

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayechi)

Someone recently sent me this story via e-mail: The story of Moe Berg, the strangest Jew ever to play baseball:

When baseball greats Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig went on tour in baseball-crazy Japan in 1934, some fans wondered why a third-string catcher named Moe Berg was included. Although he played with five major-league teams from 1923 to 1939, he was a very mediocre ball player. But Moe was regarded as the brainiest ballplayer of all time.

In fact, Casey Stengel once said: "That is the strangest man ever to play baseball."

When all the baseball stars went to Japan, Moe Berg went with them, and many people wondered why he went with "the team".

The answer was simple: Moe Berg was a United States spy, working undercover with the CIA. Moe spoke 15 languages - including Japanese. And he had two loves: baseball and spying. In Tokyo, garbed in a kimono, Berg took flowers to the daughter of an American diplomat being treated in St. Luke's Hospital - the tallest building in the Japanese capital.

He never delivered the flowers. The ball-player ascended to the hospital roof and filmed key features: the harbor, military installations, railway yards, etc. Eight years later, General Jimmy Doolittle studied Berg's films in planning his spectacular raid on Tokyo.

His father disapproved of his baseball career and never once watched his son play. In Barringer High School, Moe learned Latin, Greek and French. Moe read at least 10 newspapers every day.

He graduated magna cum laude from Princeton - having added Spanish, Italian, German and Sanskrit to his linguistic quiver. During further studies at the Sorbonne, in Paris, and Columbia Law School, he picked up Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Indian, Arabic, Portuguese and Hungarian - 15 languages in all, plus some regional dialects.

While playing baseball for Princeton University, Moe Berg would describe plays in Latin or Sanskrit.

During World War II, Moe was parachuted into Yugoslavia to assess the value to the war effort of the two groups of partisans there. The parachute jump at age 41 undoubtedly was a challenge. But there was more to come:

Berg penetrated German-held Norway, met with members of the underground and located a secret heavy-water plant - part of the Nazis' effort to build an atomic bomb.

His information guided the Royal Air Force in a bombing raid to destroy that plant.

There still remained the question of how far had the Nazis progressed in the race to build the first Atomic bomb.

If the Nazis were successful, they would win the war. Berg (under the code name "Remus") was sent to Switzerland to hear leading German physicist Werner Heisenberg, a Nobel Laureate, lecture and determine if the Nazis were close to building an A-bomb. Moe managed to slip past the SS guards at the auditorium, posing as a Swiss graduate student.

The spy carried in his pocket a pistol and a cyanide pill.

If the German indicated the Nazis were close to building a weapon, Berg was to shoot him - and then swallow the cyanide pill. Moe, sitting in the front row, determined that the Germans were nowhere near their goal, so he complimented Heisenberg on his speech and walked him back to his hotel.

Moe Berg's report was distributed to Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and key figures in the team developing the Atomic Bomb. Roosevelt responded: "Give my regards to the catcher."

Most of Germany's leading physicists had been Jewish and had fled the Nazis mainly to Britain and the United States.

After the war, Moe Berg was awarded the Medal of Freedom - America's highest honor for a civilian in wartime.

But Berg refused to accept it, because he couldn't tell people about his exploits. After his death, his sister accepted the Medal. It now hangs in the Baseball Hall of Fame, in Cooperstown. Moe Berg's baseball card is the only card on display at the CIA Headquarters in Washington, DC

This week we read the portion of *Vayechi*, which concludes the first of the five books of the Torah.

Strangely, despite a cardinal rule that we always end sections on a positive note, the portion ends (50:24) with the death of Joseph. In fact, the last words of the entire book of *Bereishit* (Genesis) are:

"And he was placed in a coffin in Egypt". Why do we end the entire first book of the Torah on such a sad note? This is especially strange given the fact that Joseph's death is mentioned again at the beginning of the second book *Shemot* (Exodus); why not simply describe Joseph's death at the beginning of *Shemot*, as the prelude it actually was to the Jews' eventual enslavement in Egypt? Why conclude *Bereishit* on such a negative and ominous note?

Interestingly, this also raises the question of why we do not start the book of *Shemot* (Exodus) with the actual Exodus from Egypt. After all, if the theme of the first book (*Bereishit*) is how the *Avot* and *Imahot* (Patriarchs and Matriarchs) created the family that would one day be the Jewish people, whereas the second book was the birth of the Jewish nation, then the enslavement in Egypt is the conclusion of the period of the family of Avraham, and the Exodus is the beginning of the nation of Israel. Which makes the death of Joseph and his burial in Egypt a strange place to transition between these two books.

We have another principal (based on tractate *Berachot* 12a) that the essence of a book is found in its beginning and its end, so obviously if all of *Bereishit* ends with the burial of Joseph this event must be linked to what the book of *Bereishit* is all about. To understand this, we must also understand how it is connected to the beginning of the book.

Rashi (1:1) points out that since the Torah is primarily a recipe for the Jewish people of how to behave and fulfill our mission in this world, it should begin with the first mitzvah given the Jewish people. It begins with the creation of the world however, because one day, when the nations of the world will claim we have ‘stolen’ the land of Israel (bear in mind Rashi wrote this at the end of the 11th century in Crusader Europe!) we will be able to respond: G-d created the world and along with it the land of Israel, and it is G-d who decides who should reside therein.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe z”tzl (*Likkutei sichos Vayechi 5747*) notes how strange this is: why should the entire beginning of the Torah be changed just to satisfy a question the nations of the world might ask? After all, this is the Torah given to the Jewish people! It must be, he suggests, that this point is essential to who we are as a Jewish people, and critical to what the Torah and the book of *Bereishit* are all about.

The truth is, the mission of the Jewish people is to create a space for Hashem (a “*dirah ba’tachtonim*”) on earth, in the physical world. Indeed, that may well have been the entire message of the story of the binding of Isaac. The goal was not to die for G-d, but rather to live for G-d. The Jew was not meant to be an ascetic, leaving the physical world behind, but rather to sanctify the physical world within the context of the spiritual experience. And this was Joseph par excellence: a man of the world who successfully navigates the court politics of ancient Egypt without losing his Jewish identity; his knowledge of economics will change the balance of world power, and he will, despite rising to one of the highest positions in the world, never forget his Jewish heritage.

Indeed, it is easy to become so focused on Jewish ideals and Jewish study that we forget that the goal was never just the Jewish people. Indeed, we dream daily (at the end of the second paragraph of the *Aleinu* prayer): “On that day may Hashem’s name be one ...” for the whole world. And we offer seventy sacrifices over the Sukkot festival as part of our prayers for the seventy nations of the world.

Perhaps the Torah begins with this contention precisely because it is important to us how the Nations view us, and the book of *Bereishit* concludes with Joseph’s coffin being interred in Egypt because Joseph was a role model who made an impact not just on Jewish destiny, but on the world’s as well. On our journey to becoming the nation of Israel we are perhaps meant to remember that we are not the goal; the goal is to be a role model; a light unto all the nations; which means the goal is the world. Judaism was never just about us; we have always been a steppingstone to the way the world could and should be.

Interestingly, the nations, as Rashi implies, consider us a religion, and do not understand why we need a land. But the Jewish people are also a Nation, and we cannot accomplish our mission of being a light; a role model, without a land in which to create that model society. And we will only accomplish that, for the benefit of the world, if we do not give up on our principles. Just like Joseph, who never gave up on his Jewish ideals and principals and whose burial in Egypt was a symbol of the impact one human being who lives by his Divine ideals can have on the entire world.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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