Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayera)

I can still remember that ride; every minute of it, every time I took it…. Passing Agam Karun (the Karun reservoir), and then the road below the Beaufort fortress imagining what that would have been like if the PLO had still controlled that high ground; marveling at the insane bravery the men of Golani must have had to take that spot just the year before ….

And then passing through Marja'oun and getting close to the border; you could taste it now; home was that close. It was always an intense ride in open safari trucks with all our gear on: flak vests helmets, webbing and gear and bullet in the chamber, never really sure if you would make it to the border; there were no shortage of stories of convoys being ambushed on this road and we were obvious targets in open safari trucks with no armor….

And once you've been through such an ambush you no longer focus on the beautiful scenery of Lebanon passing you by; every tree could be cover; every turn could have something nasty waiting around the bend…

And then that moment when you crossed over the border and drove the last few kilometers into Kiriat Shmoneh as helmets came off, flak vests were torn open and the sound of Velcro openings filled the air. And you knew you were home; back where you belonged. The Safari trucks would pull into a dirt parking lot; sometimes dozens at the same time as troops going on leave jumped down grabbed their gear and headed on foot for the central bus station in Kiriat Shmoneh. There was an intersection which came to be known as 'Tzomet Hasaftot' or just 'saftot' (Grandmothers) named for the elderly women who would stand there waiting for us with piles of free baguette sandwiches and drinks for the soldiers coming home. It was a simple act of appreciation but it always meant the world to me; I got to recognize a few of their faces after a while and I still remember, after a particularly rough few weeks when we finally got out for a long weekend, one of the guys engulfing one of the saftot in a massive hug and lifting her up in the air.

It's hard to explain what it felt like, to be back home; back in the place where you belong. But to this day, there is a feeling for me when I land back in Israel and get in the car and drive through the beautiful Judean hills home, to where I belong.

What is it about a particular place that makes it so powerful?

This week in *parshat Vayera*, we are introduced to a powerful idea by no less than Avraham himself. Hidden in the details of the powerful stories we read this week we might miss it, which is perhaps why the Talmud takes pains to point it out.

Avraham has challenged no less than G-d Himself to save Sodom (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 18), but G-d has decreed that a society based on such evil must be destroyed, and finally (ibid. 18:33) Avraham, "returns to his place".

And the next day, when G-d prepares to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham awakens early (the word used in the Torah "*Vayashkem*" implies a sense of mission and purpose…) and again, "*returns to the place where he stood before*…"

The Talmud tells us (*Berachot* 6b) that from this moment we learn the Halacha that a person should always pray in a set place, a *makom kavua*. In fact, Rav Chelbo quotes Rav Huna who says that whoever has a set place for

his prayers is considered to be a true student of Avraham, and when he leaves this world, it will be said of him that he is humble and pious….

What is so significant about the place where a person prays? Should not what really matters be the content of one's prayers? Why does it matter where you are? Shouldn't who you are be what matters most?

I am indebted to Rav Dovidl Weinberg, who teaches at Yeshivat Orayta and who introduced me to the Shaarei Orah (Rav Shach zatz"l's son in-law) who has a magnificent idea on this topic.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:19) clearly contrasts Avraham with wicked Balaam. Whoever is humble and generous (literally 'with a good eye') says the Mishna, is a student of Avraham, and whoever is arrogant and stingy or with a negative perception, is a student of the wicked Balaam. Obviously, the antithesis of Avraham is the way of Balaam.

Isn't it interesting, says the Shaarei Orah, that when Balaam sets out to curse the Jewish people (Numbers (*Bamidbar*) 22-23), every time he fails, he changes his place. Indeed, Balak (ibid. 23:13) exhorts him to follow him to a 'different place' from which to curse the Jewish people and somehow spiritually defeat us.

Again and again, Balaam changes his place to try and achieve his aims, and yet. again and again he fails. The clear implication in the story is that Balaam's failure is not attributed to who Balaam is, but rather to where he is. In fact, at the beginning of that story there is a tension between the messengers of the Moabite King Balak and Balaam precisely because Balak wants Balaam to come to a place where he can curse Israel and Balaam is not sure he can or should go. It never occurs to those wicked people that their failure is the result of their wickedness, they simply assume it is because they are in the wrong place. This is the classic perception of blaming the ills of society on the environment, assuming a person could not help but fall into wicked ways seeing as how he was in a wicked environment.

Avraham on the other hand, going back to the same place to pray yet again, knowing he had failed there the day before (Sodom would still be destroyed), understands that the failure is his alone. It is not where Avraham is,but who Avraham is that will make the difference.

To be sure, environment is indeed a powerful influence, and Jewish tradition teaches (and Maimonides rules halachically in *Hilchot Deot*, the laws of character traits) that a person must distance him or herself from a negative environment. But that does not mean we can ever lay the blame totally on the environment. That is in fact the humility of Avraham: knowing we can always be better, and we always have a long way to go towards becoming the person we are meant to be.

And there is more to this idea: Once we know that we cannot place the onus entirely on the environment, we are challenged to create an environment that will nonetheless be a positive environment. Way back when we are first created, the first thing G-d does is to place us in the Garden of Eden (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 2:8 and 15) an environment designed to be conducive to continued spiritual growth. Interestingly it does not work, we make the colossal mistake of eating from the Tree against G-d's wishes and must leave Eden. Eventually though, we will build a Temple (twice) in an attempt to recreate that spiritually conducive environment. Isn't it interesting that this time *w*e have to build it, not G-d. (Just like the tablets that last are the second tablets formed by man (Moshe)). It seems we cannot completely rely on our environment but must nonetheless work to create the healthiest environment we can. Perhaps that is why coming home to Israel is so special: nowhere else in the world is there a Jewish environment more conducive to growth than Israel both because of the history and energy imbued in this place by our holy ancestors long ago, as well as the fact that Israel is an entire country whose society and standing are determined by the Jewish people….

Interestingly, when the Jews started coming back home to Israel in the nineteenth century it was anything but an objectively wonderful place to live. As Mark Twain points out in the famous article he wrote for Harper's magazine after visiting here in late nineteenth century, 'it was a barren place better suited to wild beasts and marauders, rather than habitation by civilized man…' .

But we were never meant to rely on receiving a place, we were always meant to be partners in building it, and so, with G-d's help, the desert of Palestine has been transformed into the modern State of Israel which is a veritable Garden of Eden.

Indeed this is a fulfillment of the verse from Isaiah: "*Va'yasem Midbara ke'Eden*"
"*There will come a time when the desert will be transformed into the Garden of Eden …*"

Perhaps one day soon the entire Jewish people will realize there is nowhere else that is truly home, and we will succeed at long last in building together a model of what a healthy society can be, as a model for a better world.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman