

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Vayechi)

Of all the unexpected visitors I have ever received, none even come close to the surprise I got in the summer of 94'.

I was teaching a course on Jewish values deep in the mountains of Pennsylvania, at a camp called Moshava, near Indian Orchard. We were in the middle of an intense discussion on Jewish ethics, when I noticed three fellows standing at the entrance to the lodge. Their features were far- eastern; Chinese, it seemed, and they were standing patiently at the door, taking it all in.

You must understand, we were really in the middle of nowhere. The group of teenagers sitting before me was part of a very special group of kids who had been chosen to join a Jewish experience away from all the hustle of computers and cell- phones, television and stereos. I couldn't imagine how these three fellows had ended up here, especially as they looked like tourists.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"We come from Tibet, though we are living in Nepal right now".

But what really shocked me was their next question:

"Are you Rabbi Freedman?" I was amazed. They were actually looking for me, in the wilderness, having arrived all the way from Tibet!

It transpired that they were followers of the Dalai Lama, who, along with 80,000 followers, had been forced to flee Tibet in the early 1950's, when the Chinese had taken over their country and destroyed the infrastructure of their Tibetan religion.

Recently, they had begun coming to terms with a new challenge. Having lived in exile for nearly fifty years, a new generation was now coming of age, who had grown up in India, and never even seen the 'old country' of Tibet. So they were trying to figure out how to keep the dream of Tibet alive, in the hearts of their children who had never seen, much less experienced, the homeland they still longed for.

*So the Dalai Lama decided to consult the experts. Who better to explain how to stay connected to a land in exile, than a people that had managed to retain a dream over 2000 years, finally realizing their goal and coming home after nearly fifty **generations**?*

The Dalai Lama had then sent over 300 students all over the world, to every major Jewish Organization, particularly targeting Zionist youth camps, to ask for help in learning how to respond to this dilemma. Somehow, after hearing about Camp Moshava, they had been given my name, and had sought out our discussion group, literally in the middle of nowhere.

I was stunned by their question and didn't have the heart to tell them that I really had no idea how we had survived for so long, against so many obstacles, to finally come home. After a long discussion, I told them I hoped they would not have to wait as long as we did.

Almost Seventy-eight years ago, against all the odds, and so beyond statistical probability as to be off the charts, the State of Israel was born. After 2000 years of dreaming and wandering, the Jewish people were finally coming home. Never in history had an ancient language been reborn as a modern, spoken vernacular. Yet, today, three-year olds in the sunny streets of Tel Aviv are speaking the same language as their ancestors did, over four thousand years ago.

So unlikely an event as this was, it shocked the world. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, with nearly seven million Jewish dead, and the major institutions of Judaism across Europe destroyed, the world-famous historian, Arnold Toynbee wrote an article, entitled "*the fossil*", explaining how the Jews, so long an aberration to all normal historical patterns, were finally falling prey to the normal course of human events. Throughout history, whenever a nation was conquered, it gradually disappeared as a separate entity, assimilating instead into the culture of the conquerors, or destroyed entirely against an unbending and mighty foe. Only the Jews, hounded and targeted by every major power in the history of the western world, refused to go quietly into the night...

Five years later, after the end of the War of Independence in Israel, Chaim Herzog, who would later become the President of the State of Israel, wrote a response entitled: " *The Fossil Lives*". Toynbee, to be fair, was not wrong. If you had told a Jew in the barracks of Buchenwald in 1945 that three years later he would be dancing in the streets of a new State of Israel he would have said you were mad. But there we were, dancing...

What is, in the end, the secret of our survival? How is it, after so long, that we can walk once again the ancient cobblestones of the Old City of Jerusalem, or climb the fortress of Masada, still hearing the echoes of prayers offered so long ago, while the Roman Empire has been dust for fifteen centuries?

And is this secret still crucial today, even with a State of Israel?

There is an exchange in this week's portion *Va'Yechi*, which is as powerful as it is puzzling, and which may contain the secret of Jewish survival.

*"Vayikre'vu Yemei Yisrael La'mut",
'Yisrael (Yaakov)'s days were numbered, and he begins his preparations for death.'*

Interestingly, this is the first instance we have in the Torah, of someone sensing they are near death. (Yitzchak merely knows he is old and clearly does not know when he will die as is made clear in Genesis 27:2).

And what is Yaakov's wish prior to his death? He wants a promise from his beloved son Joseph, that he will not be buried in Egypt, but rather, that his body will be returned for burial in the land of his fathers.

For thousands of years, Jews have attached enormous significance to the place of their burial, viewing interment in the land of Israel, and especially in Jerusalem, as the highest merit. Even when Jews could not be buried in Israel, they often managed to have a small bag of dirt, from Israel, placed with them, or under their heads when they were buried. Why this fascination with burial?

If the essence in Judaism is not the body, but the soul, what does it matter where the body is buried when it is, in the end, only temporary, and survived by the spirit?

This request of Yaakov is so important that he forces Joseph to actually swear that he will indeed fulfill this promise. And it makes such an impression on Joseph that he too, in the final words of the book of

Genesis (50:24), swears his brothers to perform the same kindness for him, and to one day not forget his bones in Egypt when they return home... Why this pre-occupation with death and burial? And why is this so important that it is actually the concluding topic of the entire book of Genesis?

What really, is burial? And why must burial be in the ground, in the land itself?

Indeed, all the way back in the beginning of everything (Genesis 3:19), the last words G-d tells Adam before exiling him from the Garden of Eden, are:

"Me'Afar Atah, Ve'El Afar Tashuv";
'You are from the earth, and you will return to the earth'
Why this pre-occupation with earth? With land?

Perhaps it is not surprising, our connection to the land; after all, the first challenge G-d ever gives a Jew is his words to Abraham: *'Go... to the Land that I will show you...'* (12:1) Why, in order for Abraham to achieve his mission, did it matter *where* he was? One would have expected that what was really important was *who* he was?

And indeed, not long after Abraham fulfills his end of the bargain, he loses his only heir, his nephew Lot, to the lures of Sedom, and so G-d makes him a promise:

"All of the land that you see will I give to you and your offspring, forever. And I will make your seed like the dirt of the land..." (13:15-16)

What a strange blessing! Your children will be like dirt? If you had an audience, say, with Rabbi Akiva, and had the opportunity to ask him to bless your children, is this the request that would be foremost on your mind? One might ask for wisdom, or strength, or even happiness, but to be like dirt? What is this pre-occupation with dirt? And why does the land become so important now, at the end of Yaakov's life?

The Jewish story really does begin with Abraham. Four thousand years ago, one man, alone in a morass of pagan idolatry, believed it could be different. Life didn't have to be idols and child sacrifice, and the worship of the cruelty of nature. The world could learn to change. And it could begin with one man and one dream. The beginning of a society based on an objective ethic, that might did not necessarily make right. Perhaps one person could teach the world, not by preaching, but by example.

Judaism has never been about telling everyone, indeed telling anyone, what to do. In his entire life, Abraham never tells anyone else how to behave. Even prior to his death, and after Sarah's, he never tells Yitzchak how he is meant to be. Abraham is the example par excellence' of teaching by what you do, and not by what you say.

G-d tells Abraham that if he wants to be His partner, to be a model for what the world could be like, he needs to let go of where he is. If "through you will be blessed all the families on the face of the earth", then you need to be separate.

People have often misunderstood the essence of what Judaism is all about, because although Judaism is a religion, it is also a nation. And to be a nation, you need to have a home. To be a role model, you need to be seen, to be visible. Judaism dreams of creating an entire society based on ethics and love; based on Torah. And that can only begin in our own land. Only in our own place can we stand apart enough so that we can be seen.

I remember how difficult it was, as an officer, to walk that fine line between being your men's best friend and being their commander. One of the most beautiful things in the Israeli army is that once basic training is over, your commanders are always on a first name basis. I was never 'Sir' to my men, I was always Binny. Yet, we always had separate officer's barracks, because the men still needed to see you as separate, so they could learn from you...

And being apart isn't just about how the world sees us; it is also about how we see ourselves. When you are in a separate place, it forces you to consider who you really are.

Further, Yaakov wants to be buried in the land of his Fathers, because if I don't know where I am from, I don't really know who I am. Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel & Leah, are not just part of my past; they are a part of who I am today.

For the last fifty years, the Jewish people, especially in the land of Israel, have been going through an identity crisis. Who are we? Are we a Jewish people, or are we Israelis?

Joseph, in these last few portions, represents the first Jew to experience exile, in a strange land, constantly reminded that he is not really home.

His children, Menashe & Ephraim, are the first Jewish children born in exile. And this may be what is behind the strange episode of the blessings Yaakov gives to these two grandchildren. (Genesis 48: 5-22).

"Shenei banecha hanoladim Le'cha be'Eretz Mitzraim... Li Hem..." "These two boys, born to you in Egypt...they will for me..."

Ephraim & Menashe have never seen the land of Israel. They have grown up in Egypt, as Egyptians. Do they know their heritage? Do they understand their great legacy? That they are the great-great grandchildren of Abraham? That a dream the world so desperately needs will ultimately depend on them? Are they, in the end, Egyptian Jews, or Jewish Egyptians? And perhaps Joseph, who looks the part of the viceroy of Egypt, needs a gentle reminder as well.

When I was a boy, my grandmother, z"l, would always end her letters to us (she lived in England) with the enjoinder: *"remember who you are"*.

When Yaakov commands Joseph, indeed swears him, to take him home to the land of Israel, he is making a statement not of where we are, but of who we are. Our place, in the end, is at home, in the land of Israel.

And what does it mean to be buried in the earth? Earth, suggests Jewish tradition, represents potential. Left alone, it is a barren field, where only weeds will grow. But when sown and ploughed, reaped, threshed and winnowed, it will feed the world, and become a vehicle for our partnership with G-d. We come from the earth and will ultimately return to the earth; the question is only whether we succeed in making a difference in-between.

The blessing of being 'like the dirt', given to Abraham, reflects the fact that no matter what one does to the earth, it can never be destroyed. Earth, in the end, is eternal, and our desire to be interred in that earth reflects our belief that life is eternal, and does not end with the physical.

Ernest Beckett, in his award-winning book *'The Denial Of Death'*, suggests that we cannot discover real joy in all the physical pleasures of the world, because they are temporary, and ultimately remind us that

we too, are only temporary. The thought that we will one day disappear leaves a bitter taste, ruining the pleasures we seek in the physical world. Our ultimate desire, he claims, is the search for immortality.

Judaism agrees that life in this world does not last, but eternity does.

Burial represents the belief in eternity; where I choose to be buried represents where I really want to be, and therefore who I really am.

At the end of the book of Genesis, the family of Yaakov is about to become the nation of Israel. Becoming more and more entangled in the culture and land of Egypt, Yaakov, and then Joseph, reminds them that one day they will return home. And that will depend not on where their bodies are enslaved, but where their hearts and souls freely yearn to be.

For two thousand years, at every wedding and every funeral, at the entrance to every home, and after every meal, we dreamed of Jerusalem. You learn a lot about a person from what their dreams are, and the same holds true for a people. Our bodies were in exile, but our hearts never left home.

How sad today, that while we live in a land where our bodies are free to go home any time we want, our hearts, it seems, have become enslaved.

In pre-Covid days, \$1000 and an El Al plane could allow you to walk in Jerusalem or climb the Golan Heights tomorrow afternoon. Yet we are still here. We pray about Jerusalem, but do we really dream of being there? The story of Joseph, which began with the dreams of one individual, who could make a difference, ends with the challenge of what a difference a people, dreaming those same dreams of Abraham could make to the whole world.

Next week we begin the story of the book of Exodus, which starts by showing what happened to us when as a people, we lost sight of our dreams...

May Hashem bless us all to stop sighing and begin dreaming, and may our hearts be freed to go to where we really need to be; home.

Shabbat Shalom

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