Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Tazria)

In 1948, things did not look promising for the Jews.

The Arab armies of Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and forces from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria prepared to attack the newly declared State of Israel as soon as the British pulled out in May of 1948, vowing to push the Jews into the sea.

In Tzfat, where 80,000 Arabs surrounded approximately 3,000 Jews living in the Jewish quarter, the Jews were braced for the worst. One night, a few weeks before the pullout, the British told the Jewish community they were leaving Tzfat in the morning and had reliable intelligence that the Arabs were planning a massive attack immediately following their departure. Predicting a massacre, they urged the Jews to leave the city, even making room for them in the convoy. With eight hours' notice, they assumed the Jews would panic, but not a single Jew left the city.

Sure enough, as the empty British trucks pulled out of Tzfat, thousands of Arabs armed with hunting rifles, knives and clubs attacked the Jewish quarter and it looked as though British fears would be confirmed. The few hundred Jewish fighters were hopelessly outnumbered and fierce fighting broke out at the entrance to the old city.

The Citadel, the most important position in the city, with a strategic command of the entire area was a British fortress, which the Jewish fighters had to take in order to survive. But the Arabs, with advanced notice from the British, had already taken command of the Citadel. In a bold move, members of the Palmach (the fighting arm of the Jewish underground Haganah) planted explosives at the base of the Citadel walls, determined to blast their way through the thick walls in a desperate attempt to save the Jewish quarter and establish a position from which to hold out against the furious Arab onslaught.

Suddenly, just as they were ready to detonate the explosives, a freak rainstorm broke out, soaking the detonation wires and preventing the explosion. Now, realize, this was May, the beginning of spring; it does not rain in Israel in May; the rainy season usually ends a month or two earlier. A young Jewish fighter, before he died was heard to say to one of his religious comrades: "doesn't G-d want us to come home? How could he let it rain in May?"

(Eventually fighters managed to cross the street under heavy gunfire and detonate the explosives from close range, but losing many men in the process. The bullet holes still mark the walls where this fierce battle took place.)

Meanwhile, down below, at the entrance to the Jewish quarter, things were going from bad to worse, and, in desperation, the Jews decided to employ their last resort.

With a heavy British blockade, precious few arms succeeded in being smuggled in to arm the Jewish fighters, so the Jews developed what they hoped would be an answer to Arab armor and artillery. Called the Davidka, (literally: 'little David') it was essentially a home-built mortar. One could fill the Davidka with rocks, nails and metal balls and, setting it off with explosives, fire a deadly stream at the advancing enemy. It was a brilliant idea, as it would allow the Jews to use supplies readily available to arm themselves. Unfortunately, it did not work, barely knocking a man down at close range. It did, however, produce an incredibly loud

explosion, and the Jews at this point had nothing to lose. And so, faced with thousands of Arabs, and without even enough bullets to fire at them all, they fired the Davidka just as the rain began pouring down. And to their amazement, the Arabs stopped, and then turned and ran.

Not quite understanding what was happening, they fired the Davidka three more times until the entire Arab army had fled the quarter, and the miracle legend of Tzfat was born.

It was only after the war that they finally found out what had really happened: it seems that the greatest fear of the Arabs was the fact that most of the people behind the development of America's atomic bomb were Jewish (most notably Einstein and Oppenheimer), and the Arabs had heard a little bit about acid rain. So, they assumed the Jews had just set off an atomic bomb, and the rest is history!

Every tour guide worth his salt will show his tourists this spot and with a smile, will ask the same question: was this a miracle? Or just a freak of nature? In Tzfat, there are no miracles, because all of nature is miraculous, and miracles surround us every day…

This week's portion, Tazria, focuses on the issue of *Tzara'at,* the malady most closely associated with (but not quite) leprosy. In ancient times, when we lived in the land of Israel with a Beit HaMikdash (temple) and an active Priesthood of Kohanim (priests) this affliction did not send you to the doctor. Rather, the Torah tells us, when a person saw signs of *Tzara'at,* he went to visit a *Kohen* (a priest). Indeed, tradition teaches that *Tzara'at* was the direct consequence of lashon *hara* (slander) and *rechilut* (tale-bearing), and as such it was an opportunity for a person to do some introspection and consider the error of his ways.

The **Sefer HaChinuch** points out (mitzvah 168) that this particular process enabled us to recognize the power of Divine Providence, and relates to the larger issues of destiny, reward and punishment, and the balance between the nature of miracles and the miracle of nature.

As an example, one of the many signs of *Tzara'at* for which an expert Kohen had to be consulted, was when a hair on a person's body turned a particular shade of white ("like snow") or yellow (like winter grass; see *VaYikra* (Leviticus) 13:30). And the challenge of the Kohen was not only to find the correct shade, but to be sure that indeed there were two hairs which had turned white, and not one, because when only one hair had turned white, the person was not confined but remained in a state of ritual purity.

Think about it: the difference between being a '*Metzora*' (often translated as 'leper', but not to be confused with leprosy which is a disease that still exists in the world, with very different symptoms….) and being pure, was one hair on a person's body.

The *Midrash* in *Vayikra Rabbah* (15:3) shares a magnificent insight related to this detail of halachah:

"*You will not find a single strand of hair for which Hashem (G-d) did not create an appropriate follicle in the skin, in order that one (hair) should not benefit from what 'belongs' to another.*"

On the one hand, consider the import of this Midrash: I can learn to become a more ethical human being simply by studying the hairs on my forearm! After all, if every hair on my arm has its place, then how much more must I consider that every human being, and every event, however challenging, has a place in G-d's plan.

At the same time, if we did pursue this idea to its natural conclusion, the world would be full of people who could not leave their front doorstep, lost in reverie contemplating a particular leaf falling in the wind or the

majesty of the ant crossing one's path. In short, we might live in a nirvana-like society of dreamy smiles and gossamer clouds, but the world would stink. Because no-one would ever end up taking out the garbage!

That being said, the **Baal Shem Tov** points out that we often make the mistake of missing the messages sent our way. As an example, he suggests: if you see someone desecrating Shabbat, do not assume it is because you are meant to exhort *them* on the error of *their* ways, rather, assume it is a message to you regarding the error of *yours*. If you indeed see a person violating Shabbat, it is, suggests the Baal Shem Tov, a message that there is something missing in *your* Shabbat. Imagine if we really lived life this way, struggling with what we need to fix in ourselves, instead of spending so much time figuring out what we need to fix in everybody else; what a different world it would be.

The question, however, is how to find the balance. If I took the time to analyze every leaf, twig, insect, and sound that came my way, I would never get to the synagogue in the morning. And yet, to ignore the many powerful messages that often cross our path is to risk living a life of callousness and lose so many opportunities to grow as a person and as a society. So how, indeed, does one find the balance?

In fact, this is the famous question of the **Ramban**: why should we ever go to the Doctor? After all, every morning we recite the prayer asking Hashem to heal us, so isn't there an element of blasphemy in assuming that we need to visit the doctor when we are sick? (Note that the Ramban was himself…a doctor!)

This question was at the root of a controversy that remains a prominent social issue in Israel even today. If after two thousand years, Hashem has decided it is time to bring us home, then who are we to try and take it into our own hands? So maybe the best thing for a young man or woman to do, is to be immersed in Torah and good deeds, and leave the destiny of the Jewish people (and the defense of the land of Israel) up to G-d?

And yet the halachah (Jewish law) is very clear:

> "*Ha'ba' le'horgecha', hashkem le'hargo*"
> "*If a person comes to kill you, arise and kill him first.*"

Indeed, when Abraham's nephew *Lot* is captured by the five kings (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 14), he does not wait for G-d to perform miracles, he musters an army and saves Lot himself. And no less than Yaakov does battle all night with a mysterious figure, choosing battle rather than faithful reliance on Hashem's providence.

And yet, this is not so simple, because Yosef (Joseph) is taken to task by the rabbis for what seems to be the same decision. Lost and seemingly forgotten in the dungeons of Egypt, he begs the butler whose dream he has just favorably interpreted, and who is being restored to his position in the palace to 'remember him to Pharaoh and take him out of prison' (Genesis 40:14). And **Rashi** (quoting the *Midrash* in *Bereishit Rabbah*) points out that Yosef remains two more years as 'punishment' for relying on an Egyptian butler, instead of on G-d, as the verse suggests in *Tehillim* (Psalms 40:5):

> "*Blessed is the man that places his trust in G-d, and looks not to the proud, and those who turn to falsehood*."

However, to complicate things further, Yosef himself when interpreting the dreams, not only of the butler and the baker (Bereishit 40:8), but also even to Pharaoh himself, (Bereishit 41:16) makes abundantly clear and that it is Hashem who interprets dreams.

So how indeed are we to find this ever-elusive balance, trusting in G-d on the one hand, and yet being active partners in building a better world on the other?

Perhaps, hidden in this week's portion, is a perception that might provide if not resolution, at least a direction, in this elusive question.

Why indeed, does the *Metzora* go to the Kohen for resolution? If the question here is one of spiritual pollution, and a person, having transgressed, requires isolation and introspection, what need is there of the Kohen to intervene?

The Kohen, it seems, represents that bridge between Divine providence and human intervention. That same need for finding the balance between what we need to do, and what Hashem is willing to do for us.

You see, when a person is discovered to have Tzara'at, he must essentially remove himself from society, sequestering himself for seven days, until the Kohen then returns to see if the Tzara'at has indeed abated. And during this time, he is considered *tameh*, or ritually impure. On the one hand, it is the Kohen who recognizes the affliction and enjoins the individual to be sequestered in order that he might repent the error of his ways. Yet the Kohen is obviously completely dependent on Hashem who, based on the heart of the individual, causes the Tzara'at to abate in the interim.

And what are these seven days of impurity?

Seven days is essentially a period of processing. As an example, it offers the mourner the opportunity to focus on his or her loss and begin to process it before gradually re-entering a new world, which will never be quite the same.

Clearly, we need to be willing to trust in Hashem that life will send us what we need to receive, and we need as well to be partners with Hashem in making that happen. As the **Vilna Gaon** suggests in his *Even Sheleimah*, faith without *hishtadlut* (our attempts to do our bit, in partnership with G-d) is not really faith, it bespeaks a certain arrogance; who says I have earned the right to have faith that Hashem will help me? On the other hand, the assumption that I can do it all, and that it all depends on me, stems from this very same arrogance.

Ultimately, once I have done my bit, then I have the right to believe that Hashem in one way or another, will do His.

Life often sends us signals, but we don't always listen.

Maybe during these seven days a person who is off balance has the chance to lean towards the other extreme, and get back in balance, and perhaps this very suggestion is meant to remind us to make this 'process of processing' more a part of our life, on a regular basis.

Perhaps, like the *metzora,* we need to take some time for introspection, to consider how best to find that balance.

Wishing you a balanced, peaceful, and meaningful *Shabbat Shalom,*

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