

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality **(Portion of Vayikra)**

From Rav Binny Freedman

What do you do when you can't do what you want to do and what you have to do, you really don't want to do?

Sound confusing? That is actually our reality these days as the world turns upside down and we all find ourselves suddenly, in an entirely new reality.

It reminds me of the story of my cousin, Aryeh Yakont z"l, who was a Holocaust survivor. His family lived in Antwerp and he and his brother Ephraim were just boys when the Nazis occupied Belgium. Very quickly, things went from bad to worse, their father Betzalel was taken away by the Gestapo, and their mother Shoshana (my Aunt) went into hiding with her two small boys in the house of a kind Christian neighbor. Eventually, as things got worse, they had to stay hidden and quiet, all day, in a tiny hidden room the size of a closet, with no windows, for two years before they were eventually liberated.

*The family reunited and came to Israel after the war and Aryeh ended up as Chabad Chassid living in the Bayit Vegan neighborhood of Jerusalem. One Shabbat at his Shabbat table, I asked him how he survived such a horrific experience; how do you stay sane as a ten-year-old boy, in a closet, for **two years**? He said he had seen other families carted off by the Gestapo, and had heard stories about what happened to Jewish children held by the Nazis; so, he knew how lucky he was ...*

There is an interesting occurrence in this week's portion of Vayikra, which is rather unique and actually occurs only three times in the entire Torah:

"If ('Eem") you offer a meal offering of your first fruits to Hashem (G-d)..." (Vayikra (Leviticus) 2:14)

Rashi notes that the word 'if' does not really make sense as this is referring to the Omer offering of Barley which was actually an obligation. Rather, this is one of the three places in the Torah where the word Eem actually does not mean 'if'; it means when; when you offer up the Omer offering of barley...

Of course, this begs the question: if the Torah intends this as an obligation, why is the word normally implying volunteerism used? Why does the language *seem* to imply that the offering is something I might choose to do rather than an obligation?

The other two instances of this strange anomaly are in the book of Exodus (*Shemot*).

"If you will build an altar..." (In the Temple) it cannot be of hewn stone (*Shemot* 20:22) which really means *when* you (are obligated to) build an altar...

And *"If you will lend money..."* (To your fellow Jew; *ibid.* 22:24) which really means, as Rashi again points out, *when* you lend money as this mitzvah too is an obligation.

So if these three mitzvot: To build an altar in the Temple, to lend money to one another, and to offer up the Omer sacrifice on the second day of the Pesach holiday, are all obligations, why are they presented in a language implying they are voluntary?

Perhaps the goal is to see an obligation as something we actually *want* to do? Think about the difference in the way we perform our obligations, and the way we engage in the activities we really want to be doing.

What husband or parent or close friend doesn't feel obligated to acknowledge the birthdays of their loved ones? But whether we see finding a birthday present as a burden or a blessing is what makes all the difference.

These three mitzvot actually represent a much larger idea.

The altar we are obligated to build represents the relationship we have with Hashem (G-d) as it is the vehicle whereby we offer sacrifices, representing what we give back to G-d. Clearly, we are obligated in mitzvot that frame our relationship with Hashem: to keep kosher, to fast on Yom Kippur and the like. Do we see these as a burden, or do we rise to the challenge of allowing them to enhance our lives?

The money we are obligated to lend our fellow human beings in need represents our relationship with our fellow human beings. To visit the sick, care for the needy and take care not to cause suffering to the unfortunate, such as widows and orphans. Again, do we see these as obligations? Or do we challenge ourselves to revel in the opportunities they afford us to make the world a better place?

Lastly, in this week's portion, the mitzvah of offering up the Omer of barley actually represents our relationship with our selves. Barley is animal food and this offering represents our ability to overcome the animal that rages within all of us; to become better. It was meant to be offered on the second day of the Pesach (Passover) festival; the day after we commemorate getting out of Egypt. It is essentially the first day we woke up to a new reality: the reality of freedom. All of a sudden no-one else was telling us what to do, we were given the opportunity to choose to hear a greater voice, to use our time wisely, and challenge ourselves to become the best that we can be.

Indeed, this is actually how the entire book of Vayikra begins. Take a look at a Torah Scroll (reproduced in many Chumashim or bibles) and you will notice that the letter aleph in the word *Vayikra*, (literally: "*and He called...*") is written smaller than the rest of the word. Without the *aleph* it would only spell the word *va'yaker* which means 'and He happened upon...'

Everything that happens in this world can be seen as a calling, or as a coincidence; the choice is up to us. How do we choose to see the world we live in? Is life a series of random occurrences leaving us with no choice but to react to each event as it unfolds, or is life a calling, challenging us to find ways to rise to the moment, every moment?

If a ten-year-old boy, essentially locked in a closet with his brother for two years, can live through that with a positive attitude towards life, then we owe it to ourselves and everyone around, to aspire to the same.

We are living a new reality; the question is, will the world become the better for it? That ultimately, will be up to us.

Shabbat Shalom from the mountains of Gush Etzion, near Jerusalem,

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