

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayigash)

The thundering sounds of artillery fire echoed through the valleys beneath the Golan Heights and across the Sea of Galilee. All across the Northern border with Syria, civilians were huddled in their bunkers and bomb shelters, wondering when this latest round of violence would abate.

On the face of it, this was nothing new; for nineteen years the Israeli citizens of the North had endured an almost daily barrage of shellfire from the Syrian guns perched in the Heights above. In fact, an average of one thousand shells a day fell on the Kibbutzim, towns, and villages within range of the Golan, when the Syrian army had control of the Heights.

But this time it was different. It was June of 1967, and Israel had finally decided enough was enough. Gambling that the Syrians would never expect a surprise attack on such strategically superior positions, the Israelis were climbing the Golan in an attempt to remove, once and for all, the Syrian guns terrorizing the citizens of the North.

The battle was not just about a piece of real estate; at stake was Israel's right to live in peace, and her responsibility to protect her citizens from aggression. Finally, after nineteen years of unremitting terror, Israel had an opportunity to set the North free; there would be no second chance.

In the northern thrust, the elite Golani brigade was in trouble. The terraces up the side of the mountain were completely impassable to armor, so the infantry found themselves all alone.

Everything came to a head on the slopes beneath the Syrian fortifications at Tel Facher. The Syrians had spent an inordinate amount of time building this defensive position, as it was clear that this was the gateway to the entire Golan Heights. The Israelis, caught in an impossibly exposed position, with no armor support, and with quarters too close for real artillery and air support were being forced into almost single file up the mountain path, as they encountered intense defensive positions including mines and barbed wire.

Tel Facher was dangerously close to becoming the turning point of the war. The advance up the mountain ground to a halt. Stuck on the barbed wire, within range of the Syrian machine-gun nests above, the boys from Golani were being cut to pieces.

Enter one David Shirazi. Shirazi had already been wounded in the fighting but refused to let the platoon medic evacuate him. He had spent the better part of three years with these men, and they were more than just members of his unit; they were his brothers.

They say he looked up that hill, and knew there was no way he would make it to the top; the climb was too steep, his wounds were too great, and the merciless hammering of the artillery and machine gun fire meant there was nowhere to go.

The rows of barbed wire, normally such a simple obstacle, were, because of the terrain, proving to be the undoing of the Golani brigade. The narrow approach meant only one man at a time could

approach the wire, which gave the Syrian machine gunners more than enough time to cut the Israelis down, one by one.

There is a powerful teaching in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the fathers):

*“Be'makom She'Ein Ish, Hishtadel Le'hiyot Ish.”
“In a place where there is no man, try to be that man.”*

Someone had to do something, and in that place at that moment, with the Golan and the entire Seventh Brigade hanging in the balance, Shirazi was that man.

Shouting out one word, “Alai” (“On me”) over and over again, he leapt forward and threw himself on top of the barbed wire transforming himself into a human bridge over which the men could run across and storm the Syrian positions. With tears in their eyes as they trampled over his body, the men of Golani took heart from Shirazi’s example, and reclaimed the Golan Heights.

Only three men eventually reached the top of Tel Facher, but it was enough. On June 12, 1967, the Syrian guns on the Golan Heights finally went silent. Two thousand years after the Roman legions had exiled them, the Jewish people had finally come home to the ancient mountaintops of the Bashan.

One wonders what gives a man the strength to pursue something he knows he will not finish. David Shirazi, who is memorialized for eternity in the Golani museum at Tsomet Golani, had no illusions that he would ever reach the top of the Golan, yet he kept moving up that hill to get as far as he could, clinging to the belief that he could still make a difference.

This week’s portion of *Vayigash* begins with one of the most intense confrontations in the entire Bible.

Binyamin, the youngest son of Yaakov, stands accused of stealing the goblet of the viceroy and the punishment for such a crime is to become a slave in the dungeons of Egypt forever.

Seemingly in an impossible situation, with no way out, Yehuda steps forward to challenge the Viceroy (whom he apparently does not yet know to be Joseph) and in what becomes his finest hour, rises to the challenge of saving his brother from a horrible fate.

How does a moment of such confrontation transform into the ultimate reconciliation, with Joseph weeping in the arms of the brothers who twenty two years earlier hated him enough to abandon him to the world of Egyptian servitude?

Interestingly, the word the Torah uses for Yehuda stepping forward to confront Joseph (after which our portion is named) *Vayigash*, really means ‘to come close’. (When Yehoshua calls the Jewish people to ‘come close’ and listen prior to entering the land of Israel (Joshua 3:9) he says “*Geshu hena*” *Come close here ...*”), which is the same word used when Joseph calls the brothers to come close. As he reveals himself to them (45:4) he also says “*Ge’shu na elai*” “*come close to me*”. Indeed *Onkelos* translates the word as ‘to come close’; Hardly the language of confrontation!

Even more interesting, when all is revealed and Yaakov and his sons eventually come down to settle in Egypt, they dwell in a land called ‘*Goshen* (46:28), which literally means *the land of ‘closeness’!*

Quite a turn of events for the brothers who once had such enmity and hatred for their brother Joseph that “*they could not even speak to him in peace*” (37:4).

The **Ohr Hachaim** (R Chaim Ibn Atar) goes so far as to point out that when the brothers see Joseph approaching in the field (whereupon they conspire to kill him...) the verse says (37; 18) “*they see him from afar*”, precisely because if they came close they would not have hated him as much; it is only when you see someone figuratively from a distance, that you can really hate him.

Essentially, Yehudah offers himself as a slave in lieu of his brother; he will take his brother’s place. But the language he uses is “*Avdecha’ Arav et ha’naar*” (44:32) which literally means he had promised their father Yaakov he would be responsible for the lad (Binyamin, allowing him to be brought to Egypt in the first place.) But the word “*Areiv*” related to *Irvuv* really means to be mixed together and indeed, to be one. The first step in doing away with the internecine hatred and rivalry, jealousy and envy that plagued the brothers then, and still plagues us today, is to come close; to realize we are really one.

Ultimately, for the tragic error of assuming we are better off being ‘apart’ the brothers will spend two hundred years in Egypt learning that we are and need to work on being ‘one’.

When we view each other as ‘other’, then we are repeating the original mistake of the brothers which led to such tragedy. When we however tap into the reality that we are all really one; one family all created in Hashem’s image; then we are capturing the spirit of reconciliation that led to the birth of the Jewish Nation and speaks to its mission of sharing a reality in which the whole world one day becomes one....

David Shirazi, on that lonely hill understood that we are never alone; and he became one , with his brothers in arms, with the Jewish people and ultimately with the dream of a world in which all of humanity becomes so aware of the one-ness we all share that there will no longer be a need for war.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Rav Binny Freedman