

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Yitro)

It was her eyes that really captured me; there was an intense sadness there mixed with pain, and yet every now and then a flash of fire that seemed to suggest... defiance?

The woman was being interviewed on the television news and I stopped for a minute to watch. The screen was focused in close, showing only her face, and as the commentator translated, I realized she was speaking about her son who had just been killed in a terrorist bus bombing. I watched as a tear rolled down her cheek and listened to her describe all of the dreams and aspirations her son, Yosef, would never realize.

The camera panned around what must have been his room, and I noticed a soccer ball lying in the corner. The cameraman must have noticed it too, because he immediately panned in on the mud-speckled ball, which better than anything the mother was saying, conveyed the tragedy of lost hopes and dreams, and represented the price of war.

And then the camera panned back to the mother again, a close up of her face, just the eyes, brimming with tears as she broke down and sobbed.

There is nothing more powerful than the love of a mother for her child, nor as painful as the tragedy of that love torn apart by the untimely death, especially by violence, of that child.

Indeed, it is for this reason that we learn the sounds of the Shofar blast from the sobs and cries of the mother of Sisera, one of the Jewish people's archenemies, whose mother, waiting at the window for his return from battle, begins to cry upon realizing that he isn't coming home. Because just as the love of a mother can never be broken, Hashem loves us no matter what we do.

And then Yosef's mother began repeating again and again: "if I only I could have taken his place", to which the commentator responded gently: "If you could have taken his place would you have done so?"

And the mother of the boy repeated again: "I would be proud to have taken his place and I am proud of him for all that he has done." And it was at this point that I realized, as the camera finally panned out showing the woman, and not just her eyes, that I was listening to the mother of a suicide bomber, who not only was proud of her son for the death and destruction he had rained upon so many innocent families the day before, but actually desired to do the same thing.

Putting aside many of the questions this news piece raises regarding the role of the media, the nature of the news it reports, and the responsibility it has towards the general public, one cannot help but wonder how much of the decision of this young suicide bomber was influenced by this same mother's pride in his path, and even by her desire to emulate it.

Which raises an interesting question: should this woman (and anyone like her) be held accountable, not just for evil actions but for evil desires as well?

While one might suggest that espousing suicide bombings in the public media is no longer thought, but action, what of the original thought process? Can we be held responsible for our desires, and not just our actions?

At first glance, the idea seems absurd, and yet this is precisely the question one has to struggle with when confronting the tenth commandment in this week's portion, *Yitro*.

"Lo' tachmod beit rei'echa', lo' tachmod eishet rei'echa', ve'avdo', va'amato' ve'shoro', va'chamaro', ve'chol asher le'rei'echa'."

"You shall not covet your friend's (fellow's?) house. You shall not covet your friend's wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, and anything that belongs to your friend." (Exodus (Shemot) 20:14)

What is the nature of this mitzvah?

The *Ibn Ezra*, along with many other commentaries poses the obvious question here: how can we be expected not only to limit what we do, but also even to control what we think?

And what is the problem with wanting something that I can't have?

Perhaps, before we can consider how we want things, or even how to decide *not* to want things, this mitzvah forces us to consider what we really want in the first place. And the Torah is obviously telling us that there are certain things we should not want at all.

In truth, there are many things we expect ourselves not to want, whether as parents, as Doctors, or even as a society. It is not enough sometimes for a person not to *do* the wrong thing; it is equally important for them not to *want* those things at all.

For example, a parent whose child enjoys eating light bulbs would be calling a child psychologist, and most schools would not hire a person who enjoys child pornography as a teacher, even if that person had never actually done anything wrong.

So, suggests *Rav Avigdor Nevensahl* in his *Sichot Le Sefer Shemot*, maybe the Torah wants us to feel that way about *anything* that belongs to someone else.

In other words, the very fact that something belongs to someone else, means that not only would I never take it or attempt to acquire it, but that I would naturally not even *want it at all!* Desiring your friend's laptop, or wife, then, should be like wanting to eat your sports coat.

But as much as this may be a laudable goal, the real question is how does one accomplish this?

Perhaps instead of approaching this question from the perspective of the desires we struggle with, we might consider a closer look at the initial relationships we have prior to coveting something else.

Think about it: a fellow visits someone's home and desires it for himself, only it already belongs to someone else; a normal state of affairs right? Except the fact that this fellow could feel that way about someone else's home must mean he is not really happy with his own state of affairs.

The problem begins not with the covetous thought, but with the unhealthy relationship that allows for the process to even get started.

Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the fathers 4:1) teaches us:

"Who is truly wealthy? He who is happy with his lot...."

The very fact that a person desires another home must mean there is something missing with his own life. And *that* is what the Torah really wants us to work on.

Much like a person who covets someone else's wife; the problem begins with the fact that he needs to work on his own marriage; which is why he could even think that way about someone else's wife....

And in such a situation we have choices.

Indeed, there is even something wrong with the fact that a person only woke up to the challenges in his own relationship by seeing and desiring someone else. The true challenge of all relationships is the constant work and effort that goes into nurturing such relationships and seeing them grow, day-by-day, and year-by-year.

And if this is true of our relationships with each other, it is certainly true of our relationship with Hashem.

Indeed, the essence of our time here on earth is all about the desire to simply fulfill the desire or *Ratzon* of G-d. Ultimately, this is the great question we have the opportunity to ask ourselves each and every day: what is it, really, that G-d wants of me? And can I fulfill a little bit more, of what that *Ratzon* (that desire) of G-d's really is.

And by definition, this means focusing on the gifts and opportunities G-d gives me, and not what He has bestowed on the fellow next to me.

And *that* is the true challenge of Lo' Tachmod: the opportunity not to covet. Can I develop such healthy relationships in my life that even my desires naturally change?

It is a mitzvah less about the things we want than about who we really are. Sometimes we are not so happy with the things we want. But in the end, the things we want are just symptoms; reflections of the relationships we have in our lives.

And here too, perhaps it is less about getting there than about embracing the process.

It begins with what I decide I *want* to want, and then it proceeds to a very deep introspection into how I develop the relationships that allow me to truly want those things.

And as to how we get there, it is worth noting that we are given these mitzvot at Sinai, where, in the midst of thunder and lightning and the still, small voice of G-d, we somehow achieved an exalted state, deeply connected to G-d and our purpose on earth. And it may well be that in that briefest of moments we actually truly desired only to fulfill the will of G-d.

Every now and then we are blessed to experience such moments; perhaps it is the moment of standing with your beloved underneath the wedding canopy, the *chuppah*, or maybe it is when you intuit the pain of a friend and are filled with a desire only to be there for them.

We need to catch those moments and tap into them, learn from them, because they are the fuel which powers our lives.

We really do have the ability to change the nature of what we want in this world, and that is a crucial piece in our ability to make the world the better place we all dream it could be. Maybe we'll get a little bit closer this Shabbat....

Shabbat Shalom,
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