


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 25 January 2013 - 14 Shevat 5773
 Sedra Beshalach

THE ESSENCE OF JUDAISM

A MAJOR ASPECT OF LIFE IS LOOKING FOR THE 'ESSENCE'. What does Judaism mean, one might ask, what does it *really* mean? What is the essential teaching of Judaism today? The Sedra¹ this week provides a valuable clue. The Jewish people are at last leaving Egypt, where they have been enslaved for many years. Now they will be travelling towards the Land of Israel. At this point the Torah tells us “And Moses took the bones of Joseph along with him...” (13.19).

Joseph, viceroy of Egypt, had requested of his brothers that after his demise, when they would finally leave Egypt, they would take his remains with them for eventual burial in the Holy Land. The term used - “bones of Joseph” - sounds a little intriguing. In fact, this is the word used by Joseph himself, before he died: “G-d will redeem you and you should take my bones with you”². Why the emphasis on bones? Surely a more elegant expression could have been used, something a little more respectful?

Nothing in the Torah is without reason, and this expression too has a lesson to teach us.

In Hebrew the word for bones (*atzamot*) is closely related to the



In Memory of Reb Meshulam Scharfstein ע"ה
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word for essence (*atzmut*). The “bones” of Joseph means the physical skeleton of Joseph, the framework of the body. The “essence” of Joseph means his spiritual makeup, the framework of the soul. Moses took the casket containing the remains of Joseph’s body in order to bury him in the Land of Israel, and, spiritually, he also took the essence of Joseph.

What then is the ‘essence’ of Joseph that Moses took with him? It is the striving to love and to care for another; to bring closer those who feel that they are far.

Why is this the essence of Joseph? Because when Joseph (Yosef) was born he was given his name by his mother Rachel, who said: “Let G-d add to me another son”³. Yosef means “add”.

The literal meaning of this was a prayer to have a second son, but Chassidic teachings explain that this provides the inner meaning of Joseph’s name and his entire being: to help each person be added and included among the Jewish people, and especially that individual who feels that he or she is ‘other’ and remote from the community.

This is the essence of Joseph, and the everlasting legacy he left to Moses and the Jewish people, which they brought with them to the Holy Land: to devote ourselves to make “another” into a “son” – or daughter. To find those who feel distant and help them connect to their Jewish roots⁴.

This is particularly relevant on this Shabbat which is the New Year for Trees. Each person is considered like a tree, hopefully giving fruit. We should try to help each person with whom we come in contact to give fruit, which means to express their Jewish selves. And they too should become people who help others become fruitful⁵.

In this way, the essence of Joseph will truly be expressed. After all, it is the essence of Judaism and of life.

1. Exodus 13:17-17:16. 2. Genesis 50:25. 3. Genesis 30:24. 4. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol.26, p.85ff.
5. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 1 p.147.

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SEDRA BESHALACH – TU B'SHEVAT

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO THE TREES

“Wow, Mummy, you’ve bought so many different types of fruit this week!”

Abigail said, peeking into the shopping bags her mother had just brought in from the car.

“Look, Gila,” she said to her cousin, who had come to visit, “look at all these fruits! Kiwis, apricots, passion fruit, dates, figs - yum, I love fresh figs - lots of big purple grapes, what are these orange things? - mangoes, wow, so many things. Mum, why did you buy them?”

Her mother smiled. “Don’t you remember what this Shabbat is?” she asked, as she placed a tray of neatly plaited Challah loaves into the oven.

“Your birthday?”

“No, that’s not for another two weeks. But it is a kind of birthday - tomorrow is Tu B’Shevat, the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, which is the New Year for the trees.”

“Oh, I remember now,” said Abigail. “On Tu B’Shevat, we have a custom to eat different types of fruit, so that’s why you have bought all these.”

“Wow, that’s so interesting. I didn’t know trees were such important things that they even have a New Year,” Gila remarked.

“Of course they are, “ Abigail said. “I remember once we were even taught in school that people are compared to trees. For example, if you take a baby tree, a sapling, and scratch it, when that tree grows, the scratch will also grow.

“A human child is also like that. If a parent is not careful to teach it what’s right, something that’s a small fault in a six year old, can be an unpleasant quality in a twenty year old. But if you take care of a tree, it will grow up to be beautiful, with lots of strong branches, with leaves and fruit. And the fruit has seeds that in turn can grow more trees.”

“So I suppose that means, if you take good care of a child, he or she will grow up strong and healthy and do lots of good things,” Gila observed.

Her aunt smiled. “I think you two are such wonderful saplings, I can see you’re going to be fantastic trees, both of you, with G-d’s help, but now it’s time for Gila to go home and for Abigail to go and wash your branches and leaves for Shabbat!”

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