

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

(Portion of Tetzaveh)

In 2010, addressing the Knesset on the occasion of the visit of his Italian counterpart, Silvio Berlusconi, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told this story:

"I wish to share with you and the members of the Knesset a special story that touched my heart. It is a story about an Italian woman during World War II."

"On the train, on her way to work, this woman observed a German policeman arresting a Jewish girl. The Italian woman, who was then eight months pregnant, came between the German officer and the Jewish girl."

"Without an ounce of fear she confronted the German officer and told him: 'You can kill me, but look at the faces of the passengers on the train. I assure you, they will not let you out of here alive'."



Berlusconi was moved to tears.

"With these decisive words, that Italian woman saved the life of the Jewish girl. She lit, if only for a second, a beacon of human light and courage in the great darkness that covered the entire land of Europe at the time. That brave woman was named Rosa, and one of her children is Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's Prime Minister."

This week, we read the portion of *Tetzaveh*, continuing the Torah's description of the building of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) and the vessels contained therein.

The portion concludes with the instructions for making the altar of gold, on which incense was burned in the sanctuary. One wonders why the instructions for making these vessels are still read in the Torah today; of what relevance can the golden altar which once graced the Temple have for us today? We have no temple, and we do not offer sacrifices or incense, so why are we still reading about a golden altar? There is an interesting rule (halacha) regarding this Mizbeach haZahav, or golden altar: The Mishna (Chagigah 3:8) teaches us that both the altar of gold and the altar of copper could not become impure and did not ever need to be immersed in purifying water.

In last week's portion *Terumah*, when we are commanded to build a Tabernacle (harbinger of the Temple) G-d says:

“*Ve’asu li Mikdash veshachanti be’tocham* “
 “*Let them make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in them ...*” (Shemot 25:8)

The commentaries note that the verse does not say G-d will dwell in *it*, i.e. in the sanctuary, but rather in *them*: in each and every Jew.

Each of us is a sanctuary; a *Mikdash me’at* or miniature Temple, and even though the actual temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago, the Temple inside each of us survives, and the service in the Temple is a recipe for how we can live a more G-d conscious and thus more meaningful and joy-filled life.

One might have assumed the altar to be the vessel most likely to become impure; after all, impurity (*tumah*) is all about contact with death, and it is on the altar that we offer up the slaughtered animals. But in truth the offering up of the animals on the altar, according to the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe (in his *Likkutei Sichos*), represent our ability to offer up our animal desires allowing them to be consumed. And how indeed does a person overcome his base, animal desires? By consuming them with a love for G-d, fueled by the spark of holiness at the core of each and every one of us.

The fact that the altar cannot become impure represents the idea that as long as we breathe we still carry that inner holy spark, and even in the greatest darkness the light of human decency, even holiness, can yet be found.

Maimonides, in his *Hilchot Deot* (Chap. 1), suggests that all of our character flaws are based on a certain self-centeredness; we become angry because we expect we deserve better. We become arrogant because we think it’s all about us.

If we can recognize that it is not all about us, but about an idea and reality much bigger than ourselves; if we could see the image of G-d in every human being, we could never get annoyed, much less angry at anyone....

Thus, as long as I am seeing my life as an altar where I am not the goal, but rather a vehicle for something much bigger than myself; an opportunity to struggle with why I am here and how I can be a vehicle for creating a better world, that altar will never become impure. In other words, we will never become so focused on ourselves that we lose sight of the people all around us....

Mrs. Berlusconi, living through a very dark time, was able to get beyond herself to see G-d in the stranger standing next to her, and that is what made all the difference.

We live in challenging times, when darkness threatens to engulf entire populations. In Syria and Yemen, Sudan and Nigeria, Iran and North Korea, and wherever Hamas, Hezbollah and ISIS rear their heads, it has become too easy to lose sight of individuals. A perverted perception of G-d allows entire populations to maim, terrorize, rape and murder the innocent with impunity. Deep inside each one of us

lays the Golden altar that can never become impure. The world needs to re-discover that spark of decency; that fire of justice and humanity that will consume the animal and base desires that fuel such evil, and restore the world as it was meant to be....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman