

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayakhel-Pekudei)

They were all so different; how would I ever be able to turn them into a cohesive unit?

It was my first command, and this was my first mission. After finally completing Officer's course I was assigned to the 430th battalion of the 500th armored Brigade which at the time was still stationed in the Jordan valley. Given a few days to rest up after eleven grueling months of infantry officer's training and then tank officer's course I reported for duty to my new base with visions of commanding men under fire.

After meeting first the battalion commander and then my new company commander, I was assigned my quarters, where I met Chaim and Ohad, my two fellow platoon commanders. Having spent most of the past year sleeping in the field or in a tank, it was awesome to have my own bed and cupboard in an actual room in officer's quarters. It was late evening by the time I got my gear stowed and after a company meeting to meet all the sergeants and fellow officers, I still remember the feeling when Chaim (only a couple months away from getting his second bar and becoming a full Lieutenant and thus far senior to me) said I would meet the men by running the morning wake up and inspection the next morning at 6am. Their smiles said it all: I was the fresh meat on the block; the new low man on the totem pole.

And so, standing at 6am with my new unit, I was given my first mission: to inspect all their rooms and then get them down to the tanks to do the morning's inspection and make sure all the tanks were battle-ready in the unlikely event....

I quickly discovered it was much easier getting men ready for a combat patrol in Lebanon, than it was to get guys up and working on their tanks in the Jordan valley. (We were stationed there only to be a part of the critical mass Israel keeps on her borders in the extremely unlikely event (in this case) Jordan were to suddenly attack...)

In the Yeshivat Orayta gap year program where I work today, there are 70-80 boys every year who may come from many different places and even somewhat different backgrounds, but they all share in common two essential things: they all want to be there, and we chose them from amongst a much larger pool of applicants out of a sense that Orayta is offering exactly what they are looking for.

The IDF tank unit I was now commanding however, was an entirely different cup of tea. Israel employs an obligatory conscription, thus many of these boys were drafted and would most certainly have much rather been almost anywhere else, and the IDF's vision of what makes a boy appropriate for such a front-line combat unit is surprisingly broad, so the collection of 18 and 19 year olds I met that morning seemed to have very little in common.

They were from almost every social and cultural stratum in Israel: Sephardic and Ashkenazi, some bright and some seemingly quite thick-headed; some athletic and some looking like they were more accustomed to a couch than a good run; some ready to work, most looking like they just wanted to get back into bed... they were all so different; how would I ever be able to turn them into a cohesive unit?

This week, we will conclude the second book of the Torah: *Shemot*, also known as Exodus. The book which began with the ominous undertones of the first Jewish family becoming ensconced and then enslaved in Egypt., but then continued gloriously with the great Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the sea, and the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, only to see everything nearly destroyed with the sin of the Golden calf, now concludes with the Jewish people seemingly finding their way back and building the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle as a space for G-d on earth.

Immediately after the sin of the Golden calf and its subsequent debacle, Moshe gathers the people together (*Shemot* 35:1) to begin building the *Mishkan*. Indeed, Rashi points out that this gathering occurs on the 11th day of *Tishrei*, the day after Yom Kippur thus linking forever the day when we received the second set of tablets representing forgiveness for the Golden calf, and the subsequent building of the Tabernacle.

One cannot help but notice that the verb used for the gathering, (from which the portion derives its name) *Vayakhel* (*and he gathered the people together*) seems to directly parallel the same verb used when the people gathered for an almost antithetical purpose: the golden calf. (ibid. 32:1: “*Vayikahel ha’Am...*” when the people gathered together and demanded of Aaron to make for them a god....)

Clearly, the building of this tabernacle would somehow be a *tikkun* (a fixing) that would undo the damage brought into the world with the sin of the golden calf.

And it is interesting to note that this type of gathering created a very specific type of group or congregation known as a *Kehillah*. And yet the verse (ibid 35:1) has Moshe gathering an *Eidah* or congregation. (“*Vaykahel Moshe et kol Adat B’nei Yisrael...*”)

What is the difference between an *Eidah* and a *Kehillah*?

The word *Eidah* stems from *Eidut*, or testimony and relates as well to the concept of *ye’ud* or destiny. It describes a group that comes together as a community based on a common experience which leads them to a shared common purpose. Indeed, the Jewish people first become an *Eidah* when they are commanded (ibid. 12:3) to bring a lamb for each family for the paschal offering prior to the Exodus from Egypt. They share a common experience and have a collective identity, which can lead them to share a common action, goal or direction. In this case, they have to prepare to leave Egypt whose first step is sacrificing the lamb, one of the gods of Egypt. What they share in common is that they have all experienced suffering as Egyptian slaves, and they want to get out. They do not know yet where they are going, or even what they would do with freedom if attained, they just know they want to get out.

It is important to note however that being an *Eidah* is not always necessarily a positive thing. As an example, (see Numbers (*Bamidbar*) 14:27) in the infamous sin of the spies, the Jewish people are also described as an *Eidah*. They are a community who may not yet necessary be headed in the *right* direction, but they are headed in *a* direction. After two hundred years of slavery, the Jews first need to become an *Eidah*; they need to bear witness to something greater than themselves; they need a purpose and a direction.

In the rebellion of Korach the rebels who follow Korach are also called an *Eidah*, they feel they have experienced injustice and although they may not all want the same thing, they share a collective, if misguided experience which leads them, for the moment, to a common purpose.

A *Kehillah* however can easily be a group of people who do not share previous experiences, but they are gathered for a common purpose. Here too, this can result in disaster as was the case with the golden calf. They can be a rabble who gather together simply because of a common desire. But a *Kehillah* has something to contribute; they want to build something together. And whether it be a golden calf or a tabernacle, the desire to build, is a force that can be harnessed for tremendous good. Perhaps that is why Moshe gathered the *Eidah*, as a *Kehillah* (“*Vayakhel Moshe et kol Adat B’nei Yisrael ...*” 35:1)

Our common experience to which we bear testimony, becomes valuable when we harness it to build something for the common good.

Quickly realizing that earning the trust of an entire company of men was a pretty tall order, a few nights later I decided to start small: with my own tank crew; three men who could not have been more different from each other. I wanted to get to know them, and to be perfectly honest, I really wanted to earn their trust so I decided to pursue the best route to success in such endeavors: unabashed bribery.

So, I invited them to the commissary and treated them to sodas and cake. They were very curious as to how an obviously American boy was now their officer (back then lone soldiers were much rarer) and I made a deal with them they could ask any question and I’d answer but then they had to answer one of mine.

They were more interested in how we were different; I was looking for what we shared in common. The one that stands out in my mind was Galai, our tank driver. His family was Iraqi and he described to me how they had actually walked hundreds of miles before the State of Israel was born because his grandfather knew it was time to come to Israel. As it turned out, though he did not wear a kippah (skullcap) on his head he had a deep connection with Jewish tradition and was very close to his grandparents who were very proud of him for being in a combat unit. When I asked him what he thought his best talent was, he told me he could fix anything, a talent we made good use of on many occasions.

*And I got to know Avi, our loader, who was an awesome cook (he knew how to use tank oil to fry **luf** (spam) which was the only time I ever enjoyed eating battle rations...) whose family came from Tunisia in Operation Magic Carpet in the fifties, and Dudi (David), who did not talk much but as a gunner never missed. His father was actually a holocaust survivor and his mother was Israeli from a Kibbutz, and he did not think he had any special talents. As it turned out, he was quite wrong; his special gift was that he was incredibly calm and focused under pressure, another talent we would eventually put to good use on many an occasion....*

Looking back, that night was the night we discovered we were an *Eidah*, and we started becoming a *Kehillah*. We, all of us, are an *Eidah*, bearing testimony to a long and magnificent journey over thousands of years which has led us back at long last to where our journey began so long ago. Now our challenge is to discover our collective purpose: what will we collectively contribute towards making a better world?

In building a space for Hashem in our lives (as suggested by the building of the *Mishkan*) we demonstrate that there is and must be a larger purpose to who we are, and that we have been placed here to make a difference. Perhaps soon, all of us, with all our differences, and shared experiences as an *Eidah* will come together as a *Kehillah* to build a better world.

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman