

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

## **(Vayakhel)**

*There are sounds that you hear and things that you see that will always make you stop whatever you are doing. People yelling, the sound of an ambulance racing down a Jerusalem street, or even the backfire of a car, if you've just finished reserve duty...and always, the sound of a child crying.*

*I recall one time I was standing at the entrance to a supermarket, and saw a little girl, who couldn't have been more than three or four, sobbing her eyes out. I didn't see any adults near her, and she didn't seem to be physically hurt, so I walked over, figuring she was lost and looking for a parent... as I got within a couple of feet, a man standing on the side, whom I hadn't noticed before, took a few steps closer and gently nudged me with his hand as if to say 'don't trouble yourself', while continuing to speak on his cell phone. I assumed he was the girl's father, but as I continued to watch, he continued to speak on the phone, taking a few steps away to distance himself from the girl's crying. She, of course, continued to sob her eyes out.*

*I wasn't sure what to do, but was incapable of walking away; perhaps just wanting to see how long it would take the fellow to end his call and comfort his (?) daughter. Maybe I just hate to see a kid cry like that, and wanted to go home having seen the smile at the end of the story. But after a few more minutes, I just couldn't stand there anymore, so I walked back over, and again, this time with a look, got the message that I wasn't to interfere.*

*Finally, after what seemed to me like a long time, the fellow finished his call... and proceeded to make another one! All this without a moment's attention to this sobbing child. Can you imagine? I didn't have a great line to offer this fellow, realizing that the issue was bigger than any one comment of mine, but I had to say something, so I wrote a quick note on the back of my business card which said: "buy her a cell phone, and maybe you can conference her in..." I was hoping he might use the card to give me a call, but needless to say, he never did...*

Rav Shlomo used to say: "If you love someone, never ignore him. When you love someone and ignore him, it means they don't exist. And that really hurts."

*"Va'yakhel Moshe Et Kol Adat B'nei Yisrael, Vayomer Aleihem: Eileh Ha'Devarim Asher Tzivah Hashem La'asot Otam."*

*And Moshe gathered together the entire congregation of Israel, and said to them: these are the things (words) that Hashem (G-d) gave us (commanded us) to do."*

The word *Va'yakhel*, 'And he gathered', is an unusual word. Why does the Torah tell us that Moshe gathered the entire Jewish people together to tell them something? Why not just use the normal phrase: *Va'yedaber Moshe... and Moshe spoke to the entire Jewish people...?* Why must the Torah emphasize that the entire Jewish people are gathered together? After all, whenever Moshe speaks, one assumes the entire Jewish people stops to listen. What is so important here?

Moshe refers to *these things (words) that Hashem (G-d) gave us*. The contextual understanding is that Moshe is referring to the words that will follow. So what are these words that are so all important, that everything stops, and Moshe gathers together the entire Jewish people to hear?

“*Sheshet Yamim Te’aseh Melachah, U’vayom Ha’Shevi’i Ye’hiyeh Lachem Kodesh, Shabbat Shabbaton LaHashem...*”

*Six days shall labor be done, and on the seventh day, it will be for you holy day, a Shabbat of rest for Hashem (G-d).*

The message Moshe needs to share with the entire Jewish people is Shabbat. Shabbat? This is the big news that Moshe stops the presses for? Why are we discussing Shabbat again? We already received the *mitzvah* of Shabbat in the Ten Commandments just a few weeks (and two portions) ago? And, as if that weren’t enough, in last week’s portion, the Torah again takes the time to remind the Jewish people about Shabbat (Exodus 31: 14-18):

“*...Et Shabtotai Tishmoru*” “*Keep my Shabbat*”, ‘for it is a sign between us, says G-d, “*six days shall work be done, and the seventh day will be holy, a Shabbat of rest to G-d...*”

Why are we mentioning Shabbat yet again? One has the image of Moshe, standing in the middle of the camp, hair wildly blowing in the wind screaming “SHABBOS!” at the top of his lungs...

Why do the Jewish people need to be reminded, yet again, about Shabbat?

Perhaps we need to see this week’s portion, and especially its opening verses, against the backdrop of the sin of the Golden Calf, which took place in the previous portion, *Ki Tissah*. Somehow, it seems, after the sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people needed to be gathered together, and they needed to hear once again about Shabbat. How is Shabbat the antidote for the sin of the Golden Calf?

**Rashi** (Exodus 35:1), points out that this gathering of the Jewish people at the beginning of our portion occurs on the day after Yom Kippur. Jewish tradition teaches us that it was on Yom Kippur that we were given a second set of tablets to replace the first set broken by Moshe in response to the Golden Calf. This then, was the first day of a new beginning. So how, after such a horrible mistake, do you start over?

The first stage to any new beginning is learning from our past mistakes. **Maimonides** (in his *Laws of Repentance, Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2) points out, that the first stage of Teshuvah (a process mistakenly translated as repentance, but really meaning ‘returning to who I was really meant to be’) is *Hakarot Ha’Chet*, recognizing what my mistake was all about.

What then, really, was the Golden Calf all about? What indeed, is the fallacy of idolatry? Judaism teaches that the essence of everything is that Hashem is One. Indeed, **Maimonides**, in his *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, points out that it is inconceivable, from a Jewish perspective, for Hashem (G-d) to be physical, because if something is physical it is by definition limited. It is here, and not there. But Hashem has no limits; Hashem is everywhere. The minute I worship anything in this world that is physical, and finite, I am trying to limit G-d.

Most people think that the commandment against idolatry is antiquated and irrelevant. After all, who among us ever had the urge to sneak into a late-night idol-bar for some secret bowing? But, truth be told, nothing in the Torah ever gets out-dated. Idolatry is all about trying to limit G-d. Perhaps it stems from people’s subconscious fear that if G-d is everywhere, then there is no room for me.

Idolatry and paganism are very much wrapped up in the physical world. It is, in the end, the worship of nature. The ancient pagans worshipped the power of nature as well as its beauty. That is why the higher up in the natural order something was, the more it was to be worshipped. The Egyptians worshipped the animals they found to be life giving or powerful, and of course the Nile river which from their perspective was the source of all bounty. And that was why the Greeks worshipped the human body, as man was the highest form in the natural order; hence all the Greek gods were in human form. And that was why an Emperor could declare himself to be a god, placing idols of himself everywhere; after all, the emperor was the most powerful of all men.

That is also why ancient pagan rituals became such physical experiences, often involving unbridled sexual behavior, and feasting. Indeed, the verse in Ki Tissah (Exodus 32:6) says, regarding the Jews' behavior at the Golden calf, "*Va'yakumu Le'Tzachek*", "*And they arose to frolic*", which Jewish tradition understands to mean, that they were experiencing a mass orgy of sexuality and physicality.

Ultimately, a physical experience is about self-gratification. We eat because we are hungry, and physical experiences give us pleasure. So there is always a danger, when involved in the physical world, that we will become a little too focused on ourselves, and in the process forget everyone else. We forget about G-d, and think of ourselves, making ourselves the goal, instead of recognizing that we are really here as vehicles to serve a higher purpose.

In fact, idolatry is all about substituting a means for an end. Maimonides points out that originally people prayed to the sun, the moon and the stars, recognizing that they were created by G-d, and seeking a tangible vehicle as a focus for their appreciation of G-d. But gradually, they forgot that these constellations were vehicles to serve G-d, and they became entities to be worshipped in their own right. The means had become ends.

Ever wonder how the Jews (even if it was just three thousand of them...) could worship an idol, just six weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments directly from G-d Himself? The question people often ask is how they could have forgotten G-d? But in truth, their problem wasn't forgetting G-d; it was how to deal with G-d being everywhere! What do you do the morning after G-d Himself (Herself; Itself...) has breakfast with you?

The Kabbalah teaches that the Hebrew word for calf, *Egel*, comes from the word *Igul*, meaning circle. The circle is the shape, which represents endlessness. No beginning and no end. Their problem was how to develop a relationship with something as intangible, and as inescapable as Hashem. And if Hashem is everywhere, then maybe I am nowhere. The Golden Calf was their attempt to focus their worship on something real, but in the end, in their orgy of physicality, again, the means somehow became the end.

What is the difference between a physical experience and a spiritual one? In a physical experience if I give something away, then I don't have it. But in a spiritual experience, it is only when I give it away that I ever really have it.

Idolatry in all its forms limits us. It allows us to live in the illusion that I am limited and am my own separate island.

The **Kotzker Rebbe** is quoted as having said:

*"If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am truly I and you are truly you."*

*“But if I am I **because** you are you, and you are you **because** I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you”*”

In other words, if each of us thinks that we can exist totally separate of the other, then we will never become all that we can be. It’s kind of like a musical note. Imagine discovering one of the notes in the musical range, and running through the streets screaming this note at the top of your lungs. (*I have witnessed this at various stages with a number of our children, usually while I am on the phone...*) It just sounds like noise, because it has no context. That note only becomes truly beautiful when it exists inside a musical piece, along with many other notes.

We are, all of us, musical notes, and we are, every single one of us, beautiful in our own right. But we only become music when we are together.

The disease that the Golden Calf spread amongst the Jewish people was the idea that we can all exist separately and completely apart from anyone else. That is what lust is all about; the same lust for idolatry, or sex, or any physical experience, which is allowed to remain a purely physical experience. Love, you see, is all about giving. Lust, on the other hand, is all about taking. It is the epitome of self-focus, when I become the goal of all that I do.

Taken in this context, of course, it is very obvious why idolatry is not antiquated at all. We have all sorts of idols today. Money, power, self... in fact, anything can be an idol; you can even turn G-d into an idol, if G-d is no longer the goal, but becomes instead a vehicle for self-aggrandizement.

Some 90 years ago, America’s disastrous policy of isolationism wasn’t just wrong because it was mistaken. It was wrong because it simply isn’t true. We are not and can never be separate islands in the world staying out of each other’s affairs. We are all one world, something made abundantly clear on 9/11. To imagine otherwise would be as ridiculous as worshipping a Golden Calf.

So what then, is the solution to this notion that we can limit and separate ourselves from each other and from G-d?

*“Va’yakhel Moshe Et Kol Adat B’nei Yisrael”, And Moshe gathered together the entire congregation of Israel”.*

The message of this gathering was that we needed to re-discover the true meaning of Jewish unity. *Kehillah* is more than just being gathered together. It represents the idea that we are a community, with, ultimately, the same purpose, and the same goals.

This explains the connection to Shabbat. The theme of Shabbat is the idea of bringing G-d’s one-ness into the world. In fact, the pinnacle of all the Shabbat prayers occurs on Shabbat afternoon, at the mincha service, the last prayer of Shabbat. And what is the essence of this prayer?

*“Atah Echad, ve ‘Shimcha’ Echad, U’Mi ke ‘Amcha’ Yisrael, Goy Echad Ba’ Aretz...”* ‘You are One’, we say to G-d, and Your Name is One, and our goal is to try to experience that one-ness in this world, and who is like unto Israel, the nation of One-ness...’ And if Hashem is truly one, and there is a little piece of Hashem (the image of G-d in which we are all created...) inside each of us, then we must realize that we are all really one as well.

We have the potential to bring to the world the beauty of One-ness. But that isn't something you learn in a book. One-ness is something that has to be experienced. And Shabbat is a taste of that One-ness.

Shabbat is called *Me'Ein Olam HaBah*, a taste of the world to come. You know what that means? Imagine that yesterday two people, let's call them Avraham and Yitzchak, both passed away. Now we know, and most of the world is beginning to accept, that existence does not end with death, it merely moves on to a different reality. And we are made of both a physical body, as well as a spiritual entity we call the soul. So death is when the physical body can no longer be a vehicle for the soul to accomplish good in this world. But there is no reason to assume that means the soul isn't still here. So how would you tell the difference between Avraham and Yitzchak, once their bodies aren't around? How do you tell the difference between two souls?

The answer is, you don't. Because there is no difference, they are really one. We exist in the illusion that we think we are all separate and other. But one day we will discover that we are all really one. And that will be the world to come. Shabbat is a taste of that one-ness; a taste of the world to come. That's why, on Friday afternoon we light Shabbat candles with two separate candles, but on Saturday night, at the end of Shabbat we light the havdallah flame, which is one flame. Because that is what Shabbat is all about, it is about taking all the different flames and making them into one great light...

Incidentally, that is the connection to Yom Kippur being the day before this new beginning. The secret of Yom Kippur and the power of the day is that there is no other day where more Jews are all together, in synagogues all over the world all trying to tap in to that One-ness. Such a day has enormous potential.

Let's be sure that if someone is weeping, we are not standing by talking on the cell phone. Because if you ignore someone you love, it really hurts.

*"Va'yakhel Moshe Et Kol Adat B'nei Yisrael"*: May Hashem bless us with the strength and wisdom to become as we are meant to be: *One entire congregation of Israel.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman