

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayera)

I can still remember that night; it was the loneliest, most depressing night of my life. After almost a year of training, with only a couple of days to go before getting my bars and finishing officer's course, I had been ordered to stand before a tribunal headed by the base commander along with my battalion and company commanders and summarily told I would not be graduating.

I could not blame them; my maneuvers had not been tight enough, my command not sharp enough; I was not ready. And my commanders did not feel, in good conscience that they could send me out to command men in battle. But it was devastating. With all my fellow cadets giving in their gear and practicing for the final ceremony on the parade ground, I was told I was free to go and was dismissed.

We were on a base in the middle of the Negev desert and it was nine o'clock at night, but I could not bear to stay on the base, so I packed up my gear and walked a couple miles from the main gate to the highway, hoping for a ride... to anywhere. I sat on that highway for nearly six hours until a truck finally saw me and mercifully picked me up at 3am headed north.

Because of the extra time I had been in Officer's training, and because my obligation to serve longer was dependent upon my being an officer, I was actually free to put in my discharge papers and leave the army. But the last sentence I was told before being dismissed was still ringing in my ears. Just before I was dismissed I was told that given the fact that I was a lone soldier volunteer, and that I had not done anything wrong, they were willing to allow me to return for the beginning of the next Officer's course and repeat the course all over again if I wanted to be an Officer. (Normally a cadet dismissed from Officer's course can never go back...) The catch was, I had until Sunday to decide and it was Wednesday morning.

So, what do you do? The sweet taste of freedom beckoned, and the idea of repeating the most grueling course I had ever experienced all over again, seemed impossible. Why did they have to make that offer? It would have been so simple to just walk away...

This week we read the story of Avraham and the binding of Isaac, the *Akeidat Yitzchak*. On the one hand the story seems absurd: why would G-d ask Avraham to offer up his only son who was born so miraculously? On the other hand, it also seems simple: if you know Hashem (G-d) is asking you to do something, then you do it, right? Especially if you are an Avraham! So, what is the test here? Why do we consider this to have been Avraham's greatest achievement; the pinnacle of his spiritual ascent?

A careful look at the story, however, reveals it was not so simple. Hashem tells Avraham to offer him up (his son Yitzchak) and **Rashi** points out it says, 'offer him up'; it does not say 'slaughter him'. Indeed, Avraham has three days journey till he arrives at the Mountain; why doesn't G-d have Avraham sacrifice his son immediately? It would seem (certainly according to Rashi) that Avraham is not at all

clear on what Hashem wants of him; he has to struggle with whether what he thinks G-d is asking, is really what G-d is asking. And this is a pattern we see often in the Torah.

When there is a famine in the land, immediately after Avraham arrives in Israel at G-d's command, the verses do not tell us how Avraham knows what to do; he has to decide on his own to journey with his entire camp, down to Egypt.

The real challenge of life is actually to figure out what Hashem really wants of us. In fact, there are three basic questions a person is meant to ask themselves in every minute of every day:

1. What do I want?
2. Why do I want it?
3. Do I think Hashem wants me to want it?

It is remarkable how many people in this world have no idea what they want. And when they do know what they want, they have often not thought through at all why they want it. Judaism believes ultimately, we need to ask ourselves what Hashem really wants of us: is this what I am meant to be doing?

Four thousand years ago, Hashem asks of Avraham the impossible: despite having been promised that the Jewish people would descend from Yitzchak, Avraham believes Hashem is asking him to offer up his son, which makes no sense. It seems impossible. And if Avraham had said to G-d: 'but that's impossible!' G-d would have responded: 'yes, it is, now go do it.' And Avraham was willing to take a leap of faith, even though it made no sense.

Indeed, one might suggest Hashem came to the Jewish people in 1948 and said: 'I want you to build a Jewish State; it's time to come home. And the Jewish people, hearing this, should have said: 'But that's impossible!' With a third of the Jewish people turned into ashes over the skies of Europe, and hundreds of thousands of survivors wallowing in the DP camps, who could build a Jewish State? And for those Jews in Israel, surrounded by six mighty Arab armies, outnumbered fifteen to one, with no tanks, no planes, and no artillery, it should have been madness! And allegorically, G-d would have said; 'You're right! Now go do it!'"

That was the greatness of Avraham, and it is how we began: we were taught to dream and do the impossible. Because faith begins where logic ends. And when we take that leap and dare to do the impossible, simply because we feel that it is what Hashem wants of us, then somehow the impossible becomes possible.

This is not to say we abrogate reason, or that we are not meant to struggle with our part of the puzzle. But at a certain point the Torah is teaching us, through the story of Avraham, that logic will only get us so far; eventually we all need to take a leap of faith.

Wishing all a Shabbat shalom, from Jerusalem

Binny Freedman