

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

Portion of Tzav

I noticed the jeep in the distance almost immediately; it was impossible to miss, raising a dust column you could see for miles. We were on maneuvers deep in the Negev desert, and there wasn't anything else around but us, so we knew immediately the jeep had to be headed our way. Sure enough, twenty minutes later the jeep pulled up alongside our tank and a man with colonel's oak-leaves on his shoulders got out and stretched. Our commander jumped down for a hurried conference, and we were only too happy for the brief respite; I was in the middle of tank commander's course, one of the most depressing experiences I have ever had, and any break from the grind was always welcome.

A moment later our commander ordered the gunner off the tank and told us that this colonel was going to be joining us in the tank and that we did not need to know why or what it was about, but that for the purposes of our training and maneuvers, we should "just treat him like one of the guys". Yeah, right; a full bird colonel, one of the guys? I don't think so. You have to understand we were not even sergeants yet, so our commander, the first sergeant overseeing our training, was the final word, and his commander, a lieutenant, was to us like the prince whose word is law. And his commander, who was the company commander with the rank of captain, was like the King. And his commander, the battalion commander, with the rank of major, was like G-d. So what did that make a full colonel whose rank was equivalent to 'G-d's commander's commander (or the equivalent of a full brigade commander), G-d's mother?

We did our best to stay out of this colonel's way, though when you are sharing a tank that is not very easy. He was not a big talker, and didn't mix much with us enlisted men, which was fine with us. Needless to say, at the end of the day's maneuvers, he didn't sleep in the tank with us, which at least meant we had a little more room than normal. We ended up sharing our tank with him for the better part of three weeks, though, so I did become fairly adept at learning how to sidestep any issues that might have been challenging with such a high-ranking officer on board. One day, however, it all finally came to a head.

We were on a maneuver and I was acting as tank commander. There are four crewmembers in a tank, a driver, gunner, loader, and commander, and to become a tank commander, we had to become accomplished in each position, so we would switch off, in order to become familiar with all the different tasks of a tank crew. Every maneuver had to be repeated four times, so that each of us could train as commanders, and this was my turn.

One of the rules which is taken very seriously in tanks, is what is called "gevulot gizrah", or the limited field of the firing range. You could only fire in a certain direction, and there were always markers to denote where the field of fire actually was. Not only was it forbidden to actually fire outside the permitted field of fire, it was even prohibited to allow your tank gun to stray out of this field once there was a shell in the breach for fear of accidental misfire.

This is an issue the army takes very seriously, given the fact that a shell fired in the wrong direction could easily land in a local town or village, so the punishment for even allowing the tank gun to stray outside the field of fire was the loss of the entire crew's weekend pass.

Now this becomes a challenging affair because generally speaking your job as a commander is to seek out the 'enemy' and bring the main 105mm cannon to bear on the target, at which point the gunner takes over to line up his sights and fire. And while you can see the entire horizon from atop the commander's turret, the gunner looking through his magnified sights from inside the tank, can only see the limited field of vision that appears in his scope. So, if you haven't managed to place the gun exactly on target, he will begin to sweep the main gun sideways in search of the target. And if he is moving the gun in the wrong direction, he may continue searching, not realizing that the gun is turning the wrong way. In fact, when he uses his controls to turn the gun sideways, the entire turret of the gun turns with him such that he is not aware that he is turning completely around, and along with him not only the main gun, but all the machine guns as well.

So on this particular day I was acting as tank commander, and this colonel was practicing his gunnery. And sure enough, he began to rotate the tank gun in search of target acquisition, and I could see the gun was heading outside the field of fire. Years later, especially once you are an officer commanding many tanks, the prospect of commanding one tank crew is a relatively simple thing. But when you are first learning to command a tank, it seems as though there is a tremendous amount to do. Remember that the tank is moving very fast, and you have to make sure the driver is headed in the right direction (the prospect of 52 tons of tank rolling off the side of a hill because you didn't pay attention to where the driver, who can only see minimally through his scope, was going, is a frightening thought....), not to mention keeping the loader's machine gun as well as your own facing in the right direction, ensuring the proper ammo is in the main gun, speaking on the tank radio with your platoon or company commander, making sure you are not falling behind or getting too far ahead of the other tanks, etc.. In fact, the way things work, you don't even have a hand free to take the controls over from the gunner, because one hand is holding the radio switch, and the other is firing your machine gun. So the armored corps has developed a simple system to let the gunner know he has to release the gun controls and stop rotating: as his seat is forward of your legs, deep in the belly of the tank, you simply kick him in the helmet! And he gets the message.

But what do you do when the gunner is a full bird colonel? I screamed into the radio intercom, but to no avail; with all the noise of heavy machine gun fire and the tank engine, he just couldn't hear me.

Finally, in desperation, I decided I wasn't giving up my weekend pass for anyone, so I kicked him in the back of his helmet, and sure enough he immediately figured it out: I heard a grunt that sounded something like "ugh!" over the tank intercom, and he released the controls.

Later, when we all got out of the tank, I discovered he had a huge welt in the middle of his forehead; seems I kicked him so hard his head slammed into the gunner's console...!

I was terrified that somehow I would pay a price for this over-reaction, but never heard another word about it.

And it was only months later that I discovered whom this fellow really was: his name is Shaul Mofaz, and I next ran into him as the base commander when I showed up for officer's course...! He also happened to have been Yoni Netanyahu's second in command on the famous Entebbe mission, where Israeli commandoes flew thousands of miles deep in to the

heart of Africa to rescue Jewish hostages from terrorist hijackers in Uganda, and he would eventually become the Israeli defense Minister.

During the course of the few months (in officer's course) I served under his command that single moment remains with me as a model of what leadership can be. Here was a full colonel, basically kicked in the head by a private, who offered forth no more than a grunt. Not a curse, no formal reprimand or stockade time, not even so much as a dressing down. In that moments we were just two soldiers doing their job...

This week, we read the portion of Tsav, which includes the anointing of Aharon and his sons as Kohanim (priests) for the first time. To anoint them Hashem (G-d) tells Moshe to:

"... take the blood from the slaughtered animal and place some of it in the middle part of Aharon's right ear, upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the big toe of his right foot" (Vayikra8:23).

Some take this to mean that a leader has to learn how to listen, know what to do, and be able to choose a clear direction (path on which to walk...).

Interestingly, this very same procedure is applied to the purification of the Metzora, the leper who according to tradition is being punished with a spiritual malady due to his transgressions including slander and evil speech.

How can the same process anointing the Kohein Gadol (Aaron, the High Priest), a person supposedly on the highest level, be applied in exactly the same fashion, to the metzora who was obviously on a much lower spiritual level? Can it be that two people with two extremely different levels of holiness undergo the same procedure?

There is an interesting discussion in the tractate of Berachot which may shed light on this anomaly.

The rabbis (*Berachot* 2b) are discussing the exact point at which day becomes night. Clearly until the sun has set it is still day, and once the stars have come out it is night, the question is what the status of twilight is.

Rabbi Yossi is of the opinion that "*Bein hashmashot ke'heref ayin*". The transition from day to night is the blink of an eye; it's a split second; there is no middle ground; it is either day, or it is night.

And R Avraham Yitzchak haKohein Kook in his ***Ein Ayah*** commentary explains what rabbi Yossi is suggesting:

Imagine a person is trying to lose weight. First thing he does is to weigh himself and imagine he discovers that he is 300 lbs., and realizes he needs to lose 100 lbs.!

So he decides he will start eating healthier and exercising. After three days of daily walks and lots of fruit and vegetables, he weighs himself and discovers he has lost a lb. To everyone else, suggests Rav Kook, nothing has changed yet; no-one can tell the difference between a 300 lb. fellow and one who weighs 299 lbs.

But he knows the entire world has changed, because has turned things around, and is heading in a completely different direction.

Obviously, the Kohein Gadol (Aaron, the High Priest being anointed) and the Metzora (the leper suffering for his transgressions) are in two completely different spaces, but they share in common the fact that both are trying to grow, to elevate themselves spiritually, and in that moment they are viewed equally.

Perhaps the Torah is teaching us that when two people are trying to grow, Hashem does not see them as totally different. Just like that moment in the tank: such a high-ranking officer being kicked in the head by a simple private, might have been expected to curse, or at least glare at a simple soldier. But I concluded in that moment that he was making sure we knew we were both just soldiers doing our job.

It was a valuable lesson on what a Kohein, a leader, is really meant to be...

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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