

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

Portion of Vaetchanan

When Rav Yitzchak Hutner (Author of the Pachad Yitzchak) was learning in Slobodka Yeshiva in the early 1900's, one of the students went from Slobodka to Berlin to be with Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman. When he returned to Slobodka, the Alter of Slobodka (the head of the Slobodka yeshiva) asked for his impressions of the German people.

Among other things, the student shared that the Germans were a kind people. They had a polite way of speaking. As an example, when giving directions, a German, after sharing the instructions, would politely ask "nicht wahr?" (Is this not so?) This showed refinement. He would not say anything definitive; he would always end the sentence with a tentative, 'nicht wahr?'

At that point a debate broke out between the students of the Yeshiva. Was it right to praise the Germans? Some suggested true and lasting ethics should be culled from our own sources. But there was one student who persisted and suggested that ethical standards and admirable forms of behavior could be learned from the Germans and even praised. "Nicht wahr?" is a sign of politeness and thoughtfulness. It showed modesty and was admirable - why not learn it from the Germans?

Fifty years later, Rav Hutner was giving a class in the Chaim Berlin Yeshiva in New York. A Jew walked in and said, "Do you remember me? I was that student in Slobodka that complimented the custom of the Germans and insisted that their way of speaking showed how gentle and fine a people they were."

Rav Hutner, indicating that he did remember this student, extended his hand to greet him. The Jew stuck out his hand and Rav Hutner saw there was a hook in place of a hand. He had lost his hand in the concentration camps.

He told Rav Hutner, "When the German cut off my hand in the concentration camp, do you know what he said?" The German said, "It hurts - nicht wahr? – Is it not so?"

"You, Rav Hutner were right, and I was wrong."

This week, in his final soliloquy to the Jewish people, Moshe repeats for them the Ten Commandments given at Sinai some forty years earlier.

Interestingly, the Torah makes the point of reminding us that these Ten Commandments were engraved and given on two tablets (Devarim 5:19). Why were they not simply engraved on one larger tablet (or in smaller letters...)?

Jewish tradition (in the *Mechilta*) suggests that this was so we could read these Ten Commandments in two directions: top to bottom, and side to side.

Top to bottom, the first commandment is 'I Am G-d...' and the second is 'have no idols...'

But side to side (horizontally) the second (or parallel) commandment, at the top of the second tablet is 'do not murder'.

Of course, this obviously begs the question: why do we need to read the Ten Commandments horizontally?

Jewish tradition understood that there would come a time when man would attempt to separate the first and the sixth commandments. In the age of the enlightenment in 18th and nineteenth century Europe, philosophers would suggest that one did not need to believe in the Divine in order to know that one should not murder.

Societies began to gradually distance themselves from Theism and belief in G-d and move towards humanism, with man as the source of all knowledge and creativity. So obviously one would assume in the context of such a philosophy, that we would always see as an imperative the principle of honoring the life of one's fellow human being.

Yet, in less than a century, in the G-d-less society of Nazi occupied Europe, human beings were less valuable than a bar of soap.

In the summer of 1944, Joel Roth negotiated a deal with no less than Adolph Eichmann, author of the infamous Nazi solution. The Nazi armies were desperate for supplies and Eichmann was willing to trade the 400,000 Jews of Hungary, already being deported to Auschwitz, for 1,000 trucks. To prove his point, Eichmann stopped the ovens at Auschwitz for two weeks during the height of the mass killings, when they were gassing 10,000 Jews a day....

But Roth's pleas fell on deaf ears; not only did the Allies refuse to listen; they actually arrested Roth and threw him into a prison cell, where he eventually committed suicide....

So, if 400 Jews are not even worth a truck, what does that make one Jew not worth: a steering wheel?

What indeed makes something right or wrong, if there is no objective authority (G-d) to make that determination?

Some say society arrives at a social contract and together agrees on an 'objective ethic'. But what happens when a society (like Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia or Communist China or Cambodia) decides that what is right is wrong, and what is wrong is really right? Was it 'right' to murder one and a half million Jewish children in the Holocaust?

When there is no Divine Authority, and thus no absolute laws, in the end, there is no objective morality; ultimately anything goes.

3200 years ago, Moshe reminded us one last time, that there have to be two tablets: if we stop seeing the Divine as the source of morality, we will soon lose morality. But at the same time, we also need to remember as we embrace a deeper relationship with G-d, that every human being is created in G-d's image; if we become so focused on G-d that we lose sight of the Godliness of the person next to us, we will ultimately lose our relationship with G-d....

Perhaps that is why this week's portion of *Va'Etchanan* always follows Tisha B'Av when we traditionally mourn and recall all the great calamities that befell the Jewish people through History. Two thousand years ago we lost everything, beginning a long dark road of exile precisely because we stopped reading the Ten Commandments horizontally...

Perhaps it is time for the world to get back to horizontal reading....

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman