

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Tetzaveh)

It was known as 'Shavua Tirgolot' the 'week of training drills'. It sounded pretty innocuous, but as it turned out, it was a week of hell.

The IDF prides itself on being prepared for any and every eventuality, and to that end, tank crews were trained to automatically respond in any given combat or stress situation. When such events actually occur, you don't have time to think about what to do, you have to already have it down to a T. If there is a fire in the tank you can't start debating who gets the fire extinguisher (or activates the spectronics system) and who opens up the engine doors, it all has to be automatic with everyone knowing exactly what they are meant to do, and even what to do in the event someone is injured and their role needs to be filled by someone else.

To this end we practiced endlessly what to do in the event there was a fire, or the tank was about to overturn, or we had to get the tank under camouflage, and a variety of other possibilities. Each possible scenario was its own day which entailed half an hour of instruction and discussion followed by a tank crew practicing said activity as many as thirty or forty times, until they got it perfect, which meant it was completed in an impossibly small amount of time. And we had to practice not only as tank crews but as infantry squads, in the event we had to abandon our tanks and were forced into infantry combat situations.

This meant clambering out of the tank, removing the 12 kg. heavy machine gun from its position, handing it over to a second crewman who had already jumped down and was ready to receive it, then grabbing two extra heavy ammo boxes, jumping off the tank, and running up the hill they had us practicing on.

Then, mid-run, being told we were under fire which meant hitting the ground in a combat roll and responding with fire after which we had to resume our climb up the hill until we reached the top with all our gear and were able to set up the machine gun post. Our commander would yell out our time which was inevitably not even close to good enough, after which we had to run down with the gear, jump back up on the tank, re-attach everything, put the ammo back in its place and then do it all over again, and again and again... all in the sweltering heat of the desert Middle-Eastern sun...

It was only years later, as a combat officer responding to an actual situation in Lebanon, that I realized as we came under fire and every one of us hit the ground in a perfect combat roll, just how valuable those hours and hours of training actually were. In my mind I took back every negative thought I had considered about our seemingly sadistic commanders; their refusal to accept anything less than perfect absolutely saved my life.

This week's portion, *Tetzaveh*, continues the explanation of the commandment to build the Tabernacle, (the *Mishkan*) and all its vessels, with the depiction of the clothes the Kohanim (Priests) were required to wear during the service in the *Mishkan*.

Interestingly, the different sacrifices which Jews were meant to offer in different situations in the Temple (and the Mishkan) are described and delineated in the book of Vayikra (Leviticus). And the sacrifices which were part of the service on the holidays are described in the book of Numbers (Bamidbar), in the portion of Pinchas, with one exception.

For some reason, alongside all the clothing of the priests and their inauguration the Torah seems to switch gears, commanding us (*Shemot* 29:38-42) to offer the *Korban Tamid*, the twice-daily sacrifice, which was required as part of the daily service in the Mishkan (and later in the Temple, the *Beit ha'Mikdash*).

Why is this daily sacrifice juxtaposed with the building of the Mishkan? Especially considering its natural place in the Torah should have been alongside the sacrifices delineated in the portion of *Pinchas* in the book of *Bamidbar*? Interestingly, only *after* the command to offer the daily Tamid sacrifice does the Torah tell us that (ibid. v. 43-44) that the Mishkan would be sanctified.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the construction of the Mishkan (and later, of the Temple, the *Beit ha'Mikdash*) did not automatically ensure G-d's presence; it was only with the actual offering of the daily *Korban Tamid* and with it the establishment of a routine, that Hashem's presence finally rested on the Mishkan.

Bombastic and inspiring events, powerful as they may be, do not last; they are meant to set the stage for a routine which transcends the excitement of the moment and gives way to what really lasts in the day-in-day-out experience of a daily ritual.

As an example of this phenomenon, the **Rambam** (Maimonides) in his *Hilchot Deot*, or laws of character development, describes in his first chapter an ideal of balance between extremes. But after delineating the need for a person to navigate between anger and apathy, arrogance and low self-esteem, and stinginess and giving too much, Maimonides asks how one makes this balanced behavior a part of one's life.

Surprisingly he does not suggest a person think about it extensively or understand it. Rather, he suggests practicing a desired form behavior again and again and again, until there is no longer any 'torach'; no stress or resistance. (*Hilchot Deot* 1:7)

In other words, the Rambam is defining what a *habit* is: A habit is when one does a particular behavior so regularly, one no longer struggles with it. If a person decides to get back in shape and one morning wakes up at 5am to go for a run, he may find it very difficult to haul himself out of bed at such an hour. But if he does it every day, again and again, at some point it will no longer be an effort; it will become a habit.

I recall once, sitting in the airport transit hall in Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, with a few hours to wait for my connecting flight. It's a huge hall with shops and restaurants and has the feel of a large mall. A fellow sitting near me whom I recognized coincidentally from the flight I had just been on, must have had the same moment of recognition and smiled at me.

As I smiled back, he stood, and took off his sweater, then his shirt and then his pants and shoes, and changed into a t-shirt, sweats and sneakers he had in his carry on and asked me if I'd watch his bag. Amused I nodded in the affirmative and he literally sprinted off across the hall. It was a huge hall, probably a good kilometer across and I watched as he became smaller, until after ten minutes I saw him

running back. And as he got back to where we were sitting he ran past, got to the end of the hall turned around, and started all over again. He must have done about ten laps, and about an hour later, finally came back and began a stretching routine, all of which culminated in a 'shower' using fresh ones and a towel. When he was all done he got back into his clothes and sat down with a smile. Seeing my shocked expression, he said simply 'Can't live without my daily run'!

He had obviously been doing this every day for so long, not only was there no resistance, it was an established habit he could not live without!

Kind of like when I get up in the morning and place my Kippah (yarmulke or skullcap) on my head; I barely think about it, but could not walk around the house without it because it has become a habit. Will Durant once observed "We are what we repeatedly do; Excellence is not an act, but a habit" (Will Durant in *The Story of Philosophy*)

Indeed, for every action as it relates to a particular person there is a finite number of repetitions that will turn something into a habit. And the only question is: what habits do I want to acquire?

Imagine developing the habit to be silent for a few moments as soon as one feels annoyed or angry; how much would that reduce the words spoken in anger we wish we could take back? Or imagine developing the habit to exercise for thirty minutes in the morning first thing, *every single day*, or to spend an hour and a half without one's smartphone upon entering the home at the end of the day, *every single day*....

Perhaps this then is the message of the *Korban Tamid*, the daily sacrifice in the Temple. Indeed, the word *Tamid* actually translates as 'always'. Inspiration is indeed powerful, but it is the decision to create habits that actually changes our lives and the lives of those around us.

What remains is simply to decide what habits we wish to acquire and how much effort we are willing to make to acquire them. And be assured there is a finite number of times we need to practice any activity after which time it will indeed become a habit. And if the habit is worthwhile, then so is the effort.

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem

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