

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayechi)

Some time ago I had the privilege of meeting a World War II veteran with a fascinating story to share:

Born in Germany, he was lucky enough to be born to parents who saw the writing on the wall, and sent him away for High School to boarding school in England. Visits home, while full of the wonderful memories of family and home cooking, were also filled with tension, as he watched Adolph Hitler's rise to power, along with the Nazi impositions on Jews and Jewish living.

Eventually, his family succeeded in getting out, and he wound up a young Jewish immigrant with a German accent in America. As World War II grew into a worldwide conflagration, and the storm clouds of conflict approached America's shores, Victor, (we'll call him), succeeded in enrolling in a prestigious Ivy-League University. He was eventually drafted into the U.S. Army. As a college student he'd succeeded in being part of a special technical program in engineering, and assumed he would at least never see the front lines. And then D-Day and the beaches of Normandy changed all of that; with over a hundred thousand dead on the beaches, the army desperately needed to send fresh troops into the field to keep the war machine moving towards Berlin, and Victor was sent to the U.S. Army infantry. A couple of months later, he found himself in December of 1944, manning a foxhole in an infantry battalion along the front lines in Belgium.

As it happened, he had very large feet, and when he arrived at the Belgian front, supplies being what they were in the army in 1944, the only pair of size-twelve army boots available had been given to a battalion commander, and he was forced to shove his feet into boots that were two sizes too small and leave them unlaced. It didn't take long for him to develop blisters from the boots, and then frostbite on his feet from wearing open boots in the bitter, cold, Belgian winter.

Every so often he would manage to get to see the company medic who would give him salve for his feet.

At other spots along the lines there were constant skirmishes with snipers opening fire on occasion, but in the particular area his battalion had been lucky enough to draw duty, everything was quiet. Which may have been why the company commander agreed one evening to let Victor leave the foxhole and ride back to company headquarters with him to have his feet examined.

Back at Company headquarters, the medic took one look at Victor's feet and decided he had frostbite that needed treatment, and marked him down for transfer to the battalion infirmary. A couple of hours later, he joined a truckload of soldiers, mostly wounded on the front, being sent down to the battalion infirmary. Once there he was 'tagged' as having frostbite, and told to await the arrival of the battalion doctor who could only look at his feet when there was a break from the more seriously wounded men

from the front lines. At this point, army bureaucracy took over; in an army of millions of men, at a certain point you are no longer a person with an injury; you become a classification and are thrown into the system. That night, for whatever the reason, frostbite victims were being sent to the Brigade infirmary, further back from the front lines, and he was sent onto another truck and transported to Brigade headquarters. There, he was given a bed, and again tagged as a frostbite victim; whereupon it was soon decided he was to be transported further to the rear, to the field hospital at division headquarters.

By this time, Victor realized he had been swallowed up by 'the system', and tried desperately to get released back to his unit, but no one was listening.

It is no small thing to be stationed with men with whom you have trained, and buddies who can listen and keep your mood up, and Victor started wondering whether he would ever succeed in getting back to his unit. With the front in constant flux as the American army pushed towards Berlin, he was afraid that by the time his feet got better, he would be sent elsewhere and would lose touch with his buddies for the duration of the war. But in an army of over four million men, sometimes you get lost, and eventually, having been categorized as a frostbite case, Victor finally found himself on a troop transport train which took him all the way back to the hospital in... Paris!

Frustrated at having been separated from his unit, and depressed over his injuries, Victor lay in a hospital bed in Paris the next day all alone, and wondering what on earth he was doing so far away, with what seemed to him a few blisters on his feet, and all because of one less pair of size twelve army boots.

It would take a few days for him to discover that the same night he had gotten into the jeep to pop into the company infirmary for an hour, was a night that would be engraved into the history books forever.

December 16, 1944, turned out to be the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge also known as the Ardennes offensive, which lasted until January 28, 1945, and very nearly changed the outcome of World War II.

On that night, the Germans launched a surprise offensive, one that would become the largest land battle of World War II in which the United States participated. More than a million men fought in this battle including some 600,000 Germans, 500,000 Americans, and 55,000 British. Nearly 20,000 American soldiers would die, with over 80,000 casualties. And the narrow three mile wide strip of land over which the entire German offensive poured into the Ardennes, ran right across young Victor's foxhole.

Victor's unit was completely wiped out and all of the men were killed, taken capture, or disappeared on that fateful night. Indeed, Victor himself did not find out what had transpired until a few days later in Paris. He spent years trying to find out what had happened to his comrades but to no avail, and finally gave up, assuming they had all eventually been killed.

Only thirty years later, upon reading an article in a local paper about attempts to posthumously grant one of these men the Congressional Medal of Honor, was he finally reunited with the survivors. Amidst a tearful reunion it became known that the commander who had sent him back for treatment in the jeep had been killed, so none of them realized he had not been there that night; all of his friends had assumed he was killed in battle.

Only after the war did young Victor realize what his fate would have been, had it not been for a missing pair of size twelve boots. A young circumcised Jewish soldier, in an American Army uniform would most probably have been killed by the Germans upon capture or at least sent to the camps. And if he had somehow evaded the Germans, one wonders how long a boy in uniform with a strong German accent would have survived

There were special Nazi units disguised as Americans, in stolen uniforms, wreaking havoc behind the lines, as a result of which American units spotting a lone soldier in the field would often quiz him at gunpoint about obscure facts like the lineup of the New York Yankees; young Victor, having only spent a few years in the States had very little knowledge of baseball and apple pie....

Sometimes the missing pair of boots you wish someone could give you are actually the miracle you have already been given. Indeed, so much of life is about perspective....

This week's portion, *Vayechi*, provides us with a good example of this idea. At the beginning of the portion Yaakov takes ill and realizes his death is near. It is interesting to note that this is the first instance in the Torah of a person actually becoming ill; until this point in history it seems people just reached the end of their days, and simply died. So, a person did not ordinarily have any advance warning of the fact that his end was near. As such, it is valuable to take note of how Yaakov reacts to this knowledge.

It seems that one of the things one does at the end of his or her life, is to bless one's children:

"And it was, after these after these things, which someone said to Yosef: 'Behold! Your father is ill. (Hineh' Avichah' Choleh'), so he took his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, with him.'" (Genesis 48:1)

Immediately upon hearing that his father's life was nearing its end, Yosef takes his sons for a blessing, which ends up being one of the strangest interactions in the entire Torah (48:1-22):

At first, Yaakov does not seem to notice, and does not address his two grandsons:

*"And Yaakov said to Yosef **E-I Sha-dai** (G-d) appeared to me in Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me. And He said to me: I will make you fruitful and numerous; I will make you a congregation of nations, and I will give this land to your offspring after you as an eternal possession.*

And now, your two sons born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Re'uveu and Shimon." (48:5)

This is the introduction to the famous blessing of Menashe and Ephraim, which we recall every Friday night, invoking their names as we bless our children.

It is strange that when Yosef brings his sons for a blessing, Yaakov at first seems to ignore them. And why does Yaakov remind Yosef of his own blessings, received from G-d so long ago, upon leaving the house of his parents when running away from Esau? Why is this so important, right now, as Yaakov is about to give these grandsons, sons of Yosef, ruler of Egypt, their last blessing?

It is hard to imagine that Yosef is not aware of this particular blessing, especially as it marked a turning point in the life of his father Yaakov. And if indeed, this little history lesson was intended for the next generation, why does Yaakov address Yosef, rather than Menashe and Ephraim, both of whom he seems to ignore?

And then comes the strangest part of the entire story: after describing to Yosef the fact that both *"Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine like Re'uvan and Shimon"* (48:5), he 'suddenly' sees the two boys:

*"Then Yisrael (Yaakov) saw Yosef's sons and he said: 'Who are these?' (Mi Eleh?)
 "And Yosef said to his father: 'They are my sons whom G-d has given me here',
 "And he (Yaakov) said: 'Take them to me, and I will bless them.'" (48:8-10)*

What is going on here? How could Yaakov not recognize his grandsons? Especially given that he just finished discussing with Yosef the fact that they were like sons to him!

Note the obvious switch between the name Yaakov, and the name Yisrael. When Yaakov is describing to Yosef his blessing from G-d all those years ago, he is called Yaakov. But when he prepares to bless the next generation, he is called Yisrael (the name given him after his struggle in the night with... himself? an angel of Esau?) Why the change of names?

And what is the meaning of Yosef's response to his father's puzzling question? What is Yosef trying to communicate by saying that *"They are my sons whom G-d has given me here"*? (48:9) what other sons does Yosef have? Why the need to remind Yaakov that these two boys are Egyptian born? And why re-iterate that 'they are my sons'? Why not just say: 'This is Menashe, and this is Ephraim'?

Rashi, who normally helps us make sense of precisely these types of questions in the text, elicits here (48:8) a rather puzzling comment, quoting the *Midrash Tanchumah*, which suggests that Yaakov temporarily lost his prophetic vision *"Because in the future Yeravam and Achav would descend from the tribe of Ephraim, and Yehu and his sons from Menashe."*

These three individuals (Yeravam, Achav, and Yehu) were all kings of Israel who led the Jewish people astray by spreading idol worship throughout the kingdom. Which of course, leaves us wondering what these sorry periods in Jewish history have to do with Yaakov's blessing of Menashe and Ephraim some five hundred years earlier?

The story of Yeravam, the son of Nevat, is particularly fascinating, and may help to shed some light on what lies behind this puzzling *Midrash* (rabbinic legend).

When King Solomon, the son and heir of King David, died, his son **Rechavam**, inherited the throne. Unfortunately, Rechavam seems not to have been a chip off the old block. Choosing not to listen to his father's older advisors, he heeded the advice of a younger group of his own confidants, committing a classic error in raising taxes.

Coming so soon after the completion of the first Temple, which involved heavy taxes levied on the Jewish people, this ultimately allowed Yeravam to mount a rebellion resulting in the cessation of ten tribes, creating the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Yeravam crowned himself King of the new Northern Kingdom of ten tribes, and the Southern tribes of Yehudah, Binyamin, and the Levites remained loyal to the rightful King from the house of David who retained control of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple (*Beit Ha'Mikdash*).

In the first year of his reign, Yeravam was faced with an interesting dilemma: at each of the three festivals, (*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkoth*) the Jewish people would all come up to Jerusalem to share in the festival, based on the Biblical command to visit the Temple three times a year on the festivals.

Now, no one save a rightful King from the House of David could sit in the courtyard of the Temple; everyone else had to stand. This would mean that while Rechavam, the grandson of King David, would sit on a throne, Yeravam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim, would have to stand like everyone else.

Realizing that this would be a reminder that he was not the rightful King, he had golden calves (idols) placed at all the border crossings, causing the people to fall back to their idolatrous ways and prevent them from ever reaching Jerusalem at all. (Indeed, many years later the fifteenth day of Av would become a Jewish holiday during the First temple period, as it was the day these idols were finally removed, and Jews could go up again to Jerusalem....)

Yeravam has come to represent in Jewish history the epitome of the good idea gone bad. More than the ends justifying the means, the story of Yeravam Ben Nevat is the case of the ends and the means becoming all mixed up.

Indeed, this is the essence of what paganism was all about: Idolatry is the worship of nature, in all of its power and beauty, and the pagan, more than anything else, immerses himself in the physical world of nature; of the here and now, and survival of the fittest. In the end, in the world of nature, might makes right, everything inevitably dies, and there is no purpose beyond the here and now. Animals hunt to eat, they eat to live, and they live to hunt in order to eat so that they can live to hunt.... There is no higher purpose.

Judaism, however, suggests that there is a world of difference between one who eats to live, and one who just lives to eat. Ultimately, nature is not the goal; it is simply a vehicle to a higher purpose.

Ancient Egypt was all about the worship of nature, which is why its gods were all powerful symbols in nature, as well as being the background to how an entire country became immersed in power, and the here and now. And it was this surrounding which formed the basis of Yaakov's question to Yosef.

For twenty-two years Yosef tried to forget where he was from, but the real question was not where Yosef was from, but rather who he had become. Was he still the dreamer of dreams? Could he still see the creator of the sun, moon, and stars, even from the darkness of the pit, or was he now the ruler of Egypt immersed in the here and now?

Perhaps this is why Yaakov was addressing himself first to Yosef, and not to Menashe and Ephraim: because before blessing the next generation, he was wondering where this generation (Yosef) really was. Was he a Jewish Egyptian, or an Egyptian Jew? Had he become so immersed in the land of the Nile as to forget that all of this was simply a vehicle to something greater? The more powerful one becomes, the more challenging it is to recall that power in this world is simply a tool of the source of all power: Hashem.

And this as well is why Yaakov recalls the original blessing he received from Hashem when running from Esav all those years ago. After all, for the first time, Yaakov had just confronted the world of Esav, the world of the field and the hunt, of cruelty and nature. In so doing he had of necessity taken on 'the hands of Esav', leaving him struggling with just who he had become.

Indeed, it is at this point, on his way down to the house of *Lavan*, that Yaakov makes a pact with G-d:

"And Yaakov swore an oath saying: 'If G-d will be with me and watch over me on this journey, and He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I will return in peace to the house of my father, then Hashem will be for me a G-d (Elokim).'"(28:22-21)

Essentially, now that Yaakov was leaving the tents of study, he recognized that his challenge was to remember, even when immersed in the flocks of Lavan, (which on a certain level represented the world of the field and of nature), that the bread really comes from G-d, and that everything in this physical world is really just a means to achieve a higher purpose.

And perhaps this was, as well, Yaakov's question regarding Menashe and Ephraim: who are these two young men? Are they Jews growing up in the palace, ever aware of their roles as vehicles for some great and wonderful destiny, or had they become princes of Egypt, focused only on the here and now?

Indeed, this was the great tragedy of Yeravam (as well as Achav and Yehu); Kings of Israel, placed uniquely, with the potential to change the course of history, and yet becoming so immersed in the trappings of being Kings, that they lost sight of the purpose behind it all.

Ultimately, if my life becomes only about me, and if all I am concerned with is the here and now and the physical world I can see, then I am not living up to the true gift that life really is, and nothing that I do will really last.

Yaakov was concerned here with building a family into a nation that would change the course of human history and fulfill the mission of the Jewish people, imbedded into the fabric of creation itself: to bring G-d into the world, by making the world a place that is full of all that G-d represents.

This as well, is what we are doing when we bless our children on Friday night. We run through the week, so immersed in the world of Esav, and making sure that the Nile River overflows its banks.... We tend to forget what it is really all about. So, on Shabbat, beginning with Friday night, we get back in touch with what is really going on in the world. We try to reconnect with the purpose of it all.

What do we think of while we are blessing our children? Perhaps the greatest challenge in raising children is whether they become vehicles for increasing G-d's presence in the world. And of course, we cannot expect our children to get this message if we ourselves do not live it. Which may well have been Yaakov's challenge to Yosef: Living in the palace as ruler of Egypt, have you succeeded in remaining the role model to your children of who really rules the world? Who indeed, are these children? Are they princes of Egypt, or sons of Yaakov?

And this, indeed, is Yosef's response: *"They are my sons whom G-d has given me here"*, even here in Egypt, in the palaces of Egypt, they are still my sons, and they, as am I, are still aware that all of this, is a gift with a higher purpose than just filling the storehouses of Egypt. Indeed, this may well be why Yaakov's name at this point changes to Yisrael, which essentially means: 'he who struggles with G-d, because we are living up to our potential both as individuals and as a people when we struggle with how to make this physical world of nature, a world of G-d.

And this is the greatest aspiration we may have for ourselves, and especially for our children: do we succeed in instilling in them the idea that they, as do we, have the enormous potential of making this world a place with room for G-d, a place of meaning and purpose?

Have we succeeded in teaching them that life is more than the here and now, and that all the things we as a generation are so privileged to have and even to take for granted, are simply vehicles to create that better world we all so long for?

Perhaps this week, as we bless our children around the Shabbat table, and in so doing, bless ourselves as well, we can all dream of a world of purpose and meaning, where even a simple pair of size twelve boots, becomes another instrument in the symphony of life.

Shabbat Shalom,

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