

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayigash)

Some time ago, my brother shared with me the following story:

Yuli Edelstein the speaker of the Knesset, was visiting a small school in Beitar Illit (Le'tzion Be'Rinah) and shared the following story:

On Dec 19, 1984, Edelstein was sentenced by a Russian Tribunal, to three years of hard labor in Siberia. Technically the crime listed on the charge sheet was possession of narcotics, but the real reason was the fact that the Russians had caught him teaching Hebrew.

“That day in court”, Edelstein recalled, “was after three solid months of being imprisoned in an isolation cell in Moscow’s infamous Chistopol prison.”

“I was taken straight from my prison cell to the court and found it full of Russian military and security personnel, who had clearly filled the court room to ensure there was no room for any of my supporters; only my wife and mother managed to get into the courtroom to hear the sentencing.”

After the sentencing, the twenty-six-year-old Edelstein was immediately surrounded by Russian security personnel. On his way out of the court room he managed to stick his head through the ring of security and had a moment to say something to his wife, whom he most probably would not see again for at least three years, if ever. He had not seen his wife for three months; what would he say to her? What one sentence was he driven to share with her? What was the question he asked her?

“Tonya! What candle is it?”

The security personnel who overheard him must have thought he had lost his mind; after all, he had just heard he was sentenced to three years of hard labor.... Years later his wife would share with him that at first she thought the same thing. So again, he yelled: “what candle is it today?”

Then she got it: so she yelled back: Tonight we light the second candle of Chanukah!”

He had been in an isolation cell for three months but when the Judge read the sentence and announced the date, he realized it might be Chanukah; as it turned out he was sentenced on the first day of Chanukah in 1984.

That night, no longer in an isolation cell, but in the cell of sentenced prisoners, he managed to get hold of a couple of matches. And on the second night of Chanukah, Yuli Edelstein, son of two Russian assimilated Jews, who had come full circle back to Judaism, lit the Chanukah lights with two matches, standing in front of the barred window of his cell.

Reciting the blessings over the miracles Hashem (G-d) had performed for the Jewish people so many years ago, he held the matches until the flames burnt down to his fingertips.

As he explained to the school children with whom he was speaking: “It may have been the shortest candle lighting in Jewish history, lasting only a few seconds, but that little bit of light for me, pushed away an enormous amount of darkness.”

How can such a little light push away so much darkness?

Natan Sharansky, arguably the most famous Soviet Jewish prisoner of conscience, was imprisoned for many years and became a symbol of the movement to free Soviet Jewry in the 1970's and 80's I was there with the thousands of supporters who came to welcome him home to Israel when he was freed in 1986, and will never forget the moment he proclaimed, holding high his new Israeli identity card, “Am Yisrael Chai” Israel yet lives!“ .

I actually once had the privilege of sitting next to Natan Sharansky at a dinner and had the opportunity to ask him whether he still bore any malice towards his Russian tormentors. His response, which remains with me, was that they were just doing their job, and he was too busy getting on with his life to hold on to any anger; amazing....

This week's portion *Vayigash*, actually tells the story of one of the most incredible such moments in human history: Joseph's rapprochement with his estranged brothers.

Incredibly twenty-two years after they threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave, and despite all he had endured, Joseph seems to bear no malice towards his brothers and forgives them with tears in his eyes.... (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 45:1-9). Indeed, this is the first instance in the Torah of one person's actual, real forgiveness of another.

It is not the first time we sense forgiveness; G-d ultimately forgives Adam and Eve, commutes Kayin (Cain)'s sentence and so on, but then G-d does not really forgive, because everything is really part of G-d's plan to begin with, and G-d is the source of all reality, so for G-d, there is really nothing to forgive.

And while there are instances of rapprochement in the Torah, we did not seem to see forgiveness. Avraham avoids a conflict with his nephew Lot (*ibid.* 13: 5-14) and they “separate”, but Avraham never gets angry and there does not seem anything to let go of.

And when Esau and his long-estranged brother Yaakov finally meet again, so many years after Yaakov ‘stole’ the blessings from his older brother, it does not seem Esau ever actually forgives Yaakov. The topic does not even come up in their conversation (*ibid.* 33:1-17), and there too, either because Yaakov makes himself subservient to his older brother, or because he bribes him, or perhaps because mystically he overcomes him, they too separate. Indeed, the fact that they go their separate ways seems more about Esau having let go than about Yaakov being forgiven.

But with Yosef (Joseph), there is no avoiding the topic. When Yosef finally reveals himself, the brothers cannot speak; they are clearly terrified.

And if there ever was a person who had the right to be angry, it was Yosef. After all, his brothers robbed him of his youth; he was taken from the father he loved, not to mention his beloved younger brother Binyamin, forced to grow up without his older brother. They stole twenty-two years of his life! And they did not just leave; they threw him in a pit; he was sold as a slave; and he ended up again in the lime pits

and slave prisons of ancient Egypt; we cannot even begin to imagine the suffering Yosef must have endured.

And yet, finally given the opportunity to confront his tormentors he not only seems to have no anger and bear then no grudge, he actually understands how terrified they must be and wants to comfort *them!* And he not only seems to forgive them, he wants to *help* them! He immediately offers them a place to live, guarantees their sustenance and sets in motion the plan to bring Yaakov and Binyamin down to Egypt under his protection.

What is the secret to such magnanimity?

In order to understand forgiveness, we first need to understand the anger and the sense of being wronged that necessitates forgiveness in the first place.

Anger is all about expectations. I become angry because I feel I deserve better; I expect to be treated better, and I am upset because I am not sufficiently appreciated. Notice how many times the letter I appears in this sentence; read it again:

I become angry because **I** feel **I** deserve better; **I** expect to be treated better, and **I** am upset because **I** am not sufficiently appreciated. Anger, essentially all about me; and Judaism teaches that the way to correct such a character imbalance is that in truth it's not supposed to be about me; it's about something so much bigger than me; it's about the image of G-d in everyone around me; it's about seeing Hashem in everything, and recognizing life is not all about me.

And that is exactly what Yosef does. He does not see himself as the center of the story, nor even the brothers; we are all characters in a much larger narrative.

"For G-d has sent me before you to provide sustenance..." (ibid. 45:5); if there is a much bigger picture and we are just part of a larger production, then we don't really have expectations; we have reactions. We are forced to wonder what Hashem's plan really is, and why we find ourselves in such situations. Life becomes less about what someone else has *done* to me, and more about why G-d is *giving* me such challenges....

Which leads to the second aspect of forgiveness. Many years ago a very special friend (Rabbi Danny Beller z"l) pointed out in a lecture I heard him share that to be forgiving, is really to be *for* giving; it's all about wanting to give rather than to take.

In fact, the Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, really means to give (*le'havi* is to bring...) because love is all about giving, as opposed to lust which is all about taking. That's why when you love someone, they are your partner, but when you lust someone they become an object. That's also why love grows, and lust wanes....

If you love someone and only want to give them, seeing them as more at the center of things than you, then it's easy to let go of the anger and be more about giving.

And the more you see Hashem as the center of reality and the person you love as so clearly created in Hashem's image, the more ridiculous it becomes to get angry....

Often, we don't realize that anger is really not about the other person; I've met people who are holding on to anger for people that have been dead for twenty years!

So it's not about the other person; they could care less that we are still angry; to quote another line I recall from Rabbi Beller z"l: Forgiveness is an absolute refusal to live in a state of ill will. And the healthiest thing we can do with anger is simply to let it go. And we do that by recognizing that whatever made me angry in the first place is really a gift from Hashem.

Incidentally that is the difference between just letting go, as Esau does, and the forgiveness of Yosef. Letting go still leaves us apart which is part of why Esau and Yaakov go their separate ways (ibid. 33:16-17). Whereas real forgiveness based on love, brings us together, as with Yosef and his brothers. Certainly, we could use a lot more of that....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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