

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Toldot)

Sometimes, the most poetic people can come in the most surprising packages.

If you would have asked me what Abir would end up doing with his life, I would have imagined him as a bouncer, or perhaps a taxi driver in New York.

Abir, an ex-paratrooper, is one of the unsung heroes of the battle of the Chinese chicken farm, when a battalion of paratroopers in the Yom Kippur war had to take a crucial Egyptian position by running 300 yards of open kill-ground; most of the battalion never made it out of there. I could easily have imagined him grabbing one of the first planes out after the war, maybe to New York or Los Angeles.

But you can still find Abir tucked away in the art gallery he owns called the Olive Tree in the Old City of Jerusalem opposite the Cardo. He is one of those personalities described in books as 'larger than life', tall, dark, and handsome, with a robust, deep laugh and a twinkle in his eye, and it still amazes me to see how much pleasure he takes from the quiet solitude of his gallery; he almost seems to draw the energy out of the walls.

His gallery, just like its owner, reads like a book you can't put down.

This gallery, which was a sesame seed factory where the Ottomans and Turks made Halva (he remembers his father during the siege of Jerusalem when there was no food, going in to the factory and wiping his feet on the floor so he could walk out with Halva on his feet and eat it!) still boasts a large fifteen hundred year old mill stone used to grind down the sesame at the end of the Talmudic period.

And in the back, there is a large portrait of his parents, who walked to Israel on foot all the way from Iraq to escape danger and arrive safely in Israel. But you can easily miss the most amazing part of the gallery, if you don't take the time to take the gallery tour....

A number of years ago, Abir decided he needed a safe in the gallery. Often, when people would buy art they would pay in cash, and on a good day he could accrue a significant amount of cash....

As he was a do-it-yourself kind of guy, he decided to break away the wall and install the safe himself. The old Ottoman & Mameluke building stone is soft, and fell away easily, despite its thickness, under the swings of his 5kg hammer.

At a certain point, he hit hard rock and couldn't figure it out. When he cleared away the debris he uncovered what turned out to be the highest known remaining section of what has come to be known as the Broad Wall, which was re-fortified by King Hezekiah during the First Temple period (mentioned in the bible in the book of Kings) over twenty seven hundred years ago! (Eventually, National Geographic included his story in a documentary.)

And as if that wasn't enough, Abir, among other things, buys Roman glass from the hey-day of the Roman Empire, transforming it into Jewish ritual pieces (such as Mezuzot, candlesticks, and Saturday night havdalah spice sets).

He has been known to say,

"Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire destroyed my city, burned my Temple, and exiled my people. Today you cannot find a real Roman of that empire anywhere in the world, but I, a Jew, live here in a Jewish State and make a living from their remains!"

For reasons Abir himself cannot fully explain, this adventurous soul, whom one might have expected to find exploring the world, chose instead to explore his own backyard.

It would have been so easy, after all the tragedy of his war-time experiences, for Abir to have left this land behind long ago, yet here he still sits, crafting his glass and soaking up the history of an ancient land that seeps out through his very pores.

How and why do some people seem to change direction almost mid-stream? What allows us to connect to our true mission (s) in life, especially when they seem so out of character to where we thought we were headed?

One of the less-noticed verses in this week's portion of *Toldot* affords us a unique opportunity to gain insight into this question.

Yitzchak (Isaac) the second of our Patriarchs seems to be mirroring his father's life.

Avraham has two sons, Ishmael and Yitzchak, but it is only the younger son, Yitzchak, who follows the beliefs of his father and becomes the righteous person his father hopes to raise.

Yitzchak also has two sons, Ya'acov and Eisav, and again, it is only the younger son who seems to follow in his father's path becoming the righteous son his parents hoped to raise.

Avraham's elder son Ishmael will ultimately leave the fold, as will Yitzchak's elder son Eisav.

Both Avraham and Yitzchak are given the ability to bless others, and will share many of the same experiences even down to the detail of disguising their wives (*Sarah* and *Rivka* respectively) as their sisters, when each is confronted with a severe famine forcing them to relocate. According to the Midrash (quoted in **Rashi** 25:19) Yitzchak even *looks* exactly like Avraham, to ensure that people will not suggest he is the illegitimate son of another.

Avraham had dug in this area which had been stopped up and filled with earth by the local Philistines (in an attempt, perhaps, to later 'discover' and thus lay claim to them) as soon as Avraham died (26:15).

Yitzchak is all about following in the footsteps of his father Avraham, trying to do everything his father did. He even digs the same exact wells his father dug, re-claiming these wells as his property by digging them up anew:

"And Yitzchak dug anew the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped up after Avraham's death, and he called them by the same names his father had called them." (26:18)

And it makes sense that Yitzchak re-dug these wells, having acquired many flocks and herds (26:14), just like his father, for which he would obviously need to dig many wells.

Even the beginning of the portion, which is supposedly the portion of Yitzchak, makes this quite clear:

“Ve’eleh toldot Yitzchak ben Avraham, Avraham holid et Yitzchak.”

“And these are the stories (generations) of Yitzchak the son of Avraham, Avraham begot Yitzchak.” (25:19)

While there is much to say about the striking similarities between Avraham and Yitzchak’s life, the difference between Yitzchak and Abraham may be very simple: Avraham was the first; the beginning; Yitzchak was the one who had to follow up; he was the continuation. These are two entirely different roles, each with their challenges and difficulties, and represent different parts of the process, which can best be described as the creation of the nation that will become the Jewish people.

Avraham arrives on the world scene as a lone voice in a very lonely desert; the world is a morass of pagan idolatry, which believes in many gods, and worships the world of nature. Avraham’s mission is to introduce to the world the idea that there is one G-d who created the world and that there is therefore one objective ethic, which can guide the world to peace and coexistence.

Yitzchak does not have the privilege of being the founder of this new idea, and the creator of a new world order. But he is the one who has the challenging task of ensuring that this idea, indeed this mission, does not die. He is not the creator of a new idea, but he is nonetheless its bearer.

All of which makes one particular verse seem rather strange:

After settling in Gerar, a Philistine city, to ride out the famine, and successfully navigating the conflict with the locals concerning his wife Rivka (when the King, Avimelech, orders the Philistines to leave them alone), Yitzchak’s reaction is decidedly unlike his father’s.

One might have expected Yitzchak to gather his flocks and move away, back to the mountains, just as his father Avraham left Egypt when the famine and drought finally passed in his day. (Bereishit (Genesis) 13:1).

But rather than leave the inhospitable environment of Philistine Gerar, Yitzchak actually stays, and begins to *farm* the land:

“Vayizra Yitzchak ba’aretz ha’hi, va’yimtza bashana ha’hi meah shearim, va’yevarchehu’ Hashem. Vayigdal ha’ish vayelech haloch ve’gadel ad ki’ gadal me’od. Vayehi’ lo mikneh tzon u’mikneh bakar va’avudah rabah....”

“And Yitzchak sowed in that land, and in that year he reaped a hundred fold, and Hashem blessed him. And the man (Yitzchak) became great and kept becoming greater until he was very great. And he had acquired flocks and herds and much enterprise (worked fields?).” (26:12-14)

Why does Yitzchak, out of the blue, become a farmer, a path his father Avraham never seems to pursue? In fact, the history of farming up to this point is rather less than illustrious. Noach farmed the land, planting vineyards which were ultimately his undoing, causing him to get drunk and fall naked in his tent. (Bereishit (Genesis) 9:20-21)

And before him, Kayin (Cain) farmed the land which may well have been part of what led him into the field where he murdered his brother Hevel (Abel) the shepherd.

Indeed, the land (and the process of farming it) was cursed by G-d way back when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

“Arura ha’adama ba’avurecha’, be’itzavon tochalena kol yemei chayecha’. Ve’kotz ve’dardar tatzmiach lach ve’achalta’ met esev ha’sadeh. Be’zeat apecha’ tochal lechem....”

“Cursed is the land for you, in sadness shall you eat of it all the days of your life. And thorns and thistles shall grow for you and you shall eat of the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.” (Genesis 3:17-19)

Perhaps this why so many of the great leaders of the Jewish people were shepherds, all the way from Avraham and Ya’acov (and Yitzchak himself) down to Moshe and King David.

So why does Yitzchak suddenly decide to begin working the land? Why this sudden departure from the path of Avraham that Yitzchak seems until now to have been dedicated to follow?

What, indeed, is the difference between farming and herding? A shepherd can essentially take his livelihood with him wherever he goes, something we might have supposed Yitzchak would want to do; after all, he is currently residing in *Gerar*, a Philistine city whose residents were somewhat less than friendly, and he is apparently becoming quite wealthy, arousing no small amount of jealousy amongst his Philistine neighbors (26:14).

Indeed, this has been the path of the Jew for the last two thousand years, living with his bags packed ready to leave town at a moment’s notice, ahead of the pogroms and forced baptisms that was our lot time and time again.

And yet something causes Yitzchak to pursue a new path; to begin to farm, an enterprise rooted in permanence, and yet not easily transferable.

There is another detail where Yitzchak’s life here begins to take a different direction from his father Avraham’s.

When Avraham is confronted with a famine, he actually leaves the land of Israel (not long after he got there in the first place, journeying down to Egypt where he will find fame and fortune as a herdsman, before coming back home to Israel.

Yitzchak, however, faced with the same situation does not leave Israel, rather moving to *Gerar*, a Philistine city near the coast (not far from today’s Gaza). And he does not divert from his father’s response of his own accord; he does this because this is what G-d tells him to do:

“V’ayera elav Hashem va’yomer: ‘Al tered mitzrayma; shechon ba’aretz asher omar eilecha’. Gur ba’aretz hazot ve’eheyeh imcha’, va’avarecheka’ ki’ lecha’ u’lezaracha’ eten et kol ha’aratzot ha’el va’hakimoti et ha’shevuah’ asher nishbati’ le’Avraham avicha’. Ve’hirbeti et zaracha’ ke’chochvei’ ha’shamayim, ve’natati’ le’zaracha’ et kol ha’aratzot ha’el, ve’hitbarachu’ be’zaracha’ kol goyei ha’aretz.”

“And G-d appeared to him and said: ‘Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land that I will tell you. Live in this land and I will be with you and I will bless you, for to you and your offspring I will give all these lands and I will establish the oath that I swore to Avraham your father. And I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens and I will give to your seed all of these lands and through your seed all the nations of the land will be blessed.” (26:2-4)

Perhaps Yitzchak's deviation in occupation is a direct result of G-d's intervention in his chosen location. Why does G-d not want Yitzchak to leave the land of Israel? Especially considering the fact that G-d has brought a famine to the land, this would seem to be an unfair request. At first glance, this would certainly seem to be in keeping with the theme of Yitzchak's role to be the bearer of Avraham's message. Avraham is told by G-d to embark on a journey, leaving everything behind to go to *"the land that I will show you."* (12:1). And now Yitzchak is told that his mission is to actually settle (and thus stay in) that very same *"land that I will tell you"*.

But it goes deeper than that. The **Torah Temimah** explains that Yitzchak notes that there are two blessings Hashem (G-d) promises him here: that he will multiply (and produce many offspring), and that he will be granted these lands.

And just as the blessing of many offspring can only come as a result of man's active decision to pursue this blessing with another in order to procreate, Yitzchak understands that *"blessing only resides in the work of my own hands"* (*"Ein bracha shoreh elah be'ma'aseh yadai"* Tosefta Berachot chap. 6). In other words, if we want to receive G-d's blessings in our lives, we have to be willing to do the work to allow that blessing in.

Here too, lies the great difference between herding flocks and working the land. Flocks are what you have, but land is what you work. More than any other enterprise, land connects us to the idea that nothing in this world is really ours.

There is a beautiful Midrash which illustrates this point:

Two plaintiffs appear before the judge in a dispute over land.

"Zeh omer shel avotai, ve'zeh omer shel avotai..." each claims the land as his inheritance, but neither can offer any evidence to support their claim.

Finally, the judge says to them:

"I have heard each of your claims and can find no basis to find for one of you against the other. So, let's hear what the land has to say". At which point the judge bends low to the ground cupping a hand over his ears as if to hear the land's conversation....! (At this point the two litigants probably are wondering whether they came to the wrong judge...!) Finally, he straightens up and, looking at each litigant in turn, says to them:

"The land says it's not yours, and it's not yours; you're it's, "ki afar atah, ve'el afar tashuv." (Bereishit 3:19) "For you are dust and you will return to the dust."

A person can plough his land, sow his field, irrigate his crops and dream of riches, but it all depends on the rain, doesn't it? There are few occupations in which man has more obviously depended on G-d than farming. I may *have* cattle, but I am only *farming* the land. And yet, no matter how much rain falls, if you haven't planted your crops, you're not going to have any food in the cupboard either. So, farming represents our partnership with G-d. We have to be willing to do our bit in order for Hashem to bestow His blessings.

Why is that? If we are indeed worthy of those blessings, why can't the crops just grow in the field? After all, then we could all spend our days immersed in acts of kindness and learning Torah, right?

Maybe we need to work the land (and everything else in our lives) so hard, because our willingness to work for something demonstrates how much we really want it.

“Le’fum tza’arah agra’ ” says the Talmud; according to the travail (work) is the reward. You get what you put in; you reap what you sow. Ultimately, Hashem created this world as a tremendous act of kindness to us that is so endless it is beyond our capacity to comprehend. And all Hashem really wants is to bestow His love and kindness and blessing on us. But in order to do that, we have to want to receive it. G-d desperately wants us to want what he wants to give us. And isn’t that the essence of all relationships? A healthy relationship is all about giving, and if we find ourselves blessed to be in such healthy, loving relationships we want so very much to give to those we love and we want even more that they should want what we can give them.

All any parent really wants is to be able to give their children all the right things. And we hope that our children will want what we want to give them.

Four thousand years ago, Yitzchak begins to work the land, changing his course and entering a whole new level in his relationship with G-d. If the land represents the gifts we are given, maybe farming represents what we choose to do with those gifts while fully aware they are not really ours to have, but only to work, and that, like all gifts they may not necessarily be here tomorrow.

Like Abir in his shop, with his Roman glass and ancient walls, and his awareness that every day is a gift and a new field to be tilled, may we all be blessed with the wisdom to recognize all the ‘land’ we have been given to work, and the perseverance to farm those ‘fields’ and taste of their bounty....

Shabbat Shalom,

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