

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Va'etchanan)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

At times like these, my thoughts often go back to Dani Moshitz; one of my closest friends, though I only knew him well for a couple of years; he remains forever twenty years old. Dani was killed in a terrorist ambush in 1984 at the Kasmieh Bridge in Lebanon. Thirty years later, his intense love of Torah and of the land of Israel remain an inspiration to me, and to all those who knew him.

In recent weeks once again, the Jewish people's love for this land we call home, has been put to the test, as fresh graves are dug, thousands mourn and our best friends, beloved sons, fathers, lovers are laid to rest; killed in defense of the Jewish people and the land of Israel. How many people can say they are willing to die for a land?

This week's portion, **Vaetchanan**, always read on the Shabbat after *Tisha B'av* (the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples), contains a strange and yet fascinating allusion to this deep relationship we have with the land of Israel

“Az yavdil Moshe shalosh arim be'ever ha'Yarden mizracha shamesh.”

“Then did Moshe set aside three cities east of the Jordan (river).” (Devarim (Deut.) 4:41)

Seemingly out of the blue, with no obvious connection to the events being discussed, Moshe sets aside three cities on the Eastern side of the Jordan River, in the lands of the tribes of Reuven and Gad (and eventually half of the tribe of Menashe).

These three cities, known as *Arei Miklat*, or cities of refuge, were in fact parallel to three additional cities of refuge that would eventually be set on the Western side of the Jordan River (in Israel proper) after the conquest of the Land of Israel in the time of Joshua.

The purpose of these cities as delineated by the subsequent verses here in our portion, were to afford a place of shelter to men guilty of manslaughter (accidental murder) fleeing from their victims' blood relatives.

What purpose does the fulfillment of this mitzvah, commanded by G-d as part of the settling of the land and the creation of a just society, have here in the midst of Moshe's narrative to the Jewish people on the banks of the Jordan as they are about to enter the land of Israel?

Jewish tradition suggests that the purpose of Moshe's long soliloquy here, to the second generation about to enter the land of Israel was to give them reprove (*Tochacha*) on the mistakes they had made in the past perhaps in an effort to ensure they not be repeated in their new venture to create a just and ethical society (a “light unto the nations”) in the land of Israel.

Yet, Moshe's choice of which events in the Jewish people's long journey through the desert he wishes to share, seems somewhat random. He skips entirely the sin of the Golden Calf, opting instead to include the dialogue with the tribes of Reuven and Gad (who prefer to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan), and the sin of the spies.

Even stranger, is the connection all of this has with the opening of this week's portion (implying it is a critical piece of the narrative): Moshe's desperate pleas, left unanswered, to enter the land of Israel with his people. Why is it so important, specifically now, for the Jewish people to hear of Moshe's vain attempts to enter the land of Israel which were subsequently refused by G-d?

Perhaps the dialogue with the tribes of Reuven and Gad hold the key to understanding these events. In the middle of his long speech, Moshe mentions the agreement he came to with the tribes of Reuven and Gad, whose desire to make their homes on the Eastern side of the Jordan River presented somewhat of a quandary for Moshe.

These tribes, recognizing the value of the lush, grazing lands on the eastern slopes of the Jordan river, were quite content to remain there in lieu of entering (and conquering) the rest of the land of Israel.

Just 39 years after the sin of the spies, yet another generation of Jews were apparently willing to forego entry into the Promised Land for (literally) greener pastures. Moshe eventually agrees to their request on the condition that they first leave their families and herds as the spearhead ("chalutzim" literally 'the pioneers' ...) of the army that would ultimately conquer the land. (See *Bamidbar* (Numbers) Chapter 32).

And now Moshe, according to **Rashi**, interrupts a speech to the entire Jewish people to speak exclusively to the tribes of Reuven and Gad. Perhaps, suggests Rav Avigdor Nevensahl, to dissuade the tribes of Reuven and Gad from what Moshe still believes is essentially a bad idea.

These tribes, after all, will remain more distant from the Temple and the centers of Torah learning in the land of Israel and in Jerusalem, as well as allowing the river to divide the Jewish people, something that does not seem to have been the original intent of the Jews' journey from Egypt to the land of Israel.

Reuven and Gad are willing to settle for a lower spiritual environment (amongst the idolatrous nations of the East) on the Eastern banks of the Jordan, simply because the grazing land is better and the conquest is already complete.

Perhaps this is why the sin of the spies which was all about the desire to remain comfortable (albeit spiritually) in the desert, is included in this speech, whereas the sin of the Golden Calf and receiving the Torah at Sinai are omitted at this point, because they represent a completely different issue.

Hence Moshe spends so much time exhorting them as to the evils and pitfalls of idolatry, precisely because this is the main reason he feels they should relent and cross over the Jordan with everyone else.

And perhaps this explains our portion beginning with Moshe's burning desire to enter the land of Israel: because that is the entire point! 'Look', says Moshe, 'how much I longed to enter the land of Israel, and here you are able to go and yet choose to stay in the East!!'

Most of all, perhaps Moshe is challenged by the fact that these two tribes would separate themselves from the rest of the tribes of Israel; after all, it is when we are united as one Jewish people that we reach our greatest potential.

So Moshe makes a deal with these tribes that at the very least they should spearhead the army's conquest of the land.

This cannot be because the army 'needs' these tribes; after all, if it is Hashem's will that the Jewish people conquer the land of Israel, then the land will be conquered with or without the tribes of Reuven and Gad. Clearly, Moshe tells them they must agree to be a part of conquering the land because they

need this for themselves. Perhaps by giving that much to something, these tribes may yet fall in love with the land and choose to remain.... (After all, the more you give to something, the more you fall in love with it, and the tribes of Reuven and Gad end up fighting alongside their Jewish brethren for fourteen long years before they are able to cross back over to the eastern part of the Jordan valley....)

However, as much as Moshe tries, the tribes of Reuven and Gad do not respond as Moshe had hoped: there is no massive decision to leave the eastern lands they lust for and settle in Israel along with the rest of the Jewish people. And it is at this point, when Moshe realizes they will indeed settle these eastern lands that Moshe realizes there will need to be cities of refuge on the Eastern banks of the Jordan as well. Perhaps these cities of refuge themselves are an allusion to the great dangers of idolatry, whose ultimate consequence is indeed exile.... This, plus the fact that these cities were cities of *Kohanim* (priests) guaranteeing centers of Torah even on the eastern banks of the Jordan....

Ultimately, the land of Israel, and the Torah's desire for us to be here, is all about creating the right environment. And if our mission to be a light unto the nations necessitates the creation of an ethical and holy society, then creating the right environment for that is essential to its ultimate success.

We are a blessed generation and we live in incredible times. But make no mistake about it: our home as a people is not in Teaneck or Woodmere, Miami or Los Angeles, it is here in Israel. And we are engaged in a war against a violent enemy that represents the antithesis of all Judaism stands for.

We value life, whilst Hamas and all its partners worship death. For us, every human being, soldier or civilian is precious; to Hamas civilians are a tool of war.

More than anything, our enemies desire to cause us to be afraid, to lose faith and to become fragmented; as such, the greatest response to this war, and the sacrifices of all these incredible young Israeli soldiers, is Jewish unity. They long to drive us from this land, and so our response must be to be here, and if you live across the ocean, then there is no more important time to come and be here, with the Jews of Israel.

Creating a spiritual and ethical environment which allows for Jewish ethics and spirituality to flourish is a lot of work. And the ultimate goal of the Jewish journey remains here, in the alleyways of Jerusalem and the mountains and streams of Israel. There is something here, in the air, that a Jew cannot find anywhere else.

Perhaps this is why this portion is always read on the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av. After three weeks of mourning over what we lost two thousand years ago, maybe it is time, at last, as a people, to start thinking about how we rebuild it together, visitor by visitor, immigrant by immigrant, and maybe one day soon even community by community, here, at home, in the land of Israel.

Best wishes from Jerusalem for a Shabbat Shalom, be'ezrat Hashem in the fullest sense of the word,

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