

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayikra)

Visiting Poland is an overwhelming experience; it is a country that serves as a mass memorial to European Jewry; a Jewish community that flourished for a thousand years, and is no more. To attempt to comprehend the enormity of millions of lives taken in such a brutal fashion; of one and a half million children and thousands of Jewish communities, is simply beyond comprehension. So one attempts instead to focus on an individual story; on the details.

A visit to the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw is a case in point. With hundreds of thousands of Jewish graves buried there over hundreds of years, including some of the greatest Rabbis of Jewish history, it is an overwhelming experience. At one point, on our recent visit to Warsaw, we stopped in front of a large gravestone with the name Adam Czerniaków (pronounced Cherniack; November 30, 1880 – 23 July 1942)

It was immediately clear there was a story here; he was buried in 1942, when most of the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto were being transported to Treblinka. Of the 450,000 Jews of the Warsaw ghetto, very few merited a Jewish burial, and certainly not with such an impressive headstone.

Adam Czerniaków was actually one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto and was appointed to be head of the Judenrat, the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish Council that interfaced with the Germans and sought to provide some semblance of order and direction for the desperate Jews of the ghetto. It was the Judenrat that attempted to allocate every foot of living space to the tens of thousands of Jews pouring into the ghetto every week in 1939 and 1940. How do you find space for 450,000 Jews in a small section of blocks meant for 20,000 people?

And it was the Judenrat that attempted to allocate the meager food rations and work assignments that meant life, however temporarily, for those who managed to receive them. To be the head of the Judenrat was a thankless miserable job. And Adam Czerniaków attempted to fill the role as best he could, until the day he was found dead at his desk, a suicide note beneath his hand, written just before he killed himself.

As the German authorities began preparing for mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka in July 1942, the Judenrat was ordered to provide lists of Jews and maps of their residences. On 22 July 1942, the Judenrat received instructions from the SS that all Warsaw Jews were to be "resettled" to the East. (Exceptions were made for Jews working in Nazi German factories, Jewish hospital staff, members of the Council and the Jewish Ghetto police.) Over the course of the day, Czerniaków was able to obtain exemptions for a handful of individuals, including sanitation workers, husbands of women working in factories, and some vocational students. Despite all his pleading however he was unable to obtain an exemption for the orphans of Janusz Korczak's orphanage and other ghetto orphanages. The orders further stated that the deportations would begin immediately at the rate of 6,000 people per day, to be supplied by the Jewish Council and rounded up by the Ghetto Police.

Failure to comply would result in immediate execution of some one hundred hostages, including employees of the Council itself and Czerniaków's own wife.

By this time it had become clear to him that these hapless Jews were not going to a better place where work would mean freedom. The empty trains returning, a few escapes, and stories from bribed SS guards made it clear the Nazis were sending the Jews of Poland to mass extermination.

Realizing that deportation meant death, Czerniaków went to plead for the orphans. When he failed, he returned to his office and took a cyanide capsule he had been keeping for such an occurrence. He left a suicide note reading: "I can no longer bear all this. My act will prove to everyone what the right thing to do is..."

*The last entry in the journal found open on his desk read:
"I hope the world will learn from this".*

Adam Czerniaków wanted the Jews, and even the world to see they could resist; he was calling out from the grave not to collaborate; perhaps he felt this was his final calling....

This week we begin reading the third book of the Torah: *Vayikra*.

*"And he called to Moshe, and Hashem (G-d) spoke to him..."
(Vayikra (Leviticus) 1:1)*

The word *Vayikra*, to call, is the first word in this week's portion and is the name of both the portion as well as the entire third book of the Torah. What is significant about the word "*Vayikra*" "*And He called*" that it signifies the essence of this third book?

It is interesting to note that the word *Vayikra* is written in the Torah with a small letter *Aleph* at the end. The *Baal Haturim* explains that this is because Moshe, in his modesty, wanted to use the same word that is used when Hashem interacted with Balaam (the wicked non-Jewish prophet who appears in the fourth book of the Torah *Bamidbar* ...): "*Vayakar*"- "happened to meet". (*Bamidbar* 23:4)

Vayakar is *Vayikra* without the letter *Aleph*, but Hashem specifically asked Moshe to use the word *Vayikra*. Moshe was uncomfortable being placed at center stage, wanting it perhaps to appear that he was not so special, he just 'happened' to be in the right place at the right time .

To signify Moshe's humility the *Aleph* is written smaller to indicate that it wasn't Moshe's first choice for usage.

But this is not the first time Hashem uses the word *Vayikra* to call Moshe; in fact we find it used a number of times in the previous book of *Shemot* (Exodus) ; (see 19:3; 19:20...) Why is it that here the word "*Vayikra*" bothers Moshe?

Indeed the very first time (*Shemot* 3:4) Hashem calls Moshe at the burning bush the Torah uses the word *Vayikra*, because Moshe is not just being called; Moshe is receiving his calling. The shepherd is about to become the leader of the Jewish people for all time.

The book of Vayikra (Leviticus) introduces the concept of a "*Korban*" - a sacrificial offering. Interestingly, until now, the word used in the Torah for a sacrifice is the word "*Zevach*". Which seems to emanate from the root 'zav' to flow, implying perhaps that all things flow from Hashem's goodness.

Here now we are introduced to a new concept of service to Hashem. The **Ramban** suggests that the root of the word *Korban* (sacrifice) is "*Karov*": to be close. The Torah is introducing the idea that Hashem desires a closer relationship with us as human beings. The idea that a human being could come close to G-d was entirely foreign to the ancient pagan world. In Egypt and Babylon, Canaan and Persia we were meant to be in awe or fear; Judaism believes that we can actually come close to G-d; that Hashem loves us. Indeed, Rashi here (Vayikra 1:1) suggests that Vayikra is a language of endearment; of love.

In fact, the first verse of *Vayikra* is odd: "*and He called to Moshe...*" Yet there is no context as to who "He" is referring to? From the end of the verse we can deduce that the word "He" is referring to G-d. But why does the Torah obscure who the caller is? Rather, by first identifying Moshe as the one being called, perhaps the Torah wants to emphasize that Hashem is "calling on" Moshe and the interaction was for Moshe's personal sake (i.e. a relationship with Moshe).

And how is that we can come close to G-d? By understanding what Hashem really wants of us; what indeed is our 'calling'.

In any healthy relationship, the relationship grows when we understand what the other person (or group) really wants and needs of us.

Imagine a husband excitedly coming home on his wedding anniversary with an expensive gift, only to be shocked that his wife is not so happy with the new power tool he has brought home

Every day, and indeed in every moment and in everything we do we are meant to ask ourselves three simple questions:

- What do I want?
- Why do I want it?
- Do I believe Hashem wants me to want this?

Indeed, if we can tap deep into ourselves and discover what we really want, and if we believe we want it for the right reasons, it is because deep down we believe that no less than G-d imbued us with this desire to become a part of something bigger, of making a better world...

As Rabban Gamliel (the son of Rebbe Yehuda haNassi) teaches:

עשה רצונו כרצונך

"Make His will like your will" (Avot 2:4)

In fact, it is precisely in being able to hear and respond to a higher calling that we elevate ourselves above our animal selves; beyond our base physical desires, and succeed in channeling even such desires to a higher calling.

On our recent trip to Poland our tour guide, Rav Yitzchak Rubenstein, shared with us a detail that I had never considered and continues to haunt me. Jews who went to Treblinka spent less than an hour there; when Jews arrived at the Treblinka station they were immediately robbed (all their remaining belongings were taken), stripped, gassed and burned. And it became obvious fairly quickly, to the veterans of the Warsaw ghetto that this was the end of the line.

*When the Rav Meir Alter, the son of the Gerrer rebbe (Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter) arrived in Treblinka and understood where they were headed he walked over to a German officer and asked him for his canteen. The officer was so surprised, he actually handed him his canteen whereupon he promptly washed negelvasser (ritually washed his hands) and said: "Let us fulfill the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying G-d's name) in purity". Clearly, he felt it was not just about whether and when you died, it was about **how** you chose to die. The legend amongst the Gerrer Chassidim is that in that moment, the Germans saw this and realized: They may have won the battle but they would never win the war. I have always struggled with this story for many reasons, but on one level, perhaps Rav Meir Alter wanted to share with us that every moment is a gift, and even a calling, ours but to choose how we should respond....*

We are living in incredible times; and Hashem is calling us to be partners in making this world a better place so that one day our children and grandchildren can grow up to live in a better world. May we all be blessed to hear our calling and merit to make a difference in whatever way we believe Hashem asks of us.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman