

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Va'yakhel Pekudei)

Corona; Isolation; Quarantine; Closed schools and synagogues, flights cancelled, and travel limited; no large public gatherings... what is going on?

Years ago, during what has become known as the first Intifada, I recall 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.

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 (Exodus) 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 (*ibid.* 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 (*ibid.* 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.

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... 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 what does the prohibition against fire (and labor in general) have to do with all this?

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 (*ibid.* 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?

Essentially, the Jewish people are struggling to find a way of bringing G-d into the physical world, and that's good; but in choosing the path that is not Hashem's will (i.e. fashioning a calf on their own, instead of waiting to see how Hashem will instruct them to proceed) 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 we realize it is wrong, because 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.

So how do we tap into the reality of everything as the will of Hashem, and let go of the illusion that what I 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.

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's will, I am just a tool, and my only challenge is to make myself a willing tool.

Perhaps this is why 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....

Shabbat is all about learning to live in the moment; 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.

In these trying times when so many people are being forced to take a step back spending even two weeks alone; sequestered; quarantined, perhaps we are all being given a chance to do a little 're-set' and consider what we are all doing here in the first place.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman