

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Tetzaveh)

Priorities; sometimes, we need to take a step back and appreciate the things that are really important in life, if for no other reason than the opportunity it affords us to take note of the things that occupy so much of our time that really aren't so important....

Several years ago this week, I found myself walking in to Har Herzl, Israel's national military cemetery, for the thirty-day memorial service for Yosef Yitzchak Goodman of blessed memory, the paratrooper who fell to his death after cutting his lines to save his commander.

Not having been there in a while, it's always a strange feeling to walk past the graves of so many young men and women who gave everything that we might have this incredible country, and there are some good friends who lie in this holy earth....

There is a quiet, unique to cemeteries, which is especially powerful in Mount Herzl, and even the young soldiers were talking in hushed tones with none of the usual horsing around....

Yosef was in an elite commando unit with an extremely difficult training course, which means the boys who make it through must share a certain determination; an aspiration to excellence which they demand of themselves, even more than the unit demands of them. In the process, they become bound together as one, something that is the backbone of any serious army unit, because it is the framework which allows these young men to know, with absolute certainty, that they can put their lives in their comrades' hands, any time, any place.

All of which is part of why the energy in such a place, with such a group, on such a day is indescribably unique.

At one point, their commanding officer, wearing the less fancy uniform used in the field, with no medals and only his rank of Lieutenant Colonel on his shoulders, strode up the microphone, to eulogize the young man he had lost.

I couldn't help but wonder, of all the moments soldiers share in the field, which one of them he would choose to speak about.

He began to describe the end of the 'maslul' or course of training, when, after a year and a half, the boys of Maglan, this elite commando unit, have finally finished the full course of training.

Mind you, in these units they do not wait to be deployed in the field until their training is completely done; by the end of their first six months, as with all battle-worthy units, they are already being deployed in harm's way, itself part of their training; and judging by the stories, this particular unit had

already been tried and tested, and the men who made it to the end of their course, had obviously not been found wanting....

On the last night of these boys' training course, their commander revealed, this unit has a tradition that all the graduates climb a very steep mountain in the Negev desert near their base, simply known as 'The Mountain'. And when they get to the top, with all their gear, the rest of the battalion is waiting for them at the top, and along with the fireworks and the celebrating into the night, there is a very special ceremony where each soldier entering the family of this unit receives his commando wings (worn alongside the paratrooper wings on the opposite breast). Their tradition is that they take off the pin covers and slam the wings, pin-point-first, through the boys' shirts something that can involve no small amount of pain....

As such, he described how he always takes note of how different soldiers approach this moment, some more hesitant, some eager, but apparently, none quite like Yosef did.

Unbeknownst to the battalion commander, Yosef, at the bottom of the mountain, had confided to one of the men, that when he got his handshake, along with the wings, he was going to make sure it was a moment neither of them would ever forget, and so it was.

When Yosef (a tall, strapping fellow, who was a supreme athlete, and after many months of army training in which he excelled, was also six feet plus of pure muscle), stepped forward to receive his wings he shook his commander's hand and, not letting go, squeezed it so hard, the commander finally had to say 'dismissed'. Rubbing his hand as he spoke over Yosef's grave, with the hint of a smile across his face, he looked straight into Yosef's parents' eyes and said he could still feel the strength of that handshake. Like everything else Yosef did, he gave it his all. In that moment, the entire world was all about a handshake.

I have not stopped thinking about that handshake and that moment on Mount Herzl, since I heard this story. Of all the stories I am quite sure this commander could have shared, what made him choose such a seemingly benign experience; the experience of a handshake?

This week's portion, *Tetzaveh*, in a seemingly insignificant verse, may perhaps suggest a response to this question:

"Ve'asita' bigdei kodesh le'Aharon achicha', le'chavod, u'letifaret."

"And you shall make holy clothes for Aaron your brother, for honor and beauty." (Shemot (Exodus) 28:2)

In addition to all the details regarding the special clothing for the *Kohanim* (Priests) known as the ***Bigdei Kehuna***, their size, color, how to make them, and all the rest of the laws relating to them, the Torah takes the trouble to stress, right from the start, the fact that these *Bigdei Kehuna* have to be made *le'chavod, u'letifaret.*" for honor and beauty."

The obligation for *Kohanim* (priests) to wear special, beautiful garments when they serve in the Temple would seem to be in order to lend an air of honor and respect to the Temple service. Service in the

Temple should not be done in just any old clothes, but rather in special clothing, because this is special work.

Now this, in and of itself makes sense. But Jewish tradition gleans from this verse much more than just an exhortation to make the service special. In fact, the **Rambam** (Maimonides) points out (*Hilchot Klei' Hamikdash* 10:4-5) that if a *Kohein* was missing any piece of his attire, (or even if he added something not meant to be worn) his entire service was completely invalid. Indeed, the Halacha (Jewish law) goes a step further: if any of these priestly clothing was torn or ripped, it could not be a part of the Temple service, and again, Maimonides points out (*Hilchot Biat HaMikdash* 1:14 & *Klei' Hamikdash* 8:4) that in the event a Priest did wear torn or stained clothing while performing a service in the Temple, it would again completely invalidate the service.

Why? Why would a small stain on a *Kohein's* shirt mean that all the otherwise pure activity was completely invalid? If the High priest did exactly what was required of him on Yom Kippur but with a stained tunic, then the entire Yom Kippur service was invalid, and the entire Jewish people would not gain forgiveness? Doesn't that seem a bit extreme?

Are clothes and external trappings really so important? Doesn't it seem in this instance we have lost perspective on what is really important, making the wrapping paper, as it were, more important than the gift itself?

It is especially interesting to note that we are obligated to attempt to beautify *any* mitzvah (any commandment or service to G-d).

Learned from the verse: "*Zeh' Keli' Ve'anveihu*" "*This is my G-d and I will beautify Him*" (*Shemot* (Exodus) 15:2), the Talmud (Tractate *Shabbat* 133b) explains this verse to mean we should beautify every mitzvah we do, and always strive to ensure that mitzvot are done in as beautiful and respectful a way as possible. However, unlike the garments of the *Kohanim*, with other mitzvot, the lack of beautification does not invalidate the mitzvah it is merely the missed opportunity of making a mitzvah more beautiful.

I remember, as an example, the year I was stuck on a small base in the army while we were at the end of our tank-maneuvers training, just before the festival of Sukkoth (the festival of the booths).

We were given only a few hours to build a Sukkah (booth), and it was, to be honest, not very beautiful. Made of some cardboard attached to the back of the dining room, with some bamboo cane and bush-branches on top, and only three feet tall, such that you could only sit down in it one at a time, it was nonetheless a kosher Sukkah, and we did fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkah, (along with the opportunity to consider the messages of the temporary nature of life).

Of course, this leaves us wondering why the *Bigdei Kehuna*, the priestly clothing is different: why does it need a separate verse to teach us something we have already learned as a separate mitzvah, and why in the case of the *Bigdei Kehuna*, is the fulfillment of the mitzvah it comes to enhance lost completely in the event that beautification does not occur?

Rav Avigdor Nevensahl in his *Sichot LeSefer Shemot*, suggests that there is a fundamental difference between this mitzvah and all of the others.

You see, in most mitzvot, there is the fulfillment of the mitzvah, and then there is the beautification of the mitzvah. And while they are related, they are also separate.

Even if I bring my *Tefillin* to Synagogue in a paper bag, though it may not be very respectful, I still fulfill the mitzvah of wearing *Tefillin*, and if a groom showed up to his wedding in jeans and a T-shirt it might not be very respectful, but they would indeed be married at the end of the ceremony.

But when it comes to the *Bigdei Kehuna*, the reason one does not fulfill the entire service when the clothes aren't as beautiful as they are meant to be, is because in this case, the beautification of the mitzvah is not *separate* from the fulfillment of the mitzvah, it is the mitzvah.

The entire point of The *Kohanim* wearing beautiful clothing *is* in order to make the service more beautiful; as such, if I am not wearing beautiful clothes (i.e. they are ripped or stained) then I might as well be wearing jeans.

And it is no accident that this mitzvah whose essence is the beautification of service to G-d, is based in the Temple. After all, what is building a Temple (or the *Mishkan*, the temporary predecessor to the Temple our portion speaks of) all about? Why, indeed do I need to serve G-d in a particular place, and in a particular space? Isn't G-d everywhere?

The entire point of the mitzvah of building a *Mikdash*, or Temple, is to allow us the opportunity to create one place, one environment that is so pure, and so inspirational, so beautiful and so holy, that we can hardly help but be inspired and in awe, when experiencing it.

Indeed, there is a little-known Halacha that demonstrates this idea. The Talmud teaches us: "*Ein shvut ba'Mikdash*", there are no rabbinical decrees in place in the actual Temple.

This is because these rabbinic decrees are designed to safeguard us and prevent us from making mistakes and transgressing Biblical commandments. For example, we do not blow the Shofar when it falls on Shabbat, lest we come to carry it (a Biblical prohibition).

But we most certainly do blow the Shofar on Shabbat in the Temple itself, (*Mishna Rosh Hashana* 4:1) perhaps because when we are in the Temple, the environment allows us to be in such a state of awe that the Rabbis are confident we could not possibly come to transgress a biblical commandment in such a place.

And while we are not, most of us, of maintaining such a state of awe and inspiration in our day to day experiences, there is something to be said for the impact such an occasional experience has, on who we are, and on all that we do.

As an example, we all need to be more careful with our speech, not to speak improperly, avoid foul language, and painful and even hurtful gossip and slander. Using foul language is certainly not a good thing, but I would venture most of us would not be capable of it, if we were standing in discussion with

the *Chofetz Chaim* or the *Lubavitcher Rebbe*.... As such, the occasional visit to experience being in the presence of such greatness is a valuable experience.

Interestingly, there is another important idea that flows from this thought which is worth taking note of:

It is interesting that in this instance, that which is normally less important has indeed become the essence of the idea.

Decorating your home and making it beautiful is a wonderful thing, and allows for a nicer environment to do all sorts of good, but it is secondary to the need to build with the right materials to ensure that the home will stand strong for many years to come. A home, in the end, is a refuge and a shelter. But in the *Beit HaMikdash*, beautifying it becomes the entire point. And it is important to be sure, in all our experiences, that we pay attention to what the primary and what the secondary components of any experience are.

Indeed, this is at the root of the original catastrophe in the history of the world as written in the Torah, and as such, on a mystical level, it represents the blueprint of the root for all the mistakes we make in this world.

When the snake is attempting to convince *Chava* (Eve) to feel free to partake of the forbidden fruit, he says:

“*Af ki’ amar Elokim lo’ tochlu’ mi’kol etz ha’gan.*” (*Bereishit (Genesis) 3:1*)
“*But G-d has said you shall not eat from **all the trees** of the garden.*”

However, this was not entirely true, as *Chava* (Eve) points out:

“*U’ mipri ha’etz asher betoch ha’gan amar Elokim lo’ tochlu’ mimenu’ ve’lo’ tigu’ bo.*”
“*And from **the tree** (singular) which is in the garden G-d has said do not eat from it, and do not touch it.*” (3:3)

In fact, G-d never told Adam not to eat from all the trees, but only from the one Tree of Knowledge.

However, in clarifying this point, *Chava* (Eve) adds another detail which in fact G-d never asked for, which is the prohibition against touching the tree.

The *Midrash* (Rabbinic legend) has the snake seize the opportunity by pushing *Chava* into the Tree of Knowledge. Once she sees there is no consequence to touching the tree, it is only a short distance to convincing her there will be no problem with eating from the tree, something with disastrous ramifications for all of humanity, for all time.

But one wonders, where did *Chava* come up with the idea that she was not supposed to touch the tree? After all, G-d never said this!

The *Midrash* explains that this idea was Adam’s who decided that the best way to avoid eating from the tree was to avoid going any where near it.

On the face of it, this is an idea with some merit. The only problem was Adam neglected to tell Eve that this was not from G-d, but rather his own addition.

In other words *the expulsion from the Garden of Eden* symbolizing as it does the distancing of mankind from G-d and resulting in nearly six thousand years of pain and suffering, wandering and struggle, *came as a result of the seemingly insignificant confusion between what was primary and what was secondary*; between the main point and the less important self-imposed safeguard.

Can you imagine? All of the implications and consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve, simply because someone became confused between the critical and the valuable, between the primary and the secondary?!

There is a very important message here, because this is one of the building blocks of life itself.

How often do we become so focused on the insignificant, that we are missing the point of all that we are trying to do?

Imagine you decide to put a lot of effort into celebrating your wife's birthday, because she is worth it, and she is the light of your life.

I remember one year I wanted to surprise my wife on her birthday, so I called up all our closest friends and planned a Friday morning surprise picnic party on a beautiful mountain overlooking the *Elah* valley half an hour from our home.

In addition to planning all the food and who would bring what and sneaking away to make it sure it would all be set up, I then had to convince my wife that this Friday we were all going for a family drive and she had to get the cooking done early... (Seeing that this was a couple weeks before her actual birthday so she wouldn't guess, I wonder if she thought I was nuts...)

Imagine if, as we were getting ready to leave, my wife had spilled juice on my shirt and I had started screaming at her; wouldn't that be nuts? The entire point of the day was to show her how much I love her, only to end up yelling at her? Could you imagine anything sillier? Kind of like not wanting to miss the end of a TV program in the airport, and missing the plane you were supposed to catch!

How often do we miss the boat while we are examining details on the docks?

Maybe the entire exercise of having a Temple, including the special garments we were meant to see the Kohanim wearing, was an exercise in taking a step back to appreciate the really important moments and the purpose of all that we do and all that we are.

A simple handshake, full of power and promise, life and vitality, appreciated by two men, bound for a moment by shared experience and common goals. Most would have missed the moment and most certainly not remembered it. But for me, this Battalion Commander, with all his other responsibilities and challenges; he got it.

And as I walked out of Har Herzl with both my brothers, all three of us combat veterans, who very easily (*chas veshalom*) might never have gotten to this moment, I felt like I was walking back into life, appreciating the joy of rediscovering the power of the given moment and reveling in the knowledge that this moment is here, now.

And maybe life is just a little bit different; maybe we can all take a little more time this Shabbat to be in the moment and appreciate what the really important things really are, and learn to get our priorities a little straighter, a little clearer.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman