

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

From Rav Binny

### **(Portion of Terumah)**

#### **WHY ARE THE LUCHOT HIDDEN?**

*Last year on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) at Orayta, we were privileged to meet Mrs. Marta Weiss, a Holocaust survivor who shared her incredible story with us.*

*Born in Bratislava, in Czechoslovakia, she eventually ended up in Hungary, hiding in plain sight from the Nazis until June 1944 when she was deported along with her sister to Auschwitz.*

*She was crammed along with 120 people into a cattle car, and pretty soon there were many bodies of 'dead men standing'; but they were driven back and forth for three days because there was no room at Auschwitz; she actually recalls being relieved when they were finally let out of the cattle car and arrived at their destination; who knew? Marta arrived in Auschwitz when she was ten years old.*

*She remembers when they tattooed a number on her arm, it was extremely painful... but she was told: 'don't cry: it means you will live at least a week'. Her camp number was A27 0002.*

*And she still remembers the open sewage flowing in the ditch next to the bridge they walked on as they left any last semblance of normalcy behind ....*

*One day, as they were crossing a small bridge between the camps right next to a sewage canal, on their way back from a work detail, she overheard two German guards talking. (She knew German of which the guards were unaware...)*

*They were making a bet as to whether she would die if knocked into the sewer. Suddenly, the guard knocked her off the bridge with his rifle butt into the sewer. Freezing and covered in muck she was certain she would die, when a boy who she did not even know jumped in to save her; to this day she does not know who that boy was.*

*Even though they were not twins, she and her older sister looked very similar and were taken by Mengele for experiments with other sets of twins...*

*She was injected daily with something, but Mengele escaped after the war with all his notes so to this day she does not know what she was injected with and doctors after the war could not figure it out, so when she gets ill she still does not know how it relates to those experiences...*

*One day in 1944, the Red Cross visited Auschwitz and they were forced to pretend in the 'infirmary'.. There was a brave girl with them who waited for an opportunity and at the right moment blurted out "don't believe them; they are murdering us!"*

*The next day after the red Cross left, Mengele injected her with petroleum into her stomach and burned her alive from the inside....*

*When the war ended and Marta was liberated she weighed only 17 kg. (37 lbs.).*

*At the end of her presentation, one of the boys asked her what kept her going; to what did she attribute her survival? She explained that in Auschwitz the only tefilah (prayer) she could remember (she was thrust into the Holocaust in 1938 at the tender age of four...) was the tune and words of the last line of the Yom Kippur prayer of **Avinu Malkeinu**, literally: 'our father our King'... Even in the darkest night of Auschwitz, deep inside, she always felt Hashem, our father in heaven, was with her.*

This week we read the portion of *Terumah*, which introduces the mitzvah to build a *Mishkan*, a tabernacle, in which Hashem (G-d)'s Divine presence would rest.

As part of this mitzvah the Jewish people are commanded to build an Ark (the *Aron*), which would rest in the holy of holies (the *Kodesh Kodashim*) and in which would be placed the Tablets (*luchot*) of the Ten Commandments representing the Torah we were given at Sinai.

Interestingly, once the Tablets are placed in the ark, they are never seen again. In fact, even the ark itself, residing in the inner chamber known as the holy of holies, was only seen once a year on Yom Kippur, and only by the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest. Why do we keep the ***luchot habrit*** (the tablets of the Covenant) if they are never to be seen?

This is especially strange when considering the fact that we received the tablets when we experienced the *revelation* at Sinai, when Hashem (G-d) *revealed* Himself to the Jewish people at Sinai. In other words, the symbol of G-d being revealed in the world is meant to be always ... hidden?

It is worth noting that this is not the only time we find that Torah seems to be hidden from plain sight. It seems we experience the same phenomenon with the mitzvot of *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah*.

Common to both these mitzvot are the fact that the first two portions of the *Shema* are inserted inside (tefillin contain two additional portions) after which we never see them unless there is a problem (i.e., to check and see if they are still kosher).

Why do we hide the Torah?

Interestingly, this idea is so important it forms the center-piece of Jewish ritual as every Synagogue is structured so prayer faces the ark, in which are contained the Torah scrolls which usually remain hidden. We only open the ark to reveal the Torah for special moments, perhaps mimicking the original moment of revelation, but the Ark does not stay open.

One might have thought we would keep the Ark open at all times much like the Cross Christians face in prayer which is always central and displayed prominently in their prayers and holy places.

Perhaps we are meant to internalize the idea that even as we make Torah a part of our lives we are also meant to remember that what is really holy is not the Torah in the box, it is the Torah we carry deep inside ourselves. We are, perhaps, being taught a powerful message. The purpose of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, was to teach us the value of creating a space, an environment, imbued with spirituality and sanctity. As an example, studying Torah in a *Beit Midrash* (study hall) in the old City of Jerusalem cannot be compared to opening up a Jewish book at the kitchen table. That said, we need to remember that Torah has to always be there; if Torah and all it represents is limited to the places we imbue with

sanctity, we are missing the point; we are meant to bring the *Mishkan* and the Holy Tablets into every facet of our lives.

The Torah is invisible, precisely because Hashem is invisible; by not allowing ourselves to be distracted or misdirected by seeing the Tablets of the law, or the parchment in the Mezuzah and Tefillin, we remind ourselves that no matter how dark life may seem, like the black tefillin; the Torah is always inside shining its light, and Hashem is always with us even the darkest night, if we will but let Him in.

Indeed, it is a matter of faith to even believe that the tablets are really there considering that we never actually see them. Perhaps that is precisely the point; even in the cold dank sewers of Auschwitz, if a person so chooses, they are never really alone....

At the same time, perhaps this is also why the ark is the only article in the *Mishkan* whose measurements are completely in half cubits; perhaps we are not meant to feel we have the whole picture...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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