



### ACTUALISING JEWISH IDENTITY

**A CENTRAL IDEA IN CHASSIDIC THOUGHT IS THAT THERE IS A 'DIVINE SOUL' WITHIN THE PERSON. In each individual, deeper than the complex structure of ego, pride, selfish desires, disappointments and sometimes desperate gloom, there is an inner point of goodness, holiness and joy. This is the inner self, the hidden sacred identity which is the real key to the person's spiritual potential.**

During our normal daily lives, other forces are usually dominant, such as the 'Animal. Soul'. This may push its owner to seek self-centred forms of gratification, although it is also capable of higher modes of expression. It drives our desire for achievement, has intellectual and artistic dimensions, and can also be moved to feel love and generosity to others.

But the Divine Soul is on another level. It is a spark of G-dliness, which seeks to connect the person to G-d, through the Torah and its Commandments. Since all the Divine Souls of the entire Jewish people are linked together, it bonds with others in an altruistic way. Although it may be hidden for much of a person's life, it can suddenly be revealed, giving him or her a thirst for goodness and holiness, leading to dedicated activity beyond all normal limitations<sup>1</sup>.

The Sages trace several stages in the development and expression of the Divine Soul in the Jewish people. Rabbi Judah Halevi (11<sup>th</sup> century Spain) speaks of it as being transmitted to some of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was present in those Israelites who left Egypt with Moses, and through the intense

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experience at Mount Sinai it was moulded into an integral part of the Jewish psyche for all time.

However, it might still be hidden, deep within the psyche. Then came steps whereby it began to be revealed. A crucial stage is in our Sedra<sup>2</sup>, the beginning of the Book of Numbers. The Jewish people are still at Mount Sinai, where they received the Torah nearly a year previously. After that they had built the Sanctuary, which was set up at the beginning of Nisan. This manifested the indwelling of the Divine Presence in the Holy of Holies, at the centre of the camp. Now, a month later, G-d tells Moses and Aaron to count the Jewish people.

What was the function of this counting? The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains it was to *reveal* the Divine Soul. As Rashi comments, counting expresses the preciousness of that which is counted. It also emphasises the point of unity between disparate individuals. The greatest of the great and the lowest of the low are equal. What is this point of equality? The Divine Soul.

The constant proximity of the Sanctuary must have had an electric effect, for everyone there. Then came the actual counting, by both Moses and Aaron, together with the leaders of the Tribes. Names of families and their genealogy were written down, and half-shekalim were given<sup>3</sup> to assess the total numbers, which are given in the Sedra.

One imagines it as an incredible experience. The presence of the two great leaders Moses and Aaron emphasised this as a timeless moment. The Rebbe describes it as a time when the Divine Soul suffused the intellect and sense of self of the person. This was an experience in which each person's overt self was nothing other than their Divine Soul, their essential Jewish identity. It was an actualisation of their experience of receiving the Torah a year previously, and of the construction of the Sanctuary<sup>4</sup>.

As such it was a preparation for their many years in the wilderness, and for the thousands of years of the history of the Jewish people which lay in the future. We today are the inheritors of that moment in the Sedra.

1. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Tanya* Part 1, chapters 1-2, which describe the functions of the Animal and Divine Souls. 2. Numbers 1:1-4:20. 3. See Rashi to Exodus 30:15. 4. Freely based on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.8 pp.1-7.

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### *SEDRA BEMIDBAR*

#### **FLAGS**

“Wow, look at this book,” Debbi said to her sister. She was engrossed in a book of heraldry.

“In the Middle Ages, every family would have their own crest, with different pictures on it, like lions or dragons. It says here if you send them your surname, they’ll find your family crest.”

“That sounds like what we were learning about the tribes of Israel when they were encamped in the Desert. All the tribes had their encampments arranged around the Sanctuary, and they each had a flag so they could see which was their camp.”

“That’s right, I remember. And each flag was the same colour as that tribe’s gem on the breastplate that the High Priest wore.”

“What do you mean? What gem on the breastplate?”

“Well, the High Priest had a special breastplate with twelve precious jewels. On each jewel was engraved the name of one of the Twelve Tribes. Each jewel was a different colour. That colour was the colour of the flag of that tribe”.

“Really! That's amazing”.

Debbi was silent as she envisioned the scene. The rolling sand dunes of the desert, stretching as far as one's eyes could see, then suddenly: a huge encampment of tents, arranged around the magnificent Sanctuary. Colourful flags fluttered above the twelve groupings of tents.

Inside the Sanctuary, she imagined to herself, was Aaron the High Priest, wearing the breastplate with the twelve colourful gems.

“I wonder what our flag would have been?” Leah wondered.

“I think Daddy said that since we are not Cohanim or Levites we're probably from the family of Judah, and I think that the flag of Judah was a lion,” Debbi said.

“That's because the lion is the king of the animals, and the kings of the Jewish people came from the tribe of Judah.”

“Wow, so we're like the Royal Family!” Leah said proudly. “That's topical. Come on, your majesty, let's go and play in the garden - it's finally stopped raining!”

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