

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

(Portion of Vayakhel)

From Rav Binny Freedman

A number of years ago at a parlor meeting of the coalition for the Israeli Soldiers missing in action, someone stood up to share a few words about a close friend of his with whom he had both studied and gone to war: Yehuda Katz.

Yehuda Katz, a soldier who, along with Zack Baumel and Tzvi Feldman, has been missing in action since the battle of Sultan Yaakov in June of 1982, studied in Yeshivat Kerem Be'Yavneh and has been missing now for over twenty years.

At the beginning of the Lebanon War on the first Sunday night in June of 1982, they received word in the Yeshiva that buses would be coming to take the boys up North to fight. Kerem Be'Yavneh is one of a number of very special Yeshivot (Academies for higher Jewish learning) whose boys combine their yeshiva studies with army service in Israeli Combat units. In addition to their regular reserve duty and studies in yeshiva, whenever the army is in a tight spot, this is naturally one of the first places to receive an emergency call-up; where else can you gather together an entire reserve battalion at a moment's notice?

The boys were given only half an hour to get their gear together and be on the buses, time was of the essence as this was an elite tank unit whose services were desperately needed on the front lines.

As they were rushing to get back to the buses with their kits, Yehuda told one of his buddies to make sure the bus didn't leave without him as he had to run to the bathroom.

A few moments later with everyone accounted for and the bus engines idling, they were still waiting for Yehuda Katz to get back from the bathroom. After a few more minutes one of the men decided to go looking for him; it was out of character for him to keep everyone waiting for so long, and especially considering where they were headed, they couldn't imagine what was keeping him.

As his friend approached the men's room, he saw Yehuda Katz coming out of the Beit Midrash (the study hall) and break into a run. Not understanding why Yehuda had made a detour to the Beit Midrash when they were so pressed for time, Yehuda explained he had gone into the Beit Midrash to learn a few minutes worth of Torah, because as a Jewish soldier in a Jewish army going off to fight a war in defense of the Jewish people, "you don't go to war from the bathroom."

I have often wondered what it was that Yehuda chose to study for those brief moments in the Beit Midrash, and please G-d look forward to being able to ask him one day when he at long last comes home. But the thing that most challenges me about this story, is how, on the brink of war, in the midst of heading off to battle, and with all the thoughts that I unfortunately know rage through your mind and your soul at such a time, Yehuda Katz was able to turn it all off and sit down to learn five minutes of Torah?

This week's portion, *Va'Yakhel*, begins with a moment of pure potential:

"Va'Yakhel Moshe Et Kol Adat B'nei Yisrael, Va'Yomer Aleihem:"

"And Moshe gathered together the entire congregation of Israel and said to them:" (Shemot 35:1)

Rashi points out that this day was the day after Yom Kippur, when Moshe came down with the second Tablets, the *Luchot Ha'Brit*, signifying that the Jewish people had been forgiven (or at least their sentence had been commuted) following the transgression of the Golden Calf.

Moshe had first gone up on Mount Sinai on the seventh day of Sivan, only to return forty days later on the seventeenth day of Tammuz to discover his people dancing with idolatry (the Golden Calf). He went up again, for an additional forty days coming down on Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month of) Elul, having achieved forgiveness. But that just meant they had gotten back to where they had been before the experience of Sinai. Now they had to re-commit to receiving the Torah all over again, this time with tablets fashioned by man, and not by G-d (34:4). So Moshe went up yet a third time, again for forty days, finally coming back down to the people on Yom Kippur with the two new tablets (*Luchot*) of stone, (containing the ten commandments) signifying Hashem's forgiveness of the Jewish people, and allowing them to start over again.

Moshe however was a very wise leader; just because G-d had forgiven the Jewish people did not necessarily mean they had forgiven themselves. What were the Jews thinking and how were they feeling the morning after Yom Kippur? They had barely seen Moshe in the last three months, and it was entirely their fault. G-d had basically decreed that the consequences of this transgression (the sin of the Golden Calf) would be suffered by the Jewish people for thousands of years (32:34), and one wonders how the Jews must have felt, now that the immediate danger of annihilation was past and the enormity of their mistake had begun to sink in.

So Moshe, a true leader, rises to the challenge of the moment, and gathers the entire people together with, it would seem, the goal of inspiring them to pick up the pieces and begin again.

I recall, years ago, during what has become known as the first Intifada, a particularly hairy day, when one of our patrols got into some serious trouble. We were stationed near Jebalya, a nasty piece of real estate in the Gaza strip, home to approximately 120,000 Arab refugees, and in the spring of 88' things were really heating up. We didn't have enough officers and men to handle the load, so we were working with additional units, and an urgent radio call came in from one of these neighboring patrols who were apparently surrounded by hundreds of rioters with rocks and Molotov cocktails and found themselves hemmed in an alleyway with nowhere to retreat and not enough ammunition.

I couldn't understand where this huge riot had sprung up from, as I had just finished a patrol in the same area and had even passed the cross-street he described on patrol less than half an hour earlier, but there was no time to think about it.

Standard operating procedure in such situations was to muster up as many vehicles as were available, as quickly as possible and offer the rioters both a second 'front' (or contact point) with which to contend, as well as an easy and natural avenue of retreat. A few well-thrown tear gas grenades (which were basically harmless in the long term) would usually suffice to cause an entire riot to begin dispersing in the direction of the avenue they had open to them. Our company commander (I was a lieutenant at the time) sent us in different strategic directions so we would all arrive at the right places at the right time. Only when we got there, there was no riot... and no Israeli patrol.

It took us over half an hour, which for those eight men caught between a rock and a hard place was a very long time, to finally figure out where this patrol actually was. And it transpired that this entire mess had occurred because this new officer had at one point taken a left turn instead of a right one, and was in a completely different area from where he thought he was. In fact, he had led his patrol into an area we were not even supposed to be venturing into, as it was a hot spot far enough away from the main road that it wasn't part of our mission (which was to keep the road open to civilian traffic).

In the process of this frantic search, not only the battalion, but the brigade level got involved, and by the time we finally arrived, expecting a huge fight and worse, the rioters took one look at all the vehicles roaring down the streets, and dispersed entirely before we even reached the alleyway.

I still remember our battalion commander, Rami, who understood the value of an officer learning from his mistakes rather than being broken by them, taking the young second lieutenant aside for a quick debriefing.

The young officer was obviously pretty shaken; he and any number of his men could have been injured or worse, and an entire brigade had just spent the better part of an hour diverting valuable manpower and equipment all because he had made a wrong turn. All I caught were the first words Rami said as he walked him off to the side: "Well, we needed a good exercise for the men, so I'm glad you found an original way to set one in motion...."

That sentence carried more lessons in commanding men, and for that matter counseling life, than many entire books I have read on the subject. And this was Moshe's challenge: how, now that the Jewish people had been made to realize the error of their ways, and the guilty had suffered the necessary consequences, to find the right words that would offer the Jewish people a sense of comfort, hope, and even inspiration after the trying events of the past few months.

Which makes the message Moshe actually shared with the Jewish people so puzzling. We might have expected him to tell the Jewish people that they were on their way to the land of Israel, or even, as he begins to do subsequently (35:4), to review the mitzvot concerning the Jewish people's mission to build the Mishkan (Tabernacle), meant to be a resting place for the Divine presence which, at least according to Rashi, represented some level of atonement for the debacle of the Golden Calf.

Instead, inexplicably, Moshe shares with them a most unlikely mitzvah: Shabbat.

"These are the words Hashem has commanded to do: Six days shall you labor, and the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for G-d; whomsoever shall do work on it shall die. You shall not kindle fire in all your dwellings on the Sabbath day." (35:1-3)

What does Shabbat have to do with Moshe's desire to comfort the Jewish people after their terrible error in building a golden calf? And, if, for whatever the reason Shabbat is the right topic to mention here, why does Moshe feel it necessary to warn them that the penalty for its transgression is death? After all, Moshe is trying to comfort the Jewish people after narrowly avoiding imminent destruction, so how is the promise of a death penalty any form of comfort? And what does the prohibition against fire (and labor in general) have to do with all this?

If the Torah is going to remind the Jewish people of Shabbat, a mitzvah already given them at Marah (16:25-27; 30) as well as in the Ten Commandments (20:8-11), why not share with them the beauty and peace of the Sabbath day? Why present the prohibitions and the penalties here? And what does all this have to do with the Golden Calf?

In order to understand this we need to take a closer look both at the sin of the Golden Calf, and the concept of sin in general, as well as the true purpose of Shabbat.

What was the Golden Calf all about? The Jewish people, at the foot of Mount Sinai, not six weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments which include a specific injunction not to worship idols, forget the words they heard from G-d Himself and believe that a calf of molten gold is their true god? The Jewish people come to Aaron, struggling with what they perceive to be a new reality: Moshe, who has '*brought them up out of Egypt*' (32:1) is gone, and they are obviously looking for a substitute.

So, Aaron throws their gold into the fire and fashions it into a golden calf, and they say: “*This is your god O’ Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt.*” (32:4)

It is hard to imagine the Jewish people believing that a calf of gold they have just seen fashioned in the fire is the One who brought them out of Egypt; after all, they witnessed the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea! It is worth noting that this phrase corresponds directly to their description of Moshe (in verse 1) who also is described as having brought them out of Egypt, despite the fact that Moshe is clearly known to be a messenger of G-d, and takes great pains to ensure that this is indeed the viewpoint of the people.

Obviously, then, what the people are looking for is not to *replace* G-d, but rather a substitute vehicle in *relating* to G-d. Indeed, when G-d speaks directly to the people in the first two commandments, the people are overwhelmed, and beg Moshe to speak the word of G-d instead. (20:16) The problem the people have is not that they forgot G-d exists, rather, they are so aware of G-d’s existence, they aren’t sure what to do with it. How do you maintain a relationship with something so intangible as G-d?

Indeed this is exactly how Maimonides, in the beginning of his *Hilchot Avodah Zarah*, (*Laws of idolatry*) explains the gradual process whereby believers in One G-d, sink into the morass of idolatry. It begins with the attempt to find tangible objects of G-d’s creation with which to maintain a relationship with G-d. And eventually, the original goal, of maintaining a relationship with G-d is forgotten and all that remains are the tangible objects, which have been so deified they end up taking G-d’s place.

Essentially, the Jewish people are struggling to find a way of bringing G-d into the physical world, and that’s good; in fact, that is our purpose here on this earth; they are just going about it in a way that negates Hashem’s will; they are using the very molten image G-d has warned them against in the first place.

Their desire to bring G-d into the world is good, but in choosing the path that is not Hashem’s desire they inevitably distance themselves from Hashem’s will, and *that* was their tragic mistake.

How often do we have goals that are so noble and so pure, and yet get lost along the way when the means by which we attempt to attain those goals are not nearly as noble as the goals themselves? And one day, we wake up and take a look around, and can’t quite figure out how something that started so right became so wrong. And the way in which we realize it really is all wrong, is because it becomes abundantly clear that we have somehow strayed off the path that Hashem (G-d) really wanted us on; we have substituted, on some level, His will for ours.

And this is where the lesson of this week’s portion becomes so crucial, because so many people live with incredible amounts of guilt, over all the decisions that caused them to be headed in the wrong direction. ‘If only I could have done it differently’, is a refrain heard often amidst painful regrets of past misdeeds and mistaken courses of actions.

In truth, however, this is not at all what Judaism teaches.

Think about it: do we really have the ability to change G-d’s will? Can we look back at anything that has ever happened in this world and say that it was *not* the will of G-d? How could anything ever be against the will of G-d? By definition, if something transpires, it *must* be the will of G-d (though of course this does not mean we can necessarily *understand* the will of G-d), which is why it occurs in the first place.

In Judaism when we look back at the mistakes or sins we have committed, they are not about what we have *done*, they are about what we *wanted* to do. Transgressions are not about the actions we have done wrong, because in reality whatever happens is always what Hashem meant to happen. Rather our mistakes are about the desire to do what we perceive to be against Hashem’s will.

For example, when Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, which Hashem told them not to eat from, Hashem knew they would eat from the tree (because G-d, by definition has to know everything), and thus all of history was based on the events that unfolded as a result of their eating of the tree. Ultimately, had they waited, they would have eventually been given from that tree by G-d. Their mistake, however, was that they wanted to do something which they *perceived* to be against the will of G-d. And ultimately, all Hashem wants of us, and all we are here in this world to achieve, is to make his desire ours. “*Aseh Re'tzono Re'tzoncha*” “*Make His will yours*”, says the Talmud.

Which is why the first component of Teshuva (mistakenly translated as repentance, but really from the root ‘Shuv’, to return, and all about trying to get back to where I once was.) is *charata*: regret.

Maimonides clearly points out in his *Hilchot Teshuva (Laws of Repentance)* that the first stage of Teshuva is to regret my desire to do something different from that which Hashem wants me to be doing. Once I have succeeded in changing my desire, once I no longer *want* to sin, then I have achieved atonement, because I am a completely different person. And once my desire changes then there is nothing left but the reality that always was, and which was always good.

Now, imagine how different life would be for so many people, if we could all just tap into this idea. I have met people living with anger or pain or guilt for decades over things they have done that they can't even speak about. But if this world is really an illusion and anything I have ever done wrong was ultimately the will of Hashem and serves Hashem's purpose just as much as all of the things that I have done right, then all that really matters is where I am at right now, in this moment.

And if I truly desire only what Hashem desires, then nothing I have done is wrong anymore, because the only thing that was really wrong about anything in the first place was the desire of people to try and do something Hashem doesn't want them to be doing, but whatever happened, happened as it was meant to. So now that my desire is as it should be, all that's left are the actions, which are always good.

So how does one access this idea? How do we tap into the reality of everything as the will of Hashem, and let go of the illusion that what I do (as opposed to my desire to do) is what is real in this world?

That, finally, is the secret of Shabbat. On Shabbat, I get a taste of the world to come, because after six days of work and labor where I do so much to be in partnership with G-d, I take a day to consider what that is all about. And I manage, if only in a small way, to let go of the illusion that this world is what is real. On Shabbat we try to access what Hashem really wants of us, and why we were put here in the first place, and we get back in touch with the reality that it's all good, and that whatever happens is ultimately all part of Hashem's plan.

And if everything is part of Hashem's plan, then the consequences, however painful are also good, if we only we could see that reality.

Which is why on Shabbat we don't light fires, which are representative (along with all the categories of labor we desist from on Shabbat) of what we do in this world. According to the Midrash (Jewish rabbinic legend), fire was the first thing we created, and it thus represents our creative abilities, and our partnership with G-d in creating the world. And I let go of that on Shabbat, because on Shabbat I realize that everything I am creating is really G-d, I am just a tool, and my only challenge is to make myself a willing tool.

And this is why if we violate Shabbat we die, because if we do not understand the message of Shabbat, then we are not really living life, because if life is all about what we want without taking into account what Hashem wants, then life is really death.

Indeed, **Rav Avigdor Nevehnsahl**, in his *Sichot Le'Sefer Shemot*, points out that this is the understanding of the Midrash (**Bereishit Rabbah** on Bereishit 4:16) that when Adam heard of Cain's success in doing Teshuva, he clapped his hands to his face, realizing he too could have done Teshuva, and then immediately, he composes a Psalm for The Sabbath day. What does Teshuva have to do with Shabbat? Adam understood that the essence of Shabbat was in seeing everything as part of the wondrous and continuously unfolding plan of G-d.

This, then, is the reason Moshe begins here in our portion with Shabbat. The Jewish people, struggling with the immense tragedy of their mistake (the Golden Calf) are stuck in the world of '**Oh, What might have been...**' And Moshe here is reminding them that while looking forward we are supposed to imagine it is all up to us, nonetheless when reflecting on events passed, everything is ultimately in G-d's hands, and part of that master plan....

Indeed, this leads to the challenge of learning to live in the moment, which is what Shabbat is also all about. So often, we are so busy trying to get somewhere, we don't realize where we already are. And the ability to really see things as they are and let go of where we think things should be going, is also what Shabbat is all about. Because if Hashem runs the world, and what is crucial is tapping into what Hashem wants of me now, in this moment, then that is also the essence of Shabbat: we let go of where we are trying to get to, and slow down to appreciate where we are right now, here, in this moment.

And this is the secret to letting go of the guilt about past mistakes: they were never really mistakes, and Shabbat teaches me, and better, allows me to experience, that Hashem doesn't waste our time with where we were, He just wants to know we are here now.

Shabbat Shalom,

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