

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Yitro)

In April of 1988 I was called up for my first reserve duty. The first intifada had exploded just a few months earlier, and we were stationed for a month in a nasty little piece of real estate called Jebalya which was a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Needless to say, things were pretty intense. One day I was given an assignment to take six men and set up a lookout position on the roof of an Arab house that overlooked the main road passing by Jebalya where Jews often travelled. There had been a number of incidents that week, including riots, Molotov cocktails, burning tires laid across the road and rock throwing at moving vehicles; our job was to help get things back under control.

It was an extremely uncomfortable feeling, to be setting up a military position on someone's roof, but from a strategic point of view, it made sense, and, reminiscent of western laws of eminent domain, (where the government can legally take over property to build highways and the like) if it would save lives, so be it. But it was still an uncomfortable feeling.

One of the interesting aspects of this detail was the fact that each morning, the Arab owner of the house, an older man who looked to be in his sixties, would come up on the roof with a tray holding a samovar of tea and some glasses for me and my men.

He would pour tea for himself first, take a drink (sensing our obvious hesitation) and then absolutely refuse to take no for an answer pouring us each our own glass of tea. The interaction was fascinating to me and on a number of occasions we had some interesting conversations. One morning one of the men, hearing a noise behind him, wheeled around in a hurry accidentally banging into this Arab fellow with his tray and tea glasses, knocking over the entire tray tea glasses and all. While he apologized profusely, at the end of the day it was just a few tea glasses....

A few days later upon returning from his weekend leave, this same soldier sought out the Arab man who had brought us tea the week before and gave him... a brand new set of tea glasses....

It was a beautiful moment, reminding me, with all the craziness we had been experiencing in the Gaza strip, of what it means to be part of a Jewish army.

These are not the stories that make it into the New York Times, nor do the members of 'breaking the silence' share such stories, though I can share countless similar experiences in my thirty years serving in the Israeli army and reserves. But these are the stories that make us who we are as a Jewish people, and a Jewish army, in a Jewish State.

This week's portion Yitro shares the incredible account of G-d's revelation to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, and the giving of the Torah (and the Ten Commandments) to the Jewish people and ultimately the world.

Fascinatingly however, the portion does not begin with G-d, Moshe or even the Jewish people. We are first re-introduced to Yitro, Moshe's non-Jewish father-in-law who was in fact, a Midianite priest.

And Yitro does not merely join the scene to be 'part of the family'. He will ultimately play a central role in creating the first judicial system in Judaism, convincing Moshe to create a system of courts and judges which will guide the Jewish people forever. Indeed, our portion is actually named after this non-Jewish priest; the same portion in which the Torah is given; arguably the most important portion in the entire Torah.

Why would the portion containing the revelation of G-d Himself begin with the advice of a Midianite?

There is an interesting turn of phrase Yitro employs when making his suggestion to Moshe:

*"Madua atah yoshev **le'vadecha**? ... **lo tov** hadavar..."*

*"Why do you sit **alone**? ... This is **not good**..." (Shemot (Exodus) 18:14-17)*

When we study Torah, Jewish tradition teaches us not just to read, but also to listen carefully, for often we can hear the echoes of words from different places. One cannot help but be reminded here of the first (and only other) time in the Torah something is described as 'not good'. Just before Hashem creates Eve, the first woman, no less than G-d Himself says:

*"Lo **tov** heyot ha'Adam **levad**"*

*"It is **not good** for man to be **alone**..." (Genesis (Bereishit) 2:18)*

The definition of 'not good' is when someone is alone; being alone, the Torah is telling us, is by definition, not good. And this means the definition of that which is truly good is when we are one; when we are together. Even someone as great as Moshe, whom Judaism sees as the greatest man that ever lived, is still doing something 'not good' when he tries to do it alone.

Interestingly, we are called "*Am **levadad** yishkon...*" "A Nation that dwells **alone**" (Numbers (Bamidbar) 23:9), but this is not necessarily the ideal; one day we will be one, together, with the whole world. As we say at the conclusion of the Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur Musaf service:

"Ki Beiti beit tefillah ykareh lechol ha'Amim "

"One day my House (the Temple) will be a house of desire for all the nations"

We, all of us; the whole world; will one day come together, as one.

And of course, this is very much our challenge as individual human beings.

Maimonides in his *Hilchot Deot* (Laws of Character Traits) points out that our goal as individuals is to find the middle balanced path; the straight and narrow, which he also calls "*derech **hatovim***"; 'the good path'. (Deot 1:3).

In fact, the root of all the character imbalances we struggle with is when we think it's 'all about us'. As an example, the first two character traits the Rambam (Maimonides) lists as being 'off balance', are anger and arrogance. Anger is really about expectations; a person thinks he or she deserves more and gets angry because it's all about them. And arrogance is obviously also when a person sees him or herself as the center of the universe.

Indeed, all the character flaws we experience as human beings: pursuing unhealthy desires, laziness, stinginess and so on, all begin with a person putting their own pleasure or desire ahead of how it might adversely affect others. And the easiest path towards correcting such character flaws is to realize it's not about us; it's bigger than us; it's about seeing the other person first; about recognizing that every human being is created in the image of G-d, which means seeing G-d in every human being.

When a person views the world through such lenses he or she is never alone; they become one with a much larger picture.

Perhaps that is why the Torah names this portion after a Midianite; because as we are about to receive the most important revelation in human history, directly from G-d, and rise to being the chosen people, we are reminded that wisdom is all around us, and we can learn from every human being everywhere.

We are in the midst of an ever-growing and raging worldwide war against terrorism, against evil, and against fundamentalist Islam. And wars are not negotiated; they are either won or lost. But in the midst of this conflict, we must take special care to remain true to one of the principals of Judaism: that every human being is created by G-d, in the image of G-d, and worthy of respect mandated by G-d.

Which is why a tray of tea glasses, even in the midst of war in the Gaza Strip, is still important.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman