

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayigash)

It should have been one of the most powerful and exciting days of my life; I can still see all the guys, in their dress uniforms, preparing for the final ceremony; instead, it was one of the most depressing. After eight of the longest, most grueling months I had ever experienced, I was three days away from receiving my officer's bars. A month-long test (navigation, desert survival, weapons proficiency etc.) to enter infantry officer training, followed by nearly four months of infantry officer's training in the desert, best described as hell on earth, and then the most difficult four months I have ever experienced; tank officer's course. Averaging three hours sleep a day for 18 weeks, under intense pressure; this was where tank commanders were trained by the IDF to become platoon leaders.

And then, three days before I was meant to receive my bars, I was told by the battalion commander that for me, there wasn't going to be any ceremony. I wasn't ready, there would be no bars. I was out of the course.

They had given me every opportunity. The company commander had reviewed one of my maneuvers himself, and then even the battalion commander had decided he would attend one of my maneuvers, just to be sure. The decision to fail a cadet so close to the end of the course was certainly not taken lightly. But in the end, the responsibility of sending someone out to command a platoon of tanks in the field means only the best, and I just wasn't ready.

Normally, once a person fails out of Officer's course there is no second chance, but in my case, because there was no disciplinary measure involved (mostly it was about my struggle with Hebrew), I was told I could repeat the entire Tank officer's course again, but I only had one week to think about it, as the next course was beginning in 5 days.

The depression, of watching all your buddies practicing for the final ceremony, as you head out into the desert to try and catch a ride back to civilization, is beyond description.

How does one make such a decision? Should I head back to Yeshiva, and begin the studies I had already decided were ahead of me to become a Rabbi? Could I let go and accept having practically wasted a year of my life? I had, after all, given it my best shot. Wasn't that good enough? And if I went back, was it really about serving my people, and the State of Israel, or was it all just a big ego trip?

How do you make the decisions that aren't so simple? The Torah does not always give us the answers. If I want to decide whether to eat a piece of meat, or listen in on a conversation, Jewish tradition has very clear parameters as to what the acceptable norms of behavior are. But what if I can't decide whether to be a doctor or a lawyer? Judaism does not tell me what to do. It will tell me how to ensure that I remain an ethical lawyer, but as to whether I actually become one, that is, in the end, all up to me. So how does one decide?? What if I am making the wrong decision?

Perhaps this question lies at the root of a rather strange exchange in this week's portion, **Vayigash**.

Yaakov, after twenty-two long years of believing his beloved son Joseph dead, discovers he is after all alive, and has even become the second in command of Egypt, the mightiest empire on earth.

No words could possibly do justice to what Yaakov must have felt at that moment.

“ Vatechi Ruach Yaakov” “ And the spirit of Yaakov lived.” (Genesis 45:27)

If your son has died, a part of you dies with him. A part of Yaakov has been dead for twenty-two years. Now, he is, in a sense, reborn. And so:

*“...Yosef B’ni Chai, Elcha Ve’erenu be’terem Amut”
‘My son Joseph lives! I will go and see him before I die.’*

“Vayisa Yisrael...”

‘And Yisrael (Yaakov) journeys, with the entire family, (south towards Egypt, from the hills of Hebron), and arrives in Be’er Sheva, where he offers sacrifices (presumably of thanksgiving and gratitude) to “the G-d of his father Isaac”.

The stage seems to be set for an incredible moment. A long-lost son and his beloved father will reunite, and re-discover the love they thought lost forever. And then, out of the blue, G-d steps in. (46:2-4)

“And G-d appeared to Yisrael (Yaakov) in the night saying ‘Yaakov, Yaakov. And he (Yaakov) responded: ‘Hineni’ (Here I am).

“And He (G-d) said: ‘I am the G-d of your father; do not fear going down to Egypt, for I will make of you there a great nation...”

Why does G-d interject with this reassurance? It seemed obvious that Yaakov was quite ready to head down to Egypt and was anticipating a moment he had not thought would ever be possible.

And what is the meaning of G-d’s promise to make his offspring into a great nation in that place? Is that why Yaakov is going to Egypt? To build a Nation? Yaakov just wants to see his beloved long-lost son! And why does Yaakov offer sacrifices of thanksgiving *‘to the G-d of Yitzchak his father’*. What of Abraham his father? And for that matter, why not just offer up to G-d? What is the G-d of his father?

The key may lie with G-d’s calling to Yaakov in the night.

‘Yaakov, Yaakov. And he (Yaakov) responded: ‘Hineni’ (Here I am).

Does G-d have to wake Yaakov up? What does *‘here I am’* mean? Is G-d confused? What could possibly lie behind Yaakov telling G-d he is there? That would seem to be a rather superfluous statement to say the least! Obviously, G-d always knows where I am. The question is, *do I know where I am?*

Hineni is one of the most powerful words in the entire Torah. It is a word full of enormous potential. It is a word that does not refer to physical arrival, but to acceptance of a spiritual journey.

It is the same word Abraham used in response to G-d's overwhelming request at the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22: 1) and the same word Moshe responds with at the Burning Bush.

Here I am; I am ready. It is a response that signifies a much deeper understanding. Not only where I am, but why I am really here, and what it is all about. I am finally ready to be what I was meant to be.

It is a word Yaakov may well have learned from his father Yitzchak, who responds '*Hineni*' to Yaakov, when, disguised as Esau; he is ready to be blessed. Yitzchak there (Genesis 27:18) understands that this is not just a blessing; it is the continuation of a journey. In fact, in many ways, Yitzchak's entire purpose was to create Yaakov. Yitzchak, after all, has only one son who carries on the tradition. It will be Yaakov who will ultimately have the twelve sons that will form the Jewish people. So, the word '*Hineni*' may well signify Yitzchak's recognition of the fact that passing on the blessings to Yaakov is really his mission and the reason he is in this world.

It is worth noting that after Yitzchak blesses Yaakov, he disappears from the scene. The Biblical narrative shifts immediately to the story of Yaakov who now occupies center stage. Yitzchak, in the word *Hineni*, signifies that he understands and embraces this as his purpose in this world.

Perhaps, somehow, in offering sacrifices to the G-d of his father Yitzchak, Yaakov is struggling to find his place in the continuation of the dream that will one day become the Jewish people. Perhaps in order to accomplish all that I can in this world, I need to know where I come from. That is, after all, a part of who I am.

It is interesting to note that in the same story (27:24) Esau's response to Yitzchak's query of whether he is there is not *Hineni*, but '*Ani*' which basically means '*it is I*'. Esau isn't about 'here I am to serve my purpose'. Esau's purpose is Esau. Indeed, Esau has no interest in the birthright, all about responsibility, which he sells to Yaakov for a pot of soup. His interest lies only in the blessings and what they can do for him.

One wonders what might have been if Adam had responded with this simple word so long ago in the Garden of Eden. *Hineni* may well have been the answer G-d so desperately wanted in response to His question to Adam: '*Where are you?*' ("*Ayekah*"). G-d obviously wasn't asking where Adam was; he was asking where Adam was *at*. And Adam could have changed the course of history by simply saying '*Hineni*': here I am. I want only to live up to the gift of life that you have given me, to have meaning in this world. But Adam, after eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, just wasn't there anymore. How can I really be here to fulfill all that I was created for, if I am doing exactly what I know my creator hopes I will not do?

So why does Yaakov respond to G-d with this same word, *Hineni*?

Perhaps this was really Yaakov's struggle. Yaakov desperately wants to go down to Egypt to once again see his son Yosef. But he stops in Be'er Sheva. Is this, in the end about Yaakov? Is this what I am meant to be doing? We live in a society that often suggests that if it feels good, it must be good. But sometimes you stop and ask yourself: why am I really here? Is this what I am meant to be doing in this world? Often, the answer is not so simple. You can't look it up or 'ask the Rabbi'. You have to ask yourself: where am I, really?

Perhaps this is why Yaakov is praying to the G-d of Yitzchak. It is Yitzchak who, in the grips of terrible famine, thinks to follow in the path of his father Abraham, and go down to Egypt. But G-d tells Yitzchak not to go. (Genesis 26:2). Yitzchak never leaves the land of Israel. He represents the point in the development of the Jewish people that needs to be in Israel.

So, what about Yaakov? Is he ready to go back into exile? It seems as though everything he has been building is now about to be undone. How will living in Egypt, the center of paganism in the ancient world, affect the children of Israel?

What this conversation represents, perhaps, is the struggle we sometimes have to 'do the right thing'. The willingness to do whatever it is G-d wants of me, if only I could figure out what that is.

So how do I resolve these questions in my life?

The Vilna Gaon suggests (in his *Even Sheleimah*) that the struggle really is trying to be sure that whatever I end up doing, is really for the right reasons. Ultimately, if I make the *wrong* decision, but I do it for the *right* reasons, it will end up being all right. But if I make the *right* decision, objectively, but for the *wrong* reasons, it will always end up wrong.

It may be that a person is struggling as to whether to become a doctor or a social worker. Objectively, it may well be that they would be better suited and could do much more good in the world as a doctor. But if the decision emanates purely from a desire to earn more money, then it will somehow end up wrong.

Four months later, having decided to go back and do tank officer's school all over again, the right day finally came. And there is one moment that will stand out forever in my mind. It wasn't the berets thrown in the air, nor the impressive tank parade, or even the special salute from the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army.

It was a moment with Yuval Azulai. Yuval was a legend in the Officer's corps. He was brilliant and knew everything there was to know about tanks and armored warfare. One of those men always thirsty for knowledge, you could not stump him. Laser technology, thermal imagery, shell trajectories, enemy weaponry; he knew it all. Which was why he was one of the Officers responsible for training Officers in the Armored Corps.

A week into my repeat course he found me, late at night, working on my tank. He had heard I had come back and wanted to know what had made me do it all over again. I thought Israel needed motivated officers, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering if I should have tried. From that day, he took me under his wing. When everyone else was finally getting their two or three hours sleep, he would pull me aside and quiz me brutally on everything we were learning. He demanded excellence and told me he would make sure I didn't fail again. He took it as his personal mission to ensure that I became what an Officer was meant to be. He absolutely terrorized me, and I dreaded his surprise arrivals. One day he took over our platoon's maneuvers so he could personally oversee mine and rip it to shreds. By the time our final exams arrived at the end of the course, they were a breeze.

And on the day of the ceremony, fresh bars on my shoulders, before the traditional slam on the back, he asked me:

“So, how does it feel now that you’ve become an Officer?”

I answered with a smile: ‘It feels pretty darned good.’

And he looked at me and said: “You don’t get it at all. You aren’t even close to becoming an Officer. Being an officer isn’t about the training. That’s just the introduction. The real question is, can you become the man whose men will follow him anywhere, even up a hill under fire?”

And he walked away. And I finally got it.

Yaakov wanted to be sure that it wasn’t about Yaakov. And that is our greatest challenge: To be sure, in all that we do, that it isn’t about me, but about everyone else, which is really why we are all here to begin with.

May Hashem bless us all, as individuals, and as a people, to experience the joy of discovering what we are really meant to do in this world, and to find the strength to go and do it, for all the right reasons.

Shabbat Shalom,

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