

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Tetzaveh)

If you were a prisoner in Auschwitz and were one of the 'lucky' ones, you were put to work in a place they called 'Canada'. This was the collection center in Auschwitz where the mountains of belongings the Jews had brought with them were sorted after they were murdered. Believing they were being resettled and hoping they would be able, after the horrors of the ghetto to begin a more normal life, the Nazis encouraged them to have hope as this discouraged rebellion...

So what do you bring with you if you can only bring one bag you had to carry? Only those things that will help you survive; there is no room for photographs, precious books, or extra fine clothing. They brought pots and pans for cooking, prayer shawls (talleisim) and Tefillin for praying, winter clothes for the harsh Polish winter, and food; whatever food they had left.

And after they were gassed and burned the prisoners in 'Canada' sorted through it and organized it for sale and for shipment back to the Reich. So these prisoners could sometimes find and hide warm clothes food or valuables which might mean the difference between life and death. And sometimes they could smuggle things they found back to other loved ones to help them survive.

So one day on her birthday in Auschwitz a friend working in Canada managed to smuggle out the most amazing birthday gift Halina Birenbaum ever received on her birthday. Want to guess what it was?

It was a roll of toilet paper.

*Last week, I was in Poland with some forty students from **Yeshivat Orayta**, and we visited the Birkenau (Auschwitz II) death camp where one of the boys completed a tractate of Talmud (Masechet Megillah) next to the actual Barracks his grandmother was in nearly eighty years ago. As we were standing there in the midst of our tears our educational guide, Rav Yitzchak Rubenstein, pointed out the latrine barracks that happened to be the next barracks over and shared with us a little of what it meant to have to go the toilet in Auschwitz.*

Every morning before roll call, the prisoners had a chance to run to the latrines; use the 'bathroom' and wash themselves. But they very quickly discovered how dangerous that was: very often the Ukrainian guards would lie in wait and beat and torture them before letting them use the facilities. Often, these prisoners had dysentery and it was agony just to be forced to stand at attention and answer questions when they were so close to a toilet. And when they would finally explode, unable to hold it in any longer they would receive a good beating for being 'filthy dirty Jews'. And of course when they did manage to get in to the hut, the 'bathroom' was actually a row of holes down the center of the hut with no privacy, and no guarantee the prisoner before you had not already soiled the entire area you were about to sit on. And no-one had toilet paper; at best they tore a rag from the corner of their uniform which they kept in their pocket. If they were lucky they got to wash it every couple of weeks....

With all this, in the freezing bitter cold of early morning before roll call in Auschwitz, it is understandable why most prisoners gave up on washing themselves or even their hands.

Into this nightmare reality came one Reb Yaakov (I forget his family name) a Slonimer Chossid whom I met many years ago.

*At the time I did not understand what he was sharing with me, but I recall him sharing that he thinks one of the things that allowed him to survive Auschwitz was that no matter what, he found a way to do netillas yadayim and ritually wash his hands every morning, even in Auschwitz. His rebbe many years earlier (the Slonimer Rebbe) had exhorted his chassidim that no matter what happened they should always be meticulous about fulfilling the obligation to wash one's hands in the morning (Netillat yadayim), because **'the world watches to see if a Jew is pure'**.*

Statistically, as it turned out those who washed themselves regularly were much more likely to survive as they were less likely to contract many of the diseases which sapped the remaining strength of the prisoners....

This week we read the portion of Tetzaveh and are introduced for the very first time, to the Priestly caste of *Kohanim*; a new religious order. Meant to serve as role models for the Jewish people, the descendants of Aharon will have the responsibility of serving in the Tabernacle (the *Mishkan* and later the Temple, the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*).

Interestingly, the first action mentioned in the Torah which will ultimately be the responsibility of the Kohanim, is the preparing of the oil and wicks for the daily lighting of the menorah in the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*. Equally noteworthy is the fact that, although this was a daily part of the service generally performed by the Kohanim (though there is some debate as to whether a non-Kohein could actually light the menorah) it is also presented here as a Mitzvah for the Jewish people.

Rashi (*Shemot* (Exodus) 27:20) notes, based on the description in the verse: “*katit la'maor*” (*pressed for illumination*) that the oil used for the menorah was meant to be free of sediment, unlike the oil used in the sacrificial offerings which could in fact contain sediments.

Rav Moshe Feinstein suggests (in his *Darash Moshe*) that the menorah was the symbol of Torah education, and a Jewish leader and teacher has to be clear and free of any pollutants; his actions had to be obviously above reproach to any who saw him, without requiring any subsequent explanations, as the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers 1:11, quoting the sage *Avtalyon*) says:

“*Chachamim! Hiza'haru be'divreichem!*” “*Scholars! Be careful of your words (and deeds)!*”

A Jewish leader both in word and in deed, can have no pollutants and must be seen as completely pure.

The sediment then is a lacking in the oil and a leader cannot be perceived as lacking, in deed or in word, even by subsequent explanation they are no longer found wanting.

Indeed, this seems to be a theme that runs through the portion as Rav Moshe points out later regarding the two altars in the Temple:

There were two *mizbechot* (altars) in the *Mishkan* (and later in the *Beit Ha'Mikdash*):

1. The Copper Altar (the *Mizbeach Hane'choshet*), which stood in the courtyard (the *Azara*) outside the actual temple building.
2. And the Golden Altar (the *Mizbeach hazahav*) which stood inside the Temple (the *Heichal*).

One would think therefore, that the Golden Altar is holier or on a higher level than the Copper Altar considering that it is much closer to the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies (the *Kodesh Kodashim*).

Yet the Torah actually describes the Copper Altar as holy of holies (ibid. 29:37 and 40:10) while the Golden Altar on which the incense was offered and which actually sits in the Temple itself, opposite the Ark, only as 'holy' (ibid. 40:9) which seems backwards.

Explains Rav Moshe; the Torah scholar and leader who sit inside the holy places (the Synagogues and study halls or *Batei Hamedrash*) amongst other holy individuals who see them as holy are considered by the masses, or those outside, as 'holy of holies' who watch carefully everything they do and say. As such they must be extremely careful in all they say and do. Hence the outer Altar represents how we are seen on the outside, and *that* is the holy of holies....

There are people in this world who challenge us by their deeds to live up to the holiness for which we were created, and we can only hope to aspire to the example they leave behind...

Wishing all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman