Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Terumah)

Sixteen hundred Jews, mostly elderly and families with children, protected by barely two hundred fighters; the odds for the besieged Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948, were beyond impossible. The Jordanian Legion, by far the best fighting force in the Middle East, committed an entire division of 3200 men, their most elite fighting force, to winning this battle. Approximately thirty thousand Arab irregulars, local Arabs with a gun and a cause, supported them; the Jews were in desperate straits.

There were no reinforcements to be had, but the Israeli fighters, against all odds, refused to give up. They had only three heavy machine guns between them, and one of them was set in a sandbag position on the edge of the Churvah Synagogue, a stone's throw away from the Muslim quarter. Sitting at the strategic juncture of the widest alleyway into the Jewish quarter, the Jordanians mounted daily and often twice-daily attacks, in full battalion strength, against this three-man Israeli machine-gun position.

Because of the strategic sensitivity of the position, the three men posted there were given very specific orders: they were not allowed to leave the position under any circumstances unless someone came to relieve them. As such, a runner who would dash between the positions avoiding the Jordanian snipers brought their meals to them.

One afternoon, the men manning the position realized that their lunch had not arrived. With no radio, and no way to contact the runner, they had no option other than to wait and hope their lunch would arrive sooner rather than later. But, as the afternoon wore on and the sun sank lower on the horizon, they began to worry: what if the Jordanians had somehow circled around behind them and cut them off?

Finally, as darkness approached, one of them decided to venture out into the street and see if he could get a better picture of what was going on. And that was when he discovered Nissim Ginni, the youngest Israeli soldier ever to fall on active duty.

Hit by sniper fire not far from where they were sitting, Nissim, a runner whose mischievous grin and flashing eyes had shored up the men on the most desperate occasions, was only ten years old.

The most puzzling part of his death was that he had been hit in the stomach and quite obviously bled to death. A stomach wound is an extremely painful injury, which left the men wondering why Nissim had not at the very least called out to them for help.

The theory was that Nissim understood what calling out to his comrades would have meant. Sniper fire is the most surreal type of warfare; you don't realize at first what is happening, because with all the normal noise of warfare, and the distance of a good sniper, you don't even hear the shot.

Realizing that if he cried out the men would come to his aid, Nissim Ginni, a ten-year-old boy, chose to bleed to death all alone in an alleyway, rather than risk the lives of his comrades.

Was it worth the price? A ten year old boy, and countless others, gave their lives for a hilltop city smaller than the size of most University campuses, and the question so many pundits are asking is: can a piece of land ever be worth such a price? Is there anything we can say, standing over the grave of Nissim Ginni, re-buried on the Mount of Olives in 1967, that makes sense of all this?

What, indeed, is the seemingly incomprehensible preoccupation we seem to have with land and can any piece of property ever be worth fighting, much less dying for?

This week's portion, *Terumah*, introduces us to one of the most challenging concepts in Judaism.

"*Ve'Asu' Li' Mikdash, Ve'Shachanti' Be'Tocham*."
"*And they shall make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst*." (Shemot 25:8)

Hashem wants… what, exactly? A home? A sanctuary? The most obvious difficulty with this idea is why, and in fact, *how* G-d, the endless unlimited One, can or would be confined to a limited space? One of the first things we learn about G-d as children is that G-d, Hashem, is everywhere.

Why is the building of the Tabernacle, clearly the forerunner of the Temple, one of the most central ideas in Judaism?

It is interesting to note that the Ramban, in discussing the goal of building this sanctuary for G-d in the desert, says that the essence of this *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was to recreate the Sinai experience, wherein G-d's presence dwelled on the mountain. (19:20).

In other words, the mitzvah to build a physical space on earth for G-d's presence stems from the first physical place where G-d chose to 'dwell' on earth: Mount Sinai.

Why did we, as a people have to go to a specific mountain in order to receive the Torah? If G-d is everywhere, what difference did it make where we were when we received the Torah?

And why does the idea of a heightened relationship with G-d almost always occur in connection with space?

Moses' relationship with G-d begins at the burning bush on Mount Chorev, which is very clearly the same mountain we will later refer to as Sinai.

And all of the forefathers have intense spiritual experiences associated with specific spaces. Abraham has to take his beloved son Yitzchak all the way to Mount Moriah (which Jewish tradition has as the same mountain where the Temple will one day stand), and Yitzchak, just prior to his marriage with Rivkah goes out to pray "in the field". Why does he need to be in the field? What difference does it make *where* you are when you pray? Shouldn't it be all about *who* you are? And Yaakov has his famous dream of angels and ladders in Beit El, where he ultimately declares:

"Indeed G-d is in this place!" (Genesis 28:16)

But isn't G-d in every place?

In fact, the very dawn of Judaism carries this same challenge: the first command G-d gives Abraham is to go "*…to the land that I will show you*." (Genesis 12:1) Why does Abraham even need to go to a specific land? If his mission is to bring G-d into the world, why can't he get started right away in Mesopotamia?

This mitzvah forces us to confront one of the most basic themes in Judaism: the seeming need for creating sacred space. This central position in Judaism is one we are confronted with every time we go to pray in a Synagogue.

It is worth noting that Rashi feels that the need for a temporary physical sanctuary for G-d in the desert was necessitated by the sin (or mistake) of the Golden Calf.

Think about it: people often assume that the Golden Calf was such a great transgression on the part of the Jewish people because six weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments, including: "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*", the Jews seemingly 'forgot' all about G-d, and sank back into their Egyptian habits and idolatries. But in truth, that would be incomprehensible. Could anyone, after hearing the word of G-d directly, and while still at the very foot of Sinai, forget such a basic truth as the Oneness of G-d?

No, the Jewish people's mistake at Sinai was not that they forgot about G-d; it was that they weren't quite sure what to *do* with G-d. If the challenge we received at Sinai was to make this entire physical, temporal world a sanctuary for G-d, how are we meant to do that? How can we, as physical beings, create a relationship with something as endless and intangible as G-d?

One might think that Sinai's message was to rise above the physical world in order to develop a spiritual and meaningful relationship with G-d.

But the message of Sinai was that the Torah (tablets) had to come back down to earth. Can we infuse the physical world with the spiritual essence of G-d? This is the ultimate question posited to us as a people at Sinai. And this is why the Jewish people attempt to infuse the very spiritual experience of Sinai, which began with three days of separation and purification (19:10-11,15), with the very physical experience of the Golden Calf.

But they were sadly mistaken, because in the end, they were not infusing the physical with the spiritual, they were merely creating a purely physical experience alongside a purely spiritual one.

So often, when we speak of the value of the physical world in Judaism, we mistakenly believe that physical experiences are as important as spiritual ones. And we separate the two, by assuming the one or the other. We consider eating to be a physical experience, and prayer or Torah study to be spiritual in nature. But Judaism suggests that the very physical act of eating needs as well to be a spiritual moment, and the act of prayer needs to be wrapped up in the physical as well.

There is a beautiful *Mishnah* in *Ethics of the Fathers*, which teaches that a person who interrupts his Torah study by exclaiming: "How beautiful is this tree!" literally is worthy of forfeiting his life. **Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch** points out that this does not mean a person should not interrupt his Torah study to wonder at the beauty of the trees. Rather, it means that if the beauty of nature and the world is an *interruption* of one's Torah study, then there is something wrong with said person's relationship with Torah. Because the beauty inherent in all of creation is not an interruption of one's relationship with G-d, it is part of it.

Which is why the response, according to Rashi, is to build a Mishkan (Tabernacle). Specifically in such a spiritual place we recognize the challenge and the value of synthesizing both the physical and the spiritual into one, with the aim of bringing G-d into the world, through us.

And this is the concept of sacred space. Every great idea and every worthy goal needs a focal point, and if the mission of the Jewish people on this world is to bring G-d into the world, then the challenge of infusing the physical world with spiritual beauty begins with that rock where tradition has it the world was first created, because the entire purpose of physical creation, was to allow us as human beings to be partners with G-d in creating a holy world. And the definition of holiness is seeing G-d in every physical reality, every flower and every tree, every bug and every grape.

And this is the essence of peace or *Shalom*, which also means complete or whole. Because only when the entire world sees the spiritual beauty of G-d in all created and all living, and especially all human beings, will we all be together, in a truly whole and complete world.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman