

# ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

**From Rav Binny Freedman**

## **(Portion of Va'etchanan)**

*When Bergen Belsen was liberated by the Allies on April 15, 1945, the sight that greeted their eyes, even by concentration camp standards, was like a scene from hell itself. Thousands of bodies were lying in heaps all over the camp. In a desperate attempt to bury the dead before the British arrived, two thousand inmates were made to drag corpses to massive burial pits for three days between April 11 and April 14. And yet there were still over ten thousand rotting corpses around the camp on the day of liberation.*

*The camp was over-run with typhus, typhoid and tuberculosis, in addition to a lack of food and water and basic sanitation.*

*When the British liberated the camp, there were over 38,000 prisoners, but tragically, most were so ill, only ten thousand survived. Many of those who died after liberation actually died due to the food bestowed upon them by unsuspecting Allied soldiers who, meaning well, did not realize that the candy bars and ration they willingly gave these miserable survivors would be too much for their broken down bodies to handle....*

*Howard Klein should have died as well. After being ordered by camp guards to drag bodies into one of the pits just prior to liberation, he became so exhausted he simply collapsed and fell in with the corpses. He would later explain he was finally ready to meet his maker...*

*A short while later, a young woman named Nancy spotted him among the bodies and realized he was still alive. Garnering some help, she managed to haul him out of the pit, though no one thought he would live. But she overcame her skeptical companions and at her insistence they managed to move him to a bunk in one of the barracks.*

*For a week he was too ill to move or speak, but Nancy gradually nursed him back to health. She looked after him for three weeks until one day while she was out trying to get food, he disappeared; having been moved to a hospital by the British. Nancy was unable to find him, and eventually gave up looking for him; he was so ill, he spent the next six months recovering in the hospital.*

*Sometime later after immigrating to Canada and living in Toronto, Howard somehow discovered that by chance Nancy had also immigrated to Toronto. When he found out they were actually living in the same city, he turned up at her door unannounced with a bouquet of flowers but as she would later recount, 'he just stood there having no idea what to say'. As Howard would later explain: 'How does one say thank you to someone for saving your life? There simply are no words...'*

*Three years later they were married and as of 2013 were still married sixty-five years later. Howard says he has spent their years together treating his wife "like a princess"; his way of saying thank you!*

So how does one inmate survive when so many others perished in those dark, overwhelming days after liberation?

There is an interesting dialogue that occurs between the Jewish people and Moshe in this week's portion of *Va'etchanan*, which often gets lost amidst the larger and more famous subjects we read of this Shabbat.

This Shabbat, the Shabbat after *Tisha B'av*, the day we lost both of our Temples (*Batei Mikdash*) is traditionally called *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of consolation, when we are comforted after our

terrible loss. Indeed, the prophetic portion (the *Haftorah*) we will read from Isaiah begins with the phrase: “*Nachamu, Nachamu, Ami...*” “*Be comforted, be comforted, my people...*”, hence the name Shabbat *Nachamu*.

As such, one might suggest that all of the different topics we read of this week should offer us some form of consolation after weeks spent mourning what was and remains perhaps the most tragic occurrences in Jewish history. (One could make a case for saying if the Temple had not been destroyed, there never would have been a Holocaust...)

And so it is in this week’s portion we read perhaps the most famous paragraph in the entire Torah: the first chapter of the Shema. And it is no accident that the Ten Commandments are repeated this week as Moshe recounts them for the second generation who will soon be entering the land of Israel.

There is an often-missed detail in the Ten Commandments (both here in Va’Etchanan (*Devarim* 5:6-18) and in the first recounting in the book of Exodus (*Shemot* 20:1-14): the tense changes. In the first two commandments (*Devarim* 5:6-10) it seems Hashem (G-d) is speaking directly to the Jewish people (“...*I am the Lord your G-d; I took you out of Egypt...you should have no other gods aside from me...* and so on...). But afterwards the verses continue with what seems to be Moshe speaking about G-d (“*Don’t take G-d’s name in vain... and the seventh day is Shabbat to (for) Hashem your G-d...*”) (ibid. 5:11-18).

Why do the Ten Commandments begin with G-d speaking directly to the Jewish people only to see Moshe ‘take over’ for the last eight commandments?

Jewish tradition (Tractate *Makkot* 24a) teaches that in fact G-d gave us the first two commandments directly (hence the first tense) but the people could not handle it, so Moshe gave them the remaining 611 Mitzvot.

Indeed, this is based on the verses in our portion (ibid. 5:19-25) in which Moshe recounts to the second generation how their parents at Sinai could not handle this direct contact with G-d instead begging Moshe to ‘receive’ the Torah and transmit it to them instead! (ibid. 5:20-25)

All of which raises a number of questions: Didn’t G-d ‘know’ the Jewish people would not be able to handle it? Why set them up? And if this was as it was meant to be, what value is there in an experience that seems to have been so overwhelming only for Moshe to have to ‘step in’ to mediate?

Indeed, **Rashi** (ibid. 5:24) suggests that Moshe is castigating the Jewish people for not wanting to receive the Torah in its entirety directly from G-d; after all, posits Moshe, how could Torah received by way of man ever be as meaningful and valuable as were it to be received directly from G-d? And should not the Jewish people embrace the opportunity to come closer to G-d by receiving His Torah directly? And yet, Moshe recounts that G-d agreed with the Jewish people saying: “...what they are saying is good! (ibid. v. 25) So what is this debate between Moshe and G-d?

Perhaps the point here is simply the contrast between experiences which overwhelm and even overpower us, and those which are more calming and even underwhelming.

We so often seek the exceptional and incredible moments that come so rarely and seem to overpower us. But in the journey of life perhaps we need to learn to value the normal and unexceptional....

The Torah seems to suggest on multiple occasions that the fantastic highs simply do not last. Sinai was an incredible experience, full of sound and sight and fury; the Torah suggests that the Jews actually saw sound, and the thunder and lightning and the powerful splitting blasts of the shofar were overwhelming to the senses. The only problem was.... It did not last. Much like the Jewish people on the morning after Elijah

(Eliahu) brought fire down on Mount Carmel, six weeks after hearing G-d's voice at Sinai, the Jews were frolicking with a golden calf. Shock treatment generally just does not work.

Moshe is described amongst other things, as the paragon of truth:

*“Moshe Emet ve 'Torato emet”*

*“Moshe is true and his Torah is true”*

Truth is powerful, and has a way of splitting mountains, but sometimes ‘all the truth and nothing but the truth’ can be a bit overwhelming, and it’s not necessarily always the most productive way to go.

Sometimes a person needs to be confronted by the truth; by a reality so powerful it removes the ability to choose.

*I recall many years ago reading a story about a fellow who was being pulled out to sea by a strong undertow when a good Samaritan who was a strong swimmer managed to get out to him. Panicking, the distressed fellow grabbed his would-be savior and started pulling him under, at which point the good Samaritan punched the fellow and overpowered him which allowed him to save his life. As it turned out the punch broke a couple of the fellow’s teeth. So, he sued the good Samaritan! Fortunately, the case came before a judge who had a healthy sense of right and wrong. Finding for the defendant (the good Samaritan) he wrote in his ruling: one does not always get to have a discussion on the matter, sometimes what’s right is pretty clear.”*

But sometimes truth needs to sit down.

Imagine your daughter is getting married and on the day of the wedding you arrive at the hall a couple of hours before the guests for photographs, and your daughter suddenly turns to you with a worried look and asks you: “do you like my wedding dress?”

Now, don’t get me wrong: if you don’t think your daughter, on her wedding day, in her wedding dress, is the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen then you need therapy. But it isn’t about truth is it?

Sometimes, the gradual approach accomplishes far more than the overwhelming shock treatment we often are tempted to pursue.

Those Bergen Belsen inmates could not handle the candy bars all those well-meaning soldiers were sharing; they needed a long, slow nursing of love in order to eventually get back to health.

As the second generation prepares to enter the land of Israel., to conquer a land, Moshe reminds them that some conquests need to happen slowly, over time... Something we would all do well to remember...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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