

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Sukkot)

His steely eyes should have given him away, but over thirty years ago, I was a new immigrant, only four months into my Israeli army service, and I had no idea who this Lieutenant General really was.

We were finishing our second stage of tank training at the Israeli Armored Corps school, and, graduating as a tank driver, I was being awarded my first rank: private first class (Turai'-Rishon) by someone whom I would later learn was and still is an Israeli legend.

This particular rank has almost no value and was awarded a few of us who represented the battalion as outstanding cadets at the final ceremonies of the course.

(I wore it on my arm for one day, only so that I could outrank my older brother, who was a few days away from completing his sergeant's course in the paratroopers; I demanded that he "get off his feet for a soldier who outranked him!")

Looking back, the true value of that award ceremony was really the opportunity to meet this living legend first hand, though it was not something I appreciated at the time.

I remember what he said to me as he pinned my new, almost laughable rank on my uniform:

"You are part of a special family (the tank crews of the armored corps), whose task it is to defend the people of Israel. Aleh' Ve'Hatzleach (arise and succeed)."

To be honest, it was not his words that motivated me to find out this man's story; it was his eyes. They looked vaguely familiar, and there was a determined strength about them; you could tell, looking at his face, that in saying those words to this new tank driver, part of him was somewhere else, in a different place, and a different time.

Yom Kippur, 1973... in Katmandu, Nepal; A most unlikely place to celebrate this most solemn of days in the Jewish calendar; But six years after the Six-day war, Yossi was now a lieutenant colonel, commander of an armored battalion, and he had finally gotten away with his new bride, Nati; they were on their honeymoon.

They were a couple that represented all that was Israel in the early fall of 1973: young, brimming with enthusiasm and adventure, with the whole world before them and no mountain that could not be conquered, they were traveling the mountain passes of the Himalayas by motorcycle, and through a series of events had ended up in Katmandu in time for Yom Kippur.

After eight long years of patrols and scrambles, firing ranges and midnight alerts, he could finally look forward to a few weeks of tranquil sunset strolls and uninterrupted evenings, against the backdrop of the magnificent carpet of stars that formed the nights over the Himalayas.

Two days later, having heard the horrible news of the surprise attack on Yom Kippur afternoon, minus their backpacks, which had been thrown off in a mad rush to make a plane from Delhi to Bombay, they finally boarded an El Al plane headed home to Israel, and an uncertain future.

Most men in Yossi's situation might well have stayed in Nepal, listening anxiously to the news reports, but on October 9th, instead of climbing mountain trails with his new wife, he was climbing into the turret of a Centurion tank to command what was left of the 188th Brigade.

When Yossi finally arrived at the front lines, the seventh brigade, commanded by Yanosh Ben Gal, one of Yossi's closest friends, was fighting a desperate last stand at the Northern tip of the Golan Heights, fighting to hold off the seemingly endless onslaught of hundreds of Syrian tanks which filled the valley, from breaking through to the Galil and the unprotected belly of Israel behind them.

The 75 tanks of Yossi's 188th Brigade had been completely obliterated in the first days of the war, and its entire senior staff, including Brigade commander Yitzhak Ben Shoham, another close friend of Yossi's, lay dead on the field of battle.

The last seven tanks of the seventh were all that remained to stop four Syrian Divisions, now re-enforced with Rifat Assad's elite Syrian Presidential Guard, from breaking through and raising Syrian flags over Tel Aviv and Haifa, when Yossi finally arrived at Brigade Headquarters in Nafach on the Golan.

Shmuel Askarov, Yossi's deputy, working through the night, had, by hook and crook, managed to salvage enough parts and crews to ready eleven tanks for the field, and on that fateful afternoon, as the war was about to be lost, the 188th was reborn.

Wounded in his first few hours of combat, Yossi Ben Hanan and Shmuel Askarov, coming to the aid of their beleaguered comrades, succeeded in stemming and eventually turning the tide of battle. The stories and the names of that fateful day in the battle for the Valley of Tears are now the stuff of legends, best summed up by the tired words full of awe, broadcast by General Rafel Eitan, commander of the Northern Front, over the radio net:

"You have saved the people of Israel."

A few days later as the IDF finally turned the tide and began to push the Syrians back, their advance was in jeopardy as murderous fire poured down on the Israeli tanks below from Syrian guns entrenched high above the road. Until Yossi Ben Chanan found what amounted to a goat path and brought his few tanks up behind the Syrians. In the protracted battle Yossi's tank was hit and he lay wounded with a horribly broken leg alone with one of his crew, behind enemy lines.

With the radio they had managed to salvage from their burning tank they were able to let command know where they were which was how Yoni Netanyahu managed to rescue them in a daring mission behind enemy lines.

Some forty-three years later, as part of efforts to commemorate the anniversary of the famous Entebbe hostage rescue where Yoni was tragically killed, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu met with Yossi ben Chanan, now 71 who told him a story that Netanyahu was hearing for the first time: After listening to declassified tapes from that terrible day and hearing his older brother Yoni's voice across the years, Yossi said:

"There was a moment I recall that wasn't recorded," he told the PM. "It was the moment that Yoni and his men arrived, and I told them, 'Careful, there's shooting here.' And Yoni said to me, 'Yossi, relax, I'm in charge now.'"

Ben-Chanan, who named his daughter Yoni, said, "I think about that event almost every day."

This week we begin the festival of Sukkot, when Jews all over the world will leave the comfort of their homes to sit in booths known as Sukkot; hence the name of the holiday.

There is an interesting question regarding this festival: what exactly is the historical event we are commemorating by sitting in these booths?

On Pesach (Passover) we recall the miracles G-d did for us when we left Egypt, and on Shavuot we recall the miraculous revelation at Sinai. But what is Sukkot all about?

The Torah (*Vayikra* (Leviticus) 23:43) tells us that we are meant to sit in the booths because G-d caused us to dwell in such Booths (Sukkot) when we left Egypt. But what is so miraculous about that? After all they were in the desert for forty years; it makes a lot of sense that they would build temporary shelters for themselves ...

On Rosh Hashanah as part of the (*Mussaf zichronot*) liturgy, the Prophet Jeremiah (chap. 2) has G-d saying:

“I remember your devotion in youthful days, the love of the days of your betrothal, when you followed me in the wilderness, into a land unsown and unknown.”

Perhaps the miracle of the booths was precisely that we were willing to trust in G-d for forty years in the desert even when we knew we would not necessarily merit to reach the Promised Land. After all, the second generation after the sins of the Golden calf and the spies were told they would not enter the land. But they were willing to endure forty years in the desert nonetheless.

The Sukkah booth reminds us on the one hand just how precarious life is; how temporary and without guarantees. And yet it allows us to recall as well a time of betrothal, of love, when we as a people were willing to bear any sacrifice and endure any hardship for something we loved so much we would follow anywhere .

Yossi Ben Chanan represents for me that quintessential Israeli who on the one hand plans his honeymoon to be in Katmandu for Yom Kippur, and yet is willing to give up everything for the people he so loves.

This year as we enter the Sukkah and recall how fragile and temporary life is, especially in the wake of the tragedies experienced in the past few years, let us focus on the many blessings that surround us: less the physical homes we may or may not have, and more the loved ones with whom we share the Sukkah of life.

Wishing all a meaningful and wonderful Sukkot: Chag sameach from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman