

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Vayikra

(reprinted from 2015)

Thirty years; a long time; a generation. Last week we came together from all over the country, to remember.

Thirty years have passed since Dani Moshitz, David (Didi) Cohen and Baruch Stern fell in Lebanon in 1985, and we came together with their families to let them know we had not forgotten. Comforting on the one hand, and yet painful on the other; Dani and Didi will remain 20 years old forever, while we have moved on, with children and some of us even with grandchildren....

Many of the men (were they men then?) who served together at the Milano position where they were based, came in to pay tribute and to share their memories. Some were like old photographs I had seen many times; taken out and shared again. But some were new, things I had never heard. And one caught me by surprise.

It was Erev Pesach (the eve of Passover) and Baruch Stern was supposed to be getting out and making it home for Seder. He was actually finishing his army service and would have been done, but he volunteered to stay in Lebanon for the Seder so someone else could make it home; after all, come Sunday, Baruch would have as many weekends at home as he liked. But alas, it was not to be.

That morning while on patrol a Hezbollah terrorist set off a massive roadside bomb whose blast threw Baruch in the air. When the medics got to him scant seconds later he did not appear to be seriously injured. However, when Yaakov Rachimi, the Company Commander arrived on the scene, he took one look at the scope of the damage and realized it must have been a massive blast. Reasoning that Baruch probably had not as yet visible internal injuries, he objected to the chief Medic's decision to evacuate him in an APC (Armored personnel carrier) insisting instead on calling in a helicopter evacuation. After arguing for a few minutes he finally forced the officers to call in a helicopter which soon arrived and flew Baruch down to Rambam hospital. By the time he arrived at the hospital his situation had deteriorated and he soon fell into a coma from which he never recovered. On the eve of Israeli Independence Day, on the fifth of Iyar, he succumbed to his wounds and passed away.

Doctors would later say those few minutes that delayed the helicopter evacuation might have made all the difference. I had never heard that story before, and have been thinking about it ever since.

A simple mistake, a few moments, and a boy's life; thirty years later, it's hard to hold anyone accountable for mistakes made under such intense pressures. And yet, someone made a terrible mistake

Do we hold ourselves accountable for the mistakes we make in life? Or do we learn to let go of honest mistakes, recognizing we are far from perfect, and always will be.

This week's portion, *Vayikra*, begins the fascinating journey into the world of the Biblical sacrifices.

And even though we have not had a Temple for nearly two millennium, the messages and moral imperatives they represent are no less relevant today than they were thirty two hundred years ago when the Jews began their journey as a Nation.

One of the central sacrifices was called the *chatat*, or sin offering.

Interestingly, this offering was not brought when a person intentionally sinned, nor when events were beyond his control (a state known as *Ones*, such as when unpredictable forces of nature cause one to transgress....) . A *chatat* is offered when we inadvertently transgress; by accident, particularly serious mistakes.

But why are we held responsible for mistakes? Why are we obligated to bring a sin offering for what was an honest, inadvertent mistake ?

There are many responses given to this question: Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that ignorance does not excuse our mistakes. The Lubavitcher Rebbe would not accidentally eat on Yom Kippur. As such, if a person makes such a mistake he has some atonement to do. Indeed, when we make such mistakes we can never fully undo the consequences of what we have done, and Judaism suggests that such inadvertent transgressions, even if not intentional, are nonetheless not completely excused.

We live in challenging times when once again the specter of Anti-Semitism is raising its ugly head.

75 years ago, the world stood by while six million of our people, including one and a half million children were murdered in cold blood. And the world was never really held accountable. Who would have believed in our lifetimes we would see Jews once again terrorized in the streets of France, and afraid to walk publicly as Jews on college campuses in America?

200,000 people have been murdered in Syria, while the world again, does nothing

The sin offering reminds us all, that we are accountable not only for what we do, but even for what we do not do, simply because we pretend to be too busy... or because we simply did not know better. We have a responsibility, to never be too busy and to make sure we do know better....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman