Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

Portion of Tazria-Metzora

Walk into the Ashkenazi synagogue of the Ari Hakadosh in Tzfat, and if you look carefully, you will notice a strange detail that begs a story. On the side of the bimah (the prayer lectern from where the Torah is read), directly opposite the door, there is a small hole filled with small pieces of paper. It appears to be a sign of wear and tear, that needs to be fixed, until you take a closer look and realize the small pieces of paper are actually prayers and requests with the names of hundreds of sick and needy Jews asking for miracles, similar to the ones that are found in between the cracks of the stones in the Kotel.

In 1948, in the middle of the War of Independence, the Jewish quarter of the Old City of Tsfat came under heavy shellfire. In the middle of the afternoon prayers, a shell landed in the courtyard, and a piece of shrapnel came flying through the open door of the synagogue.

The congregation was in the middle of the Modim prayer, thanking G-d for the daily miracles which "are with us each and every day. And an older man praying next to the bimah was bowing down, and as he bent over in supplication, the shrapnel flew over him, missing him by an inch and imbedding itself in the bimah, where the hole remains as silent testimony to G-d's hand in the world, to this very day.

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 Tsfat, there are no miracles, because all of nature is miraculous, and miracles surround us every day.

There is another Tsfat story, however, that is somewhat less known which raises this question far beyond the personal story of this particular individual.

In 1948, things did not look promising for the Jews. The British controlling Palestine had finally come to the conclusion that they could not resolve the quagmire of Jewish and Arab interests in the land of Israel, and handed the question over to the United Nations, who voted in 1947 to partition Palestine (minus Tran Jordan) into two states granting the Jews their long-awaited homeland in the land of Israel. While the Jews rejoiced in November of 1947, the Arabs were less enthusiastic, and the War of Independence began in earnest.

The British decided they were pulling out, leaving the Jews and Arabs to resolve their own differences, and announced that the British army would leave Palestine forever on May 14, 1948. The Jews announced that on the same day they would officially declare the establishment of the State of Israel, and the Arabs vowed that it would be the shortest-lived state in the history of the world. Seven Arab armies massed on British Mandatory borders (not wanting to enter until the British left, as that would have constituted an invasion of British territory) committed to pushing the Jews into the sea before sun set on the Jewish state.

While the Arab armies of Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and forces from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria could not cross the borders, the Arabs living inside Palestine had no such restrictions and Jewish communities across the country came under heavy attack across the country.

In Tsfat, where 80,000 Arabs surrounded approximately 3,000 Jews living in the Jewish quarter, the Jews braced for the worst. One night, a few weeks before the pullout the British told the Jewish community they were leaving 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 Tsfat, 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 Jewish 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. However, the Arabs, with advanced notice of the British pullout, 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 an 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 were successfully 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, they fashioned a home-built mortar, designed to fire large amounts of materials at the enemy. 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 what supplies were 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 all of them, 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 Tsfat 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!

A miracle... or a freak of nature?

This week's double portion, *Tazria-Metzora*, 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.

For 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). 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, however challenging, annoying, and even evil as they may be, has a place in G-d's plan.

And this idea should come as no surprise; it is eminently logical, and woven into the fabric of the One-ness of Hashem, that something (such as an ethical idea) which is true anywhere will be recognizable as true everywhere, were we simply to invest the energy in seeking out the message wherever we look.

And yet, the image of sitting down on a fine spring morning to meditate on the ethical lessons to be gleaned from the hairs on one's arm is challenging to most of us, to say the least!

While one cannot argue the merits of such ethical messages, nor counter their inherent truism, truth be told, if we pursued 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, as we crunched our granola bars and absorbed the wafting notes of Bob Dylan's

(or Soulfarm's?) tunes in the background, but the world would stink! Because no-one would ever end up taking out the garbage!

And this is not intended to suggest that this philosophy of life is not absolutely true. In fact, the **Baal Shem Tov** points out that we often make the mistake of missing the messages sent our way. As an example, he says; 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 our selves, 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?

Even more challenging, and related to this question, is not so much the balance of how and when I choose to take a closer look at the world, but the question of what to do with the perceptions themselves.

If indeed Hashem runs the world, when are we meant to become active partners in making it a better world to live in? The conclusion of the above-quoted *Midrash*, is that the wife of the pious person (who noted the significance of every follicle of hair) suggests that he need not go to work at all! After all, if Hashem runs the world, then perhaps faith in G-d would best be demonstrated by a life immersed in Torah and *Mitzvoth*, trusting that G-d, in the end, will provide?

This, indeed, would seem to be the essence of pure faith or *Bitachon*. 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!)

In fact, this coming week marks Israeli Memorial and Independence days (*Yom Ha'Zikaron* and *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*) when we celebrate the birth of the State of Israel, and 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, who are we to try and take it into our own hands? After all, the Jewish people survived for two thousand years without a land (though they did have the dream of a land), but without our Jewish tradition, where would we be? 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 one 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). **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):

"Ashrei ha'gever asher sam Hashem mivtacho've'lo' phanah el re'havim ve'shatei chazav."
"Blessed is the man that places his trust in G-d, and looks not to the proud, and those who turn to falsehood."

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. And Abraham, after emerging victorious from his battle and saving Lot, says very clearly that the victory and its spoils are G-d's to dispense.

So how indeed are we to find this ever-elusive balance, trusting in G-d on the one hand and yet remain 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, for this elusive question.

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

While one might suggest that there is a need of the Kohen's expertise in recognizing the signs of *tzara'at* (and to subsequently determine that the *tzara'at* has dissipated), we could just have easily been commanded by the Torah to recognize these signs on our own. Or, Hashem might have created *tzara'at* in such a way as to be recognizable by any one of us. Indeed, the *Kohen* 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 do *teshuvah*, and 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.

Then these seven days of impurity may perhaps hold the key to a deeper understanding of this process. The number seven, as we have mentioned elsewhere, is an important number in the Torah, representing completion in the realm of nature. The world is created in seven days, and it is only on the seventh day that one arrives at *Shabbat*, a day of peace and repose that allows us to slow down and consider the nature of all that we have hopefully accomplished during the week. This may in fact be the reason the Tabernacle (the *Mishkan*) was erected and taken apart for seven days before finally being consecrated on the eighth.

And this is directly related to the many instances in which we find seven days to be an important part of life: The major festivals (Pesach-Passover, and Sukkoth - the Feast of Tabernacles) are comprised of seven days, and a baby must live through one Shabbat or seven days before having his *Brit Milah* (circumcision) on the eighth. When we mourn the loss of a loved one we sit seven days of *shiva*, and when Jewish couples marry, they celebrate seven days of rejoicing, during which they recite seven blessings.

Seven days is essentially a period of *processing*. It offers the mourner the opportunity to focus on his loss and begin to process it before gradually re-entering a new world, which will never be quite the same. It offers the Jewish people (and Aaron, who is becoming the first High priest (*Kohen Gadol*) in Jewish history a chance to process an entirely new relationship with Hashem through a tangible Temple. And it allows the newly married couple the chance to adjust to a totally new world of two 'others' who now need to learn to live for each other and not just with each other....

Perhaps this is the secret which may give us direction here. Perhaps it is all about perception and the opportunity to at least consider and struggle with the question.

Maimonides, (the **Rambam**), throughout his writings (see the beginning of *Hilchot Deot*, the laws of character development, as an example) suggests that our goal in life is to struggle to achieve this balance. We need to find what the **Rambam** terms the "*shvil ha'zahav*", the golden path, in all areas of our lives. This means finding the ever-elusive middle road between pride and humility, self-sacrifice and stinginess, and even anger and placidity.

One often assumes that there is a goal, however elusive it might be, of balance. But what if we can never truly arrive at a perfect balance? What if the goal, at the end of it all, is to have been committed to the pursuit of that balance? Indeed, a life dedicated to finding this balance will ultimately result in exactly that - a life lived in balance.

When you stop to think about it, life is really all about balance. How to balance one's professional life with one's personal life, how to make time for friends as well as family; study as well as exercise; and of course spiritual growth alongside tangible action, all while making a difference in the world.

Even the soul needs to be in balance, and Jewish tradition suggests it is not healthy for a person to do too much giving, without receiving. When a person is in a relationship where he or she is doing all the giving, that relationship, and even that person, is off- balance. Significantly, it is not just that the person doing all the giving is putting him or herself off balance, they are equally responsible for causing the other person (or persons) in the relationship to be off balance. If I give so much to another person that I make no room for them to give back, then they will also ultimately be off balance. Indeed, the balance we find for ourselves, affects the balance of all those around us, and ultimately on some level, everyone everywhere.

Imagine an indigent fellow comes to your door asking for a handout (*Tzedakah*), and you happen to be in a generous mood, so you give him $50, and he is amazed, having hoped at best for a couple of bucks. On a certain level you have actually done him a disservice, because he has just received, without having done anything to earn that gift. And while this is not to suggest that you have not done a tremendous mitzvah, imagine that when he comes to your door you say: "I am *so* glad you just showed up; I need to move this heavy bookcase; think you could help me?" And he proceeds to help you move this incredibly heavy piece of furniture all the way up to the third floor. And then, two sweat-filled hours later, you give

him the same fifty dollars. He may walk away with same amount of money in his pocket, but he is a different person, because his soul is more in balance.

Perhaps this is the nature of these seven days during which the *metzorah* struggles to rectify the mistakes he has made, which have led him to this sorry state of affairs.

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. Sometimes these symbols are even physical, but we miss them, often because they are so obvious. Sometimes we get so run-down that our friends and loved ones notice we are working too hard, long before we do. If your body is run down, it is because a part of your life is off balance, and you are being given a message. Maybe you are too focused on work, and need to recognize the need for finding time for your family!

There is even a book in Jewish mysticism called *Torat HaGuf,* which suggests that every part of the body corresponds to a particular aspect of one's personality. For example, the neck is associated with stubbornness (hence the Jewish people are referred to as an "*Am K'shei Oref*", "a stiff-necked people", when, at the debacle of the Golden calf, they stubbornly cling to the old ways of idolatry.), and there is an idea that if my neck is aching me, it is a sure sign that I am being intransigent about some part of my life. And, suggest the mystics, if I can figure out what it is, and become more flexible, my neck will actually stop hurting! (And the same applies, for example, to the right and left sides of the body, the right arm being the strong arm of *Chesed*, (Loving- kindness) and giving, and the left representing receiving, such that a malady on my right side somehow denotes an imbalance in what I am giving, and a stiff neck on the left side might be a stubborn insistence on some imbalanced giving....)

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 of processing in an imbalanced form (removing oneself from society for seven days is not balanced; it represents an extreme), is ultimately meant to remind us to make this 'process of processing' more a part of our life, on a regular basis.

So, while focusing on spiritual growth, one must be careful not to be insensitive to communal responsibilities, and while on reserve duty in the army, one needs to make time for spiritual growth (such as Torah study and prayer) as well.

Incidentally, part of the challenge is knowing whether *our* side of the balance and the efforts we make fits with what we are trying to achieve. As an example, we need to do our bit to protect the Jewish people, but that would not necessarily justify the gangs of survivors who sought out and killed Nazi collaborators after the war. Having recognized the need for balance, we are still left with the challenge of just how to apply that balance. (And this may be the key to understanding the story of *Yosef*, who relied on an Egyptian idolater, which did not necessarily constitute placing himself into the equation as a partner, but rather substituting an alternative, on some level, for G- d.)

If this balance is true and critical on an individual level, it is equally if not more important, on a national level.

More than fifty years after the Six Day War, we are still paying the price for an entire segment of the population in Israel's decision (one might argue the critical group of people who held in their hands that balance of a relationship with Torah, the land of Israel, and the Jewish people) to focus on the land of Israel, while almost ignoring their responsibility to the rest of the people of Israel. And unfortunately, there is still an equally large segment of the population in Israel who focus on the Torah of Israel while often underestimating (and perceived to be ignoring) the importance of the rest of the people and the land of Israel. And of course, there is a third, perhaps even larger segment of the population of the country who are very focused on the people of Israel, while almost ignoring the Torah of Israel, the *raison de'etre'* of why we are here in the first place.

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

And perhaps, equally important, we can find, if not seven days, at least seven minutes during the course of our day, to process and consider the value of each side of the equation, so that at then end of the day, the process of having considered the question will itself be a party to having brought us a little bit closer to the solution, for each of us, each in our own way.

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

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