another.

The first time Moshe struggles with this existential question of 'who am I' is actually as a young man. Abandoned on the Nile (ibid. 2:1-4) and rescued by no less than Pharaoh's daughter (ibid. v. 5-6), he is brought up as a Prince of Egypt (ibid. v.10), yet his nursemaid is his actual mother (ibid. 7-9). So, he is a Jew, but brought up in the palace of the Jews' enslavers. So... who is he? A Jew? Or an Egyptian?

One day, now a teenager (ibid. v.11) he ventures out and sees the suffering of his brothers, and sees an Egyptian beating a Jew, and (ibid. v.12) “he looks back and forth and sees there is no man...”.

There are many different opinions amongst the commentaries as to what Moshe the young lad is looking for and what he seeks. Is he concerned someone might see him? Or is he desperately hoping someone else will come and put a halt to this injustice?

One might suggest however that Moshe is struggling with who he really is; is he an Egyptian prince, or a Jew?

Indeed, forced to flee Egypt after killing the Egyptian taskmaster (ibid.v.14-15), Moshe finds himself all alone in the desert of Midian and comes upon a similar situation, saving the daughters of Jethro from the

shepherds, whereupon they tell their father (ibid. v.19) “*an Egyptian saved us*”; so, he is an Egyptian. Indeed, it is easy to imagine a person not wanting to identify as an Egyptian, whose empire rules the world, rather than as a Jew, a people downtrodden and forsaken in the slavery of ancient Egypt.

In fact, for nearly forty years we do not hear anything about Moshe in the text of the Torah. He could have been a mighty prince; who knows, perhaps even the Pharaoh himself, but for a moral stand he took as a young lad.

And now, he is basically facing the same question: can he give up the peaceful life he has built for himself in Midian and return to the horrors of Egyptian servitude?

He has now spent the greater part of his life as an adult in Midian, so Egypt and the Jews must seem very far away. Yet, clearly, he does not feel fully at home in Midian, indeed naming his first son Gershom which essentially means he feels a stranger in a foreign land (ibid.2:22).

So, he is not really a Midianite, and he is no longer really an Egyptian, and he seems to have run away from his birthright as a Jew... so who is he?

And as he is confronted with the vision of the burning bush suggesting perhaps the Jewish people who through so many years of painful exile seem to always be burning and yet never consumed, Moshe is perhaps wondering who really, am I? Can I turn my back on the Jewish people? After all these years am I really a Jew after all?

I remember as a kid, having just celebrated my bar Mitzvah, watching the American bicentennial celebrations in 1976. We lived on the West Side of Manhattan in an apartment overlooking the Hudson River and on July 4th, along with everyone else who could find a view or a space along the river, we watched hundreds of US battle ships, destroyers, submarines and even an aircraft carrier, sail up the Hudson river in Operation Sail to celebrate America's two hundredth anniversary.

And I remember well the real celebration we had as a family, huddled around our black and white TV on July 4, 1976 as news broke of Operation Entebbe, and we celebrated the IDF's successful and daring mission rescuing the Jewish hostages captured by terrorists and bringing them over 2,000 miles home to Israel. And I knew I was an American Jew, not a Jewish American. Which is probably why, forty years later myself, my brothers, my parents and all of our children are blessed to call Israel home.

At the beginning of his journey to redeem the Jewish people and bring them home, at a lonely bush in the desert of Midian, Moshe begins with a question only he can answer. And today, over three thousand years later, in the midst of the greatest experiment in the annals of human history, as an ancient people journeys home to reclaim their ancient land, we, all of us have at least to ask ourselves the same question: who, really, are we? Are we Jewish Americans, French, British and even Israelis? Or are we all really American French British and Israeli Jews?

Something to think about....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman