

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Vayera

The small room wasn't much to look at, and the sunlight filtering through the old shutters on the window just accented the old, tired-looking walls, and cracked floor tiles. And yet, a man had died here in this room, mostly for the privilege of being able to live in this room, in this place.

They had been looking for him for quite some time, scouring the country and waking entire neighborhoods every time rumor had it he was somewhere in the vicinity. To judge by the heavily armed troops that were smashing down doors in the middle of the night, they must have feared him, though he was only one man, and not a particularly large or physically powerful one at that; and yet, he must have had a fire tom him, to inspire such a determined manhunt.

He had been afforded many opportunities to escape, and find refuge overseas, in Europe or America, and even in England, yet he could not leave the dry sands and swamps of Palestine, the land he loved so much.

His name was Avraham, and like his namesake four thousand years earlier, he was willing to pit himself against the entire world if need be, rather than give up on the beliefs he held so dear.

Those were dark times for the Jewish people; millions of Jews were being herded into the barbed wire camps and ghettos of Europe, and even those few who managed to escape that hell of the Holocaust had no-where to go. For two thousand years the Jews had dreamed of returning home to Israel, the ancient land of their ancestors, now known as Palestine. But the British who now ruled that part of the world, refused to let them in, invoking the infamous 'white paper' whose quota allowed only fifteen thousand Jews a year into Palestine, while millions clamored to be let in.

For many Jews, desperate to create a homeland and safe haven for the Jewish people, the time had come at long last to create a Jewish State, though there was much debate amongst the Jews as to whether the pen or the sword would prove mightier in the battles that were to come.

Avraham Stern was one of those individuals who finally decided enough was enough. If G-d was not going to send the messiah to bring the Jewish people home, the Jews would have to do it on their own.

To be sure, there were many who disagreed with his violent methods, and his absolute refusal to make peace with the British in Palestine, even while the British were fighting the Nazis across the seas. The enemy of my enemy is still my enemy, he claimed, and nothing was more important than removing the British and establishing an independent Jewish State as a safe haven for the Jews of Europe.

And while you could disagree with his politics, and even his methods, you had to admire his burning love for the Jewish people and their land, and his willingness to give up everything even for the Jews who would rather have seen him behind bars.

When Jews were denied entry into Palestine, and the refugee boats full of Jews who had escaped the camps and the ghettos were turned away and sent to internment camps (and more barbed wire) in

Greece, he was one of the masterminds of the infamous 'night of the bridges' where 14 bridges were blown up overnight severely hampering British control of the borders. And when Jewish underground fighters captured smuggling arms for protection against Arab attacks, were publicly flogged by the British, it was he who organized the kidnapping and public flogging in Tel Aviv of two British officers as a reprisal.

Eventually, he was forced into hiding with a huge price on his head and a death sentence awaiting his capture.

Forced from hiding place to hiding place, always one step ahead of the British, he finally found refuge literally under their noses in a small roof-top one room apartment in Tel Aviv. The small room he slept in had a clothes-closet with a false back, which allowed him to squeeze in between the wall and the closet and hide whenever snooping eyes came to visit, and the widow whose room he was renting believed in his cause and had successfully managed to pretend she was actually using the room whenever the British came by.

In the end it was the little things that gave him away. British soldiers acting on a tip, burst in the door as part of a midnight search of the apartment buildings in the area, and were about to leave the apartment when one of them noticed a man's shaving brush, which might have passed as her deceased husband's, but for the fact that it was still wet from Avraham's shave a few minutes earlier.... A more aggressive search soon produced Avraham Stern, who was captured alive as attested to by witnesses, but was mysteriously shot and killed while trying to escape. He was shot twice in the back while supposedly trying to leap out a sixth story window, and this after the high-ranking Officer in charge who arrived at the scene after Avraham's capture first demanded that everyone else present leave the room....

I have always detested violence and believe it always to be the last resort, and am not at all sure I would have agreed with many of Avraham Stern's decisions. Yet, to sit in that lonely room in Tel Aviv, reading the beautiful poetry and magnificent writings of this scholar-turned-warrior, one has to be in awe at the pure dedication and willingness to sacrifice everything for the love of one's people, and things greater than one self.

Just how important is the place we happen to be, and how much is *where* we are a statement about *who* we are? Avraham Stern preferred to live in hiding in a small room in a dingy Tel Aviv apartment, rather than escape to the beautiful mountains of Switzerland, simply because this was the land that he loved; the place he had made his own. What does that mean?

Interestingly, this week's portion, *Vayera*, contains the source for a very important tradition regarding the power of place: the idea that a person should ideally return to a *makom kavua*, a set place whenever he or she prays.

The Torah tells us that on the morning that G-d destroyed the wicked cities of S'dom and Amarah, Avraham returned to the same place he had stood in the day before (when he argued with G-d to save S'dom):

"Va'yashkem Avraham ba'boker el hamakom asher amad sham et p'nei Hashem."

"And Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Hashem." (Bereishit (Genesis) 19:27)

Why was it important for Avraham to return to the exact same place he had stood in on the previous day? After all, Hashem is everywhere, right?

And yet the Talmud (Tractate *Berachot* 6b) suggests that ‘standing’ here is a language implying tefillah (prayer), and that this verse teaches us that Avraham *set a place for his prayers* (“*kava makom le’tefilato*”).

Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud (4:4) suggests, based on a verse in Exodus (*Shemot* 20:21: *Be’chol makom asher azkir et sh’mi, avo’ eilecha’ u’beirachticha’.* “*In any place wherein I will mention my name, I will come to you and bless you.*”),

that a person should always pray in a place set aside for prayer (the source for praying in a Synagogue) and many suggest that the need for a particular place goes beyond having a particular synagogue one calls one’s own, and require a person to have a particular seat or spot in the synagogue to which one returns whenever attending services.

Furthermore, **Rabbi Chelbo** (quoting **Rav Huna** in the same Talmudic discussion in tractate *Berachot*) says:

“*Kol ha’kovea’ makom le’tefillato, Elokei Avraham be’ezro*”
 “*Whoever sets a (regular) place for his prayers, the G-d of Avraham assists him.*”

At first glance the implication may be that since it is Avraham who first came up with the idea of a set place for prayers, whoever follows in his footsteps merits some of the same assistance from Hashem (G-d) that Avraham got. But the Talmud goes even further by adding: “...and when he dies, it is said of him: *O’ humble one, O’ Righteous one! (He is) from the students of Avraham.*”

All this praise simply because he prayed in the same place every day? Why is such a person considered humble and righteous? And what difference does it make where I pray? Isn’t the real issue why and how I pray?

It is interesting to note that there is another reference to the concept of *keva* (thus far referring to a makom *kavua* or set place for tefillah- prayer) as it relates to prayer.

Only in this instance it is almost the opposite approach. The Mishna in *Berachot* (4:4) says:

“*Ha’oseh tefillato keva, ein tefillato’ tachanunim.*”
 “*If a person makes his prayers set (regular? Rote?), they are not beautiful.*”
 (See commentary of the *Tiferet Yisrael* there.)

In this instance, the return to the same routine actually undermines the process of prayer; so why does the place where I pray need to be so set? Doesn’t that also become rote?

Perhaps, in order to understand all this we need to take a closer look at the story in this week’s portion (*Vayera*) that seems to have raised all these issues in the first place. What does having a set place for prayer have to do with the story of *S’dom*? Why not introduce this concept at the binding of Isaac, or even earlier when Noach is faced with the flood?

Why does the imminent destruction of *S’dom*, the most wicked place on earth raise the issue of a makom *kavua*, a set place for prayer in the first place?

A closer look at the unfolding saga of *S’dom* (Genesis 18: 20-33) reveals a rather strange dialogue between Hashem (g-d) and Avraham: G-d wants to destroy *S’dom* and actually seems to consult with Avraham, whereupon Avraham begins to question whether it is fair to destroy a city if there might be

fifty righteous people in it . And when G-d acquiesces, Avraham actually begins to bargain with G-d, ‘getting G-d down’ as it were to agreeing to save the city if there are even ten righteous people there, which is of course ridiculous, because G-d already knows that there aren’t even ten righteous individuals in S’dom. So what was the point of the entire discussion?

Obviously, this dialogue was not for G-d, it was for Avraham. Hashem (G-d) presents Avraham with the reality of the world, and Avraham has to struggle with it. And this, in fact, is the essence of what tefillah (prayer) is all about.

Prayer is not actually a Jewish word; it is a Christian word which means ‘to beg’. One way of understanding the word *tefillah* (the Hebrew word for prayer) is from the name *Naftali* (a closely related word). When Rachel names her surrogate son Naftali, she says:

“*Naftulei Elokim niftalti.*”

“*I have **struggled** the struggles of G-d.*” (Bereishit 30:8)

The word *tefillah* then, means to struggle. (Similar to the word *nafal*, which means to fall down; to struggle is to be willing to get up after falling down....) And this is precisely what Avraham is doing: he is struggling with the world as G-d has presented him with: how can I accept, says Avraham, a world where the righteous, and maybe even the innocent die along with the wicked?

And here we come to the essence of tefillah: Avraham is struggling with what Hashem really wants: of him, and in the world in general. And this is what Jewish prayer is all about: the struggle of my role in the world, and the attempt to come to terms with what G-d truly wants of me.

Think about it: one day Avraham has the audacity to argue with G-d about the destruction of S’dom, and the next day he peacefully watches its annihilation without so much as a word of dismay. Because Avraham has accepted Hashem’s will, and this may often be the hardest thing we can do in this world.

Perhaps this is why Avraham returns to the exact same place. Because the place is the same; it is only Avraham who has changed by accepting and seeing a different reality.

This, incidentally is exactly the point **Maimonides** makes in the laws of repentance (*Hilchot Teshuva* chap. 2) when suggesting that true *teshuvah* (repentance) comes only when I find myself in the exact same place; because then it is about me and not about where I happen to be.

And this is the daily struggle of Jewish prayer; Jewish *tefillah*: to struggle with what Hashem’s will truly is, and how my life, and even my day, can fulfill that will.

This is not to say we will always get it right. Nor does it mean we will always know when we do; but we have to try.

Maybe this is why tefillah experienced regularly in the same place is valuable: because if the place is the same it forces me to consider whether I have changed. And if I am not changing every day then something is wrong.

Indeed, changing one’s place does change many things, as the Talmud says in tractate Rosh Hashana (16b):

“*Meshaneh makom meshaneh mazal.*”

“*He who changes his place, changes his destiny*”

Changing places can be a powerful catalyst for change, but it does not substitute true change and growth; it is the place that has changed, not the self. And it is true that sometimes we need an infusion of such new energy, which is why three times a year traditionally Jews traveled to Jerusalem for the festivals, to experience a different place.

But in the day to day experience of life, the real challenge is to change myself. I can still remember as a kid visiting the Grand Canyon, and experiencing that first view by the side of the road. Everyone who stopped their car there was in awe, just like us; there was a hushed silence no-one had to ask for, it just came. And I remember being with a group and we prayed the afternoon service (mincha) overlooking the incredible colors of the Grand Canyon's cliffs.

It was a beautiful prayer experience, but it was the place, it wasn't me. The real challenge was whether I could take a little piece of that back home with me.

And if I am truly trying to figure out how I can become a vehicle for G-d's will that each of us make the world a better place, then being in the same place allows me to get there.

And there is one more aspect to this. Come visit us in the old city of Jerusalem and you can stand where rabbi Yishmael Kohein Gadol once stood, or see the Kotel, the Western wall, in exactly the same spot where the paratroopers of 1967 once stood in awe. What makes these places special and even powerful is not the place; all that sits there is a chair or a bench or a wall. What makes them special and imbues them with a unique energy are the people who were there and the level they achieved in that spot. Places do, after all, acquire certain energy, and being in a place where happy things have occurred will affect a sensitive person's energy to a degree. But precisely because they were in the same place, it became less about the place, and more about the person.

And specifically when praying for a wicked city like *S'dom*, Avraham demonstrated that it wasn't about which place we were discussing, it was about who Avraham was meant to be.

And of course, this is all why the Talmud suggests that a person who prays in a set place acquires the humility etc. of Avraham. What does it mean to be humble (*Anav* in Hebrew)? An *Anav* is not a person who has no sense of self; after all, Moshe is called the greatest *Anav* on earth, and yet he argues with G-d!

To be humble is actually to know how great you are, but to recognize that it is all a gift from G-d. Humility recognizes that in the end Hashem runs the world, and all I am trying to do, is be a part of that.

Four thousand years ago a great man, the first Jew, taught us all that it was not who you were, but about whether you could make a difference. And whether for a tragic man all alone in an apartment in Tel Aviv, or for any one of us every time we wake up in the morning and walk out the door, the desire and the struggle and every so often the gift of being able to make that difference is a gift worth cherishing and a dream worth pursuing.

Shabbat Shalom,

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