

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman
(**Yom Kippur**)

I still don't know how he made it into Infantry Officer's course, but I do know how difficult it was for him. Overweight, and far from being an athlete, the physical challenges he would clearly have to overcome seemed insurmountable. How would he run up a 3 km mountain with a gasmask in the time allotted (Bocha nafchah)? How would he pass the Bar-Or 2km run test? How would he manage the morning runs for what seemed endless miles? And most of all, how would he get through Wingate and the Ason teva or 'freak of nature' run and obstacle course?

Two thirds of the way through the course we started training for the Ason teva course and I stopped wondering about him and started worrying how on earth I would make it through myself. Every time we practiced it, after coming up soaked out of the river I could not seem to get up the 6-meter rope fast enough; between the extra weight from the water and my slippery hands and boots I just could not seem to get it. So, one Thursday night I went down to the course on my own to try and practice and heard noises coming from the obstacle course, and there was this pituitary giant running the course; he simply refused to give in.

Turned out he was in an Artillery unit, and his commanding Officer had convinced him to apply for Officer's course and had subsequently advocated for him to be accepted, and he did not want to let down this officer who believed in him...

In the end, by the thinnest of margins (finishing the course with barely five seconds to spare) he passed.

There is a fascinating suggestion in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 16b):

Rav Kruspedai says in the name of Rav Yochanan: Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: The righteous are written into the book of the righteous and granted life; the wicked are written into the book of the wicked and decreed to die, and the intermediates are written into the book of the intermediates, whose judgement is withheld until Yom Kippur; if they merit they are then inscribed in the book of life and if not..."

What exactly is the book of intermediates?

I have a hard time imagining three physical books on a shelf somewhere in heaven; G-d does not need books, and certainly would not need to open them nor inscribe them for the record; G-d *is* the record. Further, what are the odds a person has exactly the same amount of transgressions as good deeds resulting in him being at the exact midpoint between guilt and merit? And if this was indeed the case, one mitzvah would do the trick, so why does his or her judgement wait for Yom Kippur?

Rav Hutner in his *Pachad Yitzchak* suggests that this intermediacy is not a status, it is rather a quality; a character trait. This idea reflects the person who is happy with mediocrity; who does not seek to excel or overcome, to achieve or to advance. Such a person just wants to get by; to be comfortable.

I remember many years ago, upon returning for my second year of study in yeshiva, the disappointment I experienced upon discovering I had been switched into a different shiur (class) with a different rebbe. Having spent a year under the tutelage of Rav Ezra Bick, I was excited to come back after a summer

break and hit the books feeling I finally understood what was going on and what was expected of me. Hoping to convince Rav Bick to allow me to stay in his shiur I went to speak with him and he listened attentively to what I had to say until I mentioned that I felt I had finally gotten comfortable in his class.

“Comfortable?”

The last thing you should be if you want to grow, is ‘comfortable’; you should feel challenged! “ And that was the end of discussion! (Years later, it still amazes me that I almost missed the chance to spend a year studying with Rav Shabtai haKohen Rappaport, a direct descendant of the Shach ...)

We live in a world where it is so easy to be comfortable but do we challenge ourselves to be better than we were this past year? How can we be comfortable when so many families in Houston and Florida and Mexico don't even have homes in which to be uncomfortable? Do we plan for another year of the same routine, because it is so... comfortable? Or do we become part of the making the world a better place in the coming year?

The **Rambam** (Maimonides) apparently based on this Talmudic dictum, rules accordingly in his laws of repentance (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:2-3) suggesting that it is the person whose merits and transgressions are balanced who has the chance to do *teshuva* (repentance) during the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

During this period of time we have the chance to be better; to rise to the challenge of how much better we can be. Just like that Officer's course cadet who late in the night on a lonely obstacle course, refused to accept mediocrity.

This year, once again we will gather together on the night of Yom Kippur and hear the haunting sounds of the *Kol Nidre* prayers exhorting us to live up to the promises (the *Nedarim*) we made to ourselves this past year. Let us resolve to make this year far above and beyond mediocrity; let us aspire to excellence; excellence in who we can be, and excellence in how we care for each other.

Wishing all a meaningful Yom Kippur and a year of great blessings and much joy.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah, from Jerusalem,
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