

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Yitro)

Recently, I attended the wedding of the daughter of very old friends and was enjoying the palpable joy at the chosson's tisch (the gathering where the marriage document, the Ketubah, was witnessed and signed with the groom before the ceremony) when the father of the bride approached me and asked me to daven Maariv (lead the evening service).

I had a moment of angst as I did not have a siddur (prayer book) on me, nor did it seem anyone else did. But as he seemed pressured to move things along, I did not want to hold things up and so elected to lead the prayers by heart from memory.

Thinking about it later it was interesting that the prospect of davening from memory caused me angst; after all, I say these prayers every day and almost always do it from memory; and had I not been asked to lead the service would have done so again, so why the sudden stress?

In sports they have a name for this phenomenon: it's what happens when a player chokes at the bat and describes a seasoned player who can't perform a simple task because he gets too nervous. This is actually different from panic.

Panic is when a person stops thinking, like when a person gets up to give a speech and can't remember anything; he freezes, and strange sounds emanate from his mouth. In that situation, he has to slow down and think, he has to remember what he planned to say, and it will gradually come back to him.

'Choking' is precisely the opposite: it's what happens when a person thinks too much. I knew all the words and have said them a thousand times, but now that everyone was watching and listening it became easy to question myself, to think too much about what I was doing. So the solution was actually to stop thinking about it and rely on the routine that was already there.

It reminded me of the intense fear I felt and can still recall, the first time I had to throw a live grenade in training in the army. I had already thrown a 'dummy' grenade dozens of times, but now, as part of the test at the end of basic training, everyone including all of my commanders, was watching and I started thinking too much: about everything that could go wrong and all the mistakes one could make when throwing a live grenade, so for a moment I froze. And the commander overseeing the test finally yelled at me: "Stop thinking! Just throw it!"

Sometimes, we think too much, and we need to rely on what is deep inside of us, what we really already know.

This week, we read the portion of *Yitro*, famous for its introduction of the commandments.

There is a fascinating discussion about the nature of the opening statement of these Commandments (Actually called 'utterings' or *Dibrot* in the Jewish tradition):

"I am the Lord your G-d..." "Anochi Hashem Elokecha..."

Is this an actual Commandment? Or simply an introduction? **Maimonides** clearly says it is a mitzvah, a Commandment:

"Mitzvah gedolah... leidah she'yesh sham Eloka..."

"There is a great Mitzvah to Know Hashem (G-d) exists."

(Sefer Hamitzvot 1 and Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 1:1)

The **Ramban**, (ad loc. in his commentary on the *Sefer HaMitzvot*) disagrees for obvious reasons and suggests it is a preamble to the Ten Commandments which follow. There is a fascinating insight on this question suggested by **Rav Elchonon Wasserman**, in his *Kovetz Ma'amarim*.

But to properly understand his comment a brief introduction is in order. Rav Elchonon was a *Talmid-Chaver* (a student but also close confidant) of the Chofetz Chaim in the years before World War II. In fact, Rav Elchonon sent his children to learn in the yeshiva in Radyn to be close to the Chofetz Chaim, while the Chofetz Chaim sent many of his grandchildren to Baranovich (in Lithuania near Kovno) to study in the famed yeshiva of Rav Elchonon.

Rav Elchonon actually visited the United States as late as 1939, and many begged him to stay, sensing the danger of returning to Europe, but Rav Elchonon, explaining he could not abandon his flock, returned. He was eventually caught up in the storm of the Holocaust and ended up in the Kovno ghetto, where he was murdered by the Nazis in 1941.

He is known famously for his *Kovetz chiddushim*: incredibly novel ideas on difficult questions in the Talmud. Lesser known is his *Kovetz ma'amarim*: A collection of essays based on talks he gave in the ghetto before his ultimate death and published posthumously by his students. In this book he asks our question: How, according to the Rambam (Maimonides) can we be obligated to believe in G-d? His response is remarkable no less for the fact that he delivered it in the ghetto to an audience that must have been struggling intensely with this question.

Belief, states Rav Elchonon, is a psychological state. So being commanded to achieve it is of no use; I either believe or I don't. If I already believe, there is no need for the commandment, and if I do not believe, what good is the Commandment?

Working under the premise that the Torah (Hashem) would never ask of us something of which we are not capable, his conclusion is that **everyone** believes in G-d; indeed, we are created with an innate knowledge that Hashem exists.

This begs the obvious question: why there are so many people who do not believe in G-d?

Suggests Rav Elchonon: there is something that gets in the way of our accepting that innate belief in G-d, and that is what he calls 'mother's milk'. Almost from the moment we are born we discover that when we are hungry all we have to do is cry and pretty soon we will be rewarded with ... mother's milk! And this teaches us that we can control our lives, we can get what we want when we want it if we are just willing to cry a bit. We become the center of our own universe, and we mistakenly assume that we are in control and that what we really want is pleasure, which we can get when we want it.

And when we begin to struggle with the existential questions of G-d and creation and the obligations that might entail, we naturally have a hard time giving up on that control and realizing that we are not at the center of the Universe, and that we are rather vehicles for bringing the consciousness of G-d into that same universe.

The mitzvah then of knowing Hashem, according to Rav Elchonon, is to accept what we already know; what is true and the source of all truth deep inside each of us.

It is to rely on being part of something so much greater than ourselves, and to access the inner instinctive knowledge we already have that we are not random, we are created; with purpose and meaning which allows us to be vehicles and partners in creating a more beautiful and meaningful world.

Often we would do well to ask ourselves what is holding us back from doing and accepting the things we already know to be true. Why do we allow ourselves to get into the petty debates and arguments we so often have with the people we love the most, when deep down we know how much we love them and how petty these debates can be.

Perhaps, in accessing those inner truths we can remind ourselves just how great the world is because of all the wonderful people and events in our lives and let go of the tendency we sometimes have to live in a much smaller reality just so we can remain at its center....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
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