

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman
(Portion of Vayelech)

A number of years ago, I was given a copy of Dr. Hagi ben Artzi's book on the Six-Day war (produced by Mizrahi) *Megillat Sheshet Hayamim*, based on the IDF's post war reports analyzing the war. It contained the following fascinating story:

On June 4, 1967, the day before Israel launched the Six-Day war, Abdel Hakim Amer, the Egyptian minister of war, decided a review of the Egyptian troops massed in the Sinai was in order. He invited senior military personal from Cairo to join him on an air tour of the lines along with a visit to senior officers in the Sinai on a special flight scheduled to take off from Cairo at 7am the next morning, June 5. A delegation from the Iraqi army was invited to join as well and they flew in a second plane.

To ensure the safety of all these VIP's flying in a closed military air zone, Amer ordered all his anti-aircraft batteries to stand down at 7am the next morning adding that any anti-aircraft fire would need to be personally approved by him until counter orders would be issued following the flights.

*The next morning, June 5, 1967, at the exact time 200 Israeli planes launched operation **Moked**, designed to take out the Egyptian air force on the ground, the entire array of Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries simply shut down. After the war, it was determined that no one in Israel had known of this, and could not have planned for it, it was simply a magnificent co-incidence. As a result of this, many anti-aircraft battery operators used the time to get breakfast or nap, such that most of them did not even see the Israeli planes on their radars. This led to the unmitigated success of the first stage of the war; by afternoon Israel controlled the skies over the entire Middle East.*

*The Six-Day war was really won ... in six hours. The only question for some: who was the **real** Commander in Chief ...?*

This week's portion *Vayelech*, which takes place on the last day of Moshe's life, has Hashem sharing that there will come a time when we as a people will reach our nadir. At that time, we will be so distant from Hashem (G-d) that Hashem will literally 'hide' from us. This process, known as *hester panim* is when events seem so terrible, we might imagine Hashem is no longer willing to intercede on our behalves.

And when that happens says the verse (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 31:17) the Jewish people will say:

“... Is it not because G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me ...? “

One would have thought this to be a positive development; after all their sufferings and exiles, the Jewish people have finally realized that the true source of their travails is that they have abandoned their relationship with G-d. Once we realize this, one would think we as a people have begun our journey back towards who we are meant to be as a people.

After all, in the *tochacha* containing the curses in *Bechukotai* (Leviticus (Vayikra) 26) we are admonished by G-d for having related to the events around us and even to G-d Himself “*be'keri* “; in a happenstance fashion (based on the word *mikreh*: coincidence; when we ascribe no meaning or Divine plan to the events around us....).

So now, perceiving events as the result of having abandoned G-d would seem to be a step in the right direction.

Yet, G-d's reaction in the next verse (Devarim 31:18) is followed by an even harsher promise of *hester panim* (hidden-ness):

“...Yet I will surely conceal my face on that day because of all the evil....”

Why is our suggestion that we have abandoned G-d so terrible?

Rav Frand, in one of his essays quoting **Rav Bunim of Pshische**, suggests that the issue is not that we have abandoned G-d, but more that G-d has abandoned us. It is precisely when we choose to see a world without G-d, that we do not allow ourselves to see a world with G-d in our lives.

The most amazing thing about the Six-Day war was not its miraculous success or the incredible series of inexplicable events that all miraculously occurred at just the right time, (the Senior Commander of the Sinai front throwing a party for his Egyptian officers the night before Israel’s planes began their epic mission, or the mysterious changing of the Jordanian code for enemy planes the night before, resulting in so much confusion on the Jordanian front).

Most incredible is how many senior Israeli commanders, in absolute awe at their stellar success, seeing the hand of a higher power at work, nonetheless chose to focus on the success of Israeli ingenuity and the IDF at war’s end...

After the Six-Day war the bumper sticker that appeared on cars all over the country was: *Kol hakavod le'tzahal* “ : ‘hats off to the IDF’

(Only after the miraculous salvation of the country in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when we were literally on the brink of destruction, did a new bumper sticker take its place. This one proclaiming: “*Yisrael betach ba'Hashem*”: “‘Israel trusts in G-d ...’

This then, is the challenge of the portion we read on **Shabbat Shuvah**, the Shabbat before Yom Kippur this year. Rather than what will happen in the world, the real question is how we choose to see it. Do we recognize that Hashem is the source of reality and do we acknowledge how blessed we are to live in such incredible times....

Tradition teaches that the source of our first mistake, way back in the Garden of Eden, was actually not that we ate from the tree; that might have been forgiven. Rather, it was that we were ungrateful for all that Hashem had given us. G-d does not actually exile Adam and Eve from the garden immediately upon the partaking of the forbidden fruit. Rather, G-d asks Adam if he ate from the fruit giving him the chance to ‘own up’.

Instead, Adam blames it on Eve:

“... *The woman **you** gave to be with me ...*”! (Bereishit / Genesis 3; 11-12)

Rather than appreciate what a priceless gift a life partner was, Adam was ungrateful blaming the entire episode on Eve. This was the source of our first and greatest mistake.

Thus, the ability to experience pure unremitting gratitude is actually the opportunity to undo our mistakes (**tikkun**) and begin the journey back to a world as it was meant to be, literally as the Garden of Eden.

This year, amidst all the great challenges that we face as individuals, as a people., and as an entire world, let us focus on how blessed we are amidst all the good we have been given, and find ways to live up to the responsibilities and opportunities they entail.

Wishing all a shanah tovah and a ketivah ve'chatimah tovah :

A sweet happy and healthy new year for all,

Shanah Tovah from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman