


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש


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Sedra Nitzavim-Vayelech

IS G-D IN EXILE?

THE IDEA THAT THE DIVINE COULD POSSIBLY BE ‘IN EXILE’ SOUNDS very strange. G-d is the Creator and Master of the whole universe, all-knowing and all-powerful. How can one say that He is exiled? However, in fact an important source for this concept is a verse in this week’s double Sedra¹.

In the first half, Sedra Nitzavim, we hear about the Redemption, the ingathering of the exiles and a spiritual transformation which will affect the Jewish people and ultimately the whole of humanity. “Even if you are scattered to the ends of the heavens”, the Torah tells us, “from there G-d will gather you together”². This is the traditional Jewish ideal of the coming of the Messiah and our return to the Holy Land. But the preceding verse implies, in a surprising way, that G-d Himself will also be returning.

The literal translation of the Hebrew is that “G-d will return with your captives”. The great commentator Rashi points out that we would expect to read that “G-d will make your captives return”, but the Hebrew text does not say this: it says He Himself will return. Rashi continues: “Our Rabbis learned from this that, if one can say so of G-d, His Divine Presence dwells with the Jewish people in all the



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misery of their exile, so that when they are redeemed He makes the Torah write that He too is redeemed, that He will return with them.”³

How are we to understand this strange concept? Can G-d be in exile?

Let us try to think about this for a moment. Firstly, G-d is indeed boundlessly exalted. Further, from a certain point of view, there is only G-d, and nothing else exists. The universe is included within G-d like a thought is included in the mind of a person.

Let us try this out at the table. Let everyone think of the City of Jerusalem. Right, you are thinking of it? Now, who is here: just you! Is there anything else? No! Just you! In the same way, there is only G-d, nothing else...

Of course there is an important difference. When we human beings think of Jerusalem it is just a thought in our mind. When G-d thinks of the universe - it is created. And here we are inside it. But we are still inside G-d - and from this point of view, there is *only* G-d⁴.

Now let us consider another point of view. G-d created the universe, and our planet, and the City of Jerusalem, and us – with a purpose. His purpose is that His Presence should ‘dwell’ in the world. In fact, He intends it to dwell in a revealed way in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, and in the heart of each one of us.

From the point of view of G-d’s Presence, every detail in our world is important. When there is evil, the Divine Presence withdraws and is hidden. When there is goodness, the Divine Presence is revealed. If evil is powerful in the world, as it is today, which means also that we the Jewish people are in exile and the Temple is still in ruins - then G-d’s Presence is also in exile. It cannot be revealed in the way which is the true purpose of Creation.

By redeeming that aspect of G-d which is within ourselves, through acts of goodness and kindness, and by helping others to do the same, we come closer to the full redemption of the Jewish people, the Divine Presence and the whole world: then existence will truly be a dwelling for the Divine, appreciated by all humanity.

1. Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30. 2. Deut. 30:4. 3. For a full discussion of this Rashi see the Lubavither Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol.9, 175 ff, and vol.23, p.178. 4. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Tanya* Part 1, ch.48, 68a-b; Part 2, ch.3.

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SEDRA NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

YOUR CHOICE

“Ring Ring” rang the telephone. Leah quickly grabbed it. “Hello, the David’s residence, how can I help you?” “Oh yes,” said a lady at the other end, “is that Leah? Can I speak to your father please?”

“Yes, sure” answered Leah. “Who is calling please?” She actually thought she recognized the voice but she couldn’t remember who it was. “It’s Mrs Green” the lady answered. “Oh, yes Mrs Green” Leah answered, in shock. Mrs Green was her headmistress.

Leah knew why she was calling. It was the beginning of the school year and Leah had had a rather bad start. Something just didn’t click with her new teacher Mrs Feld, and because of that Leah didn’t learn very much and had been getting into trouble in class.

She handed the phone to her father without looking at him and ran upstairs to her bedroom. She would quickly start her homework and then hopefully her father would not want to disturb her... He wouldn’t talk about it now, and then he might forget about it altogether....

She began reading the notes for her Sedra homework. Where was the verse on which she had to comment? There it was, near the end of the Sedra. “See, I am putting before you today life and good, and death and bad.” Then there was another similar verse further on. “...Life and death, a blessing and a curse. And you should choose life.” Now, what is she supposed to say about that?

Suddenly she heard a gentle knock on her door. “Leah” she heard her father calling. “Yes? I’m doing homework...”

“Leah,” he said from outside her room, “can we talk for a few minutes?” Her father was speaking in a calm voice. “Well, he doesn’t sound too upset, it won’t be that bad” she thought to herself. She opened the door.

Her father stepped into the room. “How are you, darling?” he asked. “Look, you’re doing homework. That’s wonderful, but could we just have a quick little talk?”

Her father sat down on a chair. Leah sat on her bed, avoiding eye contact with her father. There was silence for what seemed a long time. Finally Leah broke it.

“I don’t like Mrs Feld,” she said, bluntly, “and that’s why I can’t learn in her class”.

“Okay,” said her father gently, “I understand that if you don’t like someone then you won’t enjoy learning from them. But does that mean that you cannot learn at all? And that you have to disturb other people?”. He paused. “And anyway, why don’t you like her?”

Leah laughed and said “come to her class and you will see, I can’t explain it”. “Mmm..” he replied, thoughtfully, and was silent for a moment. “But I want to tell you something interesting” he continued. “We have many choices to make in this world, no one can force us what to do, not your teacher not I and not even your headmistress. But do you know who can make you do something?” “No” answered Leah softly.

“You” said her father. “You are the person who has control over yourself. The Torah writes in this week’s Sedra: “See, I am putting before you today...”

“I know,” said Leah. “Life and good, and death and bad.”
“Yes,” said her father. “And then it says – ‘and you should choose life’. It’s your choice....”

“Okay, Daddy” she said. “So I have the choice... I will try and see if I can learn in her class.” Her father smiled.

“And another thing, Daddy...” she said. “Yes, Leah?” “Now I know what to write in my homework...”

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