

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Va'etchanan)

I can close my eyes and I'm there: one of the most intense moments of my entire life; a moment straight out of Shakespeare: full of sound and fury, but signifying ... everything.

Bullets flying everywhere, smoke grenades making it difficult to see; M-203 grenade launcher and Mag heavy machine gun doing their merciless work tearing up the top of the hill we were running towards; not sure what is really waiting for us on top of that hill, wanting so much to get there and yet, not wanting to get there, in the worst way....

Leading men, but to what? Does everyone walk down off this hill at the end of the day? Did we; did I, do everything I was supposed to do? Had I made any mistakes we would realize later were the reason for catastrophe? Would there be a catastrophe? Would I even be there to 'realize later'?

*And then, in the middle of it all, my gun stopped firing; a jam? No time to think; no time to go through the order of what to do when the gun jams: is the cartridge loose? Hit the bottom of the cartridge smacking it up into the M-16 if it's loose; if that doesn't work, maybe the cartridge is empty; eject it and slam another one in, hit the release for the slide and start firing; if that doesn't work, pull back the breech and shake the gun sideways; there might be a misfired shell casing jammed in the barrel you need to shake out, and if **that** doesn't work, (by this time down on one knee to present less of a target) you need to look in the breech and see if there is a bullet or shell casing stuck in the barrel which you might need to get out with a small screw driver you always keep clipped in your tight short pocket....*

But you are running (fast walking to stay in line) up a low hill not knowing what is really waiting at the top but knowing your men are depending on you leading the way, so you can't think about the order of what to do, much less go down on one knee; so you just do it without even thinking; and hours later when you go over it all in your head you suddenly grasp the enormity of that moment because without even thinking you instinctively slammed the cartridge, realized that wasn't it; made an instant mental decision to switch cartridges, hit the slide release and started firing again, all in less than a second.

I can still remember our sergeant way back in basic training: how many times did Samal (Sergeant Micha) scream yell and terrorize us until we got it right? How many times had I been forced to get up run around the hill and do it all over again until I got it perfect? How many times on guard duty, when no-one was looking had I practiced with an empty cartridge until I got it down pat, terrified I would lose my weekend pass if I did not have it perfect by the end of the week?

I am sure that sergeant has no idea that his efforts definitively saved my life, but I have little doubt they did; a second on a run up a hill with an empty cartridge can be an awfully long time and in thinking about it later the fact that I could do that without even thinking about it may well have saved my life or the lives of those next to me. He succeeded in teaching us to reduce a series of decisions and actions to pure instinct, and force of habit. And a habit can be an extremely powerful force.

This week's portion of *Va'Etchanan* is a Jewish powerhouse containing as it does both the repetition of the Ten Commandments (repeated by Moshe to the second generation about to enter the land of Israel) as well as the first paragraph of the Shema.

And hidden in the first paragraph of the Shema is a powerful verse many often miss:

“And you shall repeat them (these words of Torah) to your children, and speak to them, when you sit in your home and when you walk on the road and when you lie down, and when you arise.” (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:7)

The Hebrew word for repeating used here, *ve’shinantem*, which seems to come from the word *shnei* or twice, implies that we are meant to repeatedly share these words with our children whenever and wherever we are

We enjoy reading new books and discovering new ideas, but the Torah here is reminding us that there is a value to making sure that we review, constantly that which we already know.

What is the value of this repetition and review, and why does this seem to be the methodology of choice for teaching our children?

The **Rambam** (Maimonides), in his *Hilchot Deot* (1:7) discusses how to make the character traits he espouses a part of life. Once a person understands the principle of finding the middle ground and achieving a healthy balance in his or her character, he or she must then act in this manner “*again and again ...until there is no longer any burden to the activity...*”

In other words, the Rambam is defining a habit: something becomes a habit when you have repeated it enough times so that it is no longer a burden. At that point, suggests the Rambam, you no longer have to work to do it, and you don’t even have to think about it; you *own* it.

And that would seem to be the goal. To really own the things we learn and the behaviors we want to make a part of our lives. Whether it is the daily page of Talmud we study, or the decision to stand up for an elderly person on a bus, there is actually a metric; an exact point or number of times something is repeated at which point it becomes a habit which is easily done without thinking.

I recall once during a stopover in the airport in Amsterdam sitting in the huge departures hall waiting for my connection home to Israel. I had a few hours till my flight and Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport is a magnificent airport; in fact I felt like I was sitting in a mall. But I was tired and had some work to do so I found a seat and opened up my lap top , when I noticed a fellow who had been on my flight from the States sitting down near me and we exchanged a smile. A moment later I noticed he was doing a rather odd thing: he was peeling off his trousers and shirt right there in the public hall!

It transpired he was stripping down into his running clothes and he asked me if I would mind watching his bags, after which he took off across the hall and began his exercise run! I watched with admiration as he came back into view some ten minutes later and repeated the process a number of times until he had done his hour run. When he was done cooling off and stretching we struck up a conversation and I told him how impressed I was that he had planned to exercise even in transit to which he responded: “I run every day; can’t live without it! “ He had made his running a habit!

The experts say, on average it takes thirty repetitions to make something a habit and while the exact numeric can depend both on the particular person as well as the activity one is trying to acquire, imagine the things that would be valuable to transform into a habit.

They say it is healthy to drink 5 glasses of water a day. Imagine if for thirty days we had six small instead of three large meals a day and drank a full glass of water before each meal; and this became a habit; how much healthier would we be?

And imagine if for the same thirty days we practiced a moment of pure gratitude (said the *Modeh Ani* prayer?) right after the first glass of water each day: how much healthier would we be psychologically after thirty days?

And imagine if for the same thirty days we studied one teaching (Mishna) from {Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) or one tidbit in Maimonides' Hilchot Deot , a magnificent system of character development, for three minutes right after that glass of water and moment of gratitude, how much spiritually healthier would we be each day.

The most powerful messages we share with ourselves and with those we love are the ones we review until we own them.

So ask yourself a simple question: thirty days from now as we approach *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, what do we want to really own? And practice that diligently each day until then and see what happens!

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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