

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Terumah)

Many years ago, long before we founded Yeshivat Orayta, I was privileged to direct a program called Isralight, which was primarily what some would refer to as a 'Kiruv' or 'outreach' program. The students, mostly post-College and young professionals, usually came from a very limited Jewish background seeking spirituality and meaning in their lives.

I recall one day as we were beginning a new three week program, a student walked in who looked vaguely familiar. Bare-headed, with a lumberjack beard and wearing jeans and a T shirt, it took me a minute to realize he was a boy who had been in yeshiva with me though a few years younger.

He came with his non-Jewish girlfriend with whom he was living, and as he did not introduce himself, I decided to pretend I did not recognize him.

After a few days of classes and discussion we spent Shabbat with the group in the Old City, and I decided to do something a little different. Usually at the Shabbat meals I would teach and sing niggunim (tunes) without words as most of the students did not know the traditional Shabbat zemirot songs.

But in consideration of this student, that Friday night I started singing a traditional Friday night Zemirah (Shabbat song) , having recalled that he had a beautiful voice and thinking he might enjoy the memory from years past. And as we sang, he started to cry....

I sat up with him that Friday night reminiscing about our days in yeshiva especially as I had a vivid memory of our Rosh yeshiva Rav Aharon Lichtenstein asking him a difficult question during a class and recalled his deft response.

Finally, I asked him to share his story: how did someone who had clearly enjoyed significant proficiency in Talmud in one of the top Talmud classes in the world, with one of the previous generation's greatest Torah minds, end up living with a non-Jew in the Village in NY?

He told me that after yeshiva high school and a year in yeshiva in Israel, he had attended a top Ivy league University but had maintained his learning and Jewish practice. He had a chavrusa (Talmud study partner) twice a week which all seemed fine, until one day someone asked him why he was studying all this Talmud, and he was not quite sure how to answer the question; it was just something everyone knew you did....

And the straw that brought down the camel's back for him happened not long after that in a contemporary philosophy course he was taking; the professor asked who would be willing to share if they believed in G-d to which he readily responded in the affirmative. But when the Professor proceeded to ask: "So what is G-d?" he suddenly realized he had no idea how to answer that question; and the walls for him came tumbling down.

He had built for himself, over years of study, a magnificent castle; a structure of Jewish practice and Talmudic analysis. But he had built it entirely in the air; it had no foundations, so it was only a matter of time before the winds of doubt would knock it down.

This week, we read the portion of Terumah. After receiving the Torah we are enjoined by Hashem (G-d) to build a tabernacle; a place in the finite world where we can taste the Divine; where we can experience the spiritual depth of a close relationship with Hashem.

And as part of this project, the Jews are encouraged to donate and collect all that would be needed to build the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and all its magnificent vessels.

Interestingly, **Rashi's** commentary points out that there were three special funds set up for three specific collections, in the context of building the Mishkan.

One was for sacrifices; another special fund was for collecting in general for all the needs of the Mishkan (a half shekel from each person). But the third special collection, actually mentioned first by Rashi (implying it is the fund with which the Torah begins the collection for the Mishkan) was for the **sockets**, known as the **Adanim**, into which the boards of the fence surrounding the Mishkan were inserted so that they could stand securely.

And one wonders: why a special collection for the sockets? There was no special collection for the Ark, or the Menorah, so why was there a special collection for the sockets which would seem to be a much less significant piece of the building?

The last **Lubavitcher Rebbe**, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson shares that the sockets represent the foundation; they are the reason the structure can stand; and we all know a building is only as strong as its foundation.

Before we get too caught up in the magnificent beauty of the Ark, and the intricate design of the menorah, representing the brilliance and light of Jewish wisdom, we have to be sure we have a strong foundation.

This student I rediscovered had effectively created a beautiful menorah of Torah study, and even a wonderful palace of Jewish life and rituals. But he had never had the chance to build the strong foundations necessary to be sure the palace would last.

The **Ramchal** (Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato) in his classic eighteenth century work the **Mesilat Yesharim** (pathways of the righteous) in his introduction, points out how many people in the traditional Jewish world are so invested in advance Torah study, whilst neglecting the foundations of a deeper connection with Hashem and the spiritual underpinnings of Judaism.

We are living in challenging times. When discounting the Orthodox traditional Jewish community, over 70% of Jews in the West today are marrying outside the Jewish faith. And an Avichai foundation study ten years ago concluded that 25% of Orthodox Jewish students who attend secular Colleges abandon their traditional Jewish identity.

(“One-quarter of the students who come to college as Orthodox Jews...changed their denominational identity while at college.” Avichai Foundation, “Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus,” Report, Jan. 2006)

We need to take a closer look at the sockets of Jewish life and ensure the next generation is prepared for the challenges of Jewish life in a secular world. How do we connect with G-d? Is G-d relevant in our lives? Why keep Kosher? Isn't what's important what comes out of our mouth more than what goes in? Why pray? Are we trying to change G-d's mind? Why do we wear tefillin every morning? Is there some meaning to binding leather boxes to our heads and arms? And the list goes on....

As we continue to share the Tabernacle of Judaism with our children, we need to be sure the sockets are taken care of as well....

Wishing all a Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman