


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 20 January 2017 - 22 Tevet 5777
Sedra Shemot

DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY

WE ARE ALL COMPOSITE BEINGS, WITH DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS of identity and sense of self. Facing the question “who are you?” a person might reply a husband/wife, a parent, a student, a schoolgirl, a businessman, an artist, a Jew, a feminist, a scientist, me - don’t you know my name? I am ME!

The question of identity is an important theme in the Sedra¹ this week, which begins the Book of Exodus (Shemot). We read about the way the family of Jacob which had come to Egypt during the famine lived there peacefully, increasing many times over. Then a new king arose, who began persecuting them and enslaving them. Would these early Jews preserve their distinctive identity? Would they serve the G-d of Abraham and keep the command of circumcision or would they serve the Egyptian idols? Would they keep their distinctive Jewish names and language?

The Sages tell us that while they did preserve their Hebrew language and even their names and distinctive Jewish clothing, in other respects they became very similar to their Egyptian neighbours. Most of them abandoned circumcision and began serving idols. Despite this, when (near the end of the Sedra) Moses appeared among them with his message of Redemption, the people responded wholeheartedly².

Looking around the Jewish world today, one may well feel that



ז"ל In Loving Memory of Menashy ben Yechezkel Ezra
24 Tevet - Dedicated by his Family שי'

comparable issues are relevant in our own time. However, these are basically questions about one's *Jewish* identity. "What about my identity as an individual?" a person might ask. "What about *me*?"

A comment by Rashi on a passage at the beginning of the Sedra illuminates this issue, disclosing two different dimensions of the identity of the individual, both of which are significant.

The Sedra begins with a list of the names of the sons of Jacob, and then tells us that the total of Jacob's children and grandchildren who had come to Egypt was seventy. All this information is known from previous passages³. Why does the Torah repeat it? Rashi comments that this is an expression of G-d's love to the Jewish people: counting them and listing their names is a way of asserting their preciousness.

Every detail in the Torah is important. Rashi too, in his famous commentary on the Torah, does not waste words. Why stress that they were counted and also listed by name? The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this is emphasising two different aspects of one's identity. Being counted focuses on that quality which links one to others: the Jewish spark within. Being listed by name emphasises a person's individual identity - one's sense of being unique: 'me'.

Both these dimensions of one's identity are important. Both relate to the essence of one's being. The Rebbe suggests that the quality by which the Jewish people are 'counted' in the Torah relates to one's Jewish essence as it is beyond one's specific body and personality. At that level we are all the same - each person is simply another 'one' to be added to the total. At that level we are also all united. By contrast when the Torah lists Jacob's children by name it is emphasising that spiritual aspect which relates to the particular body, character and personal qualities of each individual.

These two dimensions are complementary. Each supports and strengthens the other. As in the ancient past described in the Torah, so too today we need both these qualities, linking us together as Jews and revealing our individual personalities, so that, working together and as individuals, we can create a radiant future for the world⁴.

1. Exodus 1:1-6:1. 2. Exodus 4:29-31. 3. See Gen.46:27. 4. Based freely on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.6, pp.7-12.

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SEDRA SHEMOT

BABY SISTER

"How was school today?" Mrs Cohen asked in her cheerful voice.

"Um" was all Adam said.

"I just met your teacher the other day and he was telling me about how nicely you worked on your project". Mrs Cohen had noticed that Adam had been rather quiet lately and was trying to cheer him up.

"Um" – Adam didn't seem to be in a very sociable mood today.

The truth is that Adam was usually quite talkative. In fact he was usually the loudest at the supper table, but for the past few days it seemed that he had retreated into a shell.

Adam stood up from the table, put his plate and cutlery in the sink, and with a mumbled "good night" went up to his room.

Since the recent arrival of the new "Baby sister" Adam had started to feel that no one was taking any notice of him anymore. He felt that everyone loved the baby and had forgotten all about him.

"I wish I was a baby again" he thought sullenly as he lay in bed that night.

The next day in school during the Sedra class Mr. Benson was talking about the fact that in this week's Sedra Shemot for the first time the Jewish people are referred to as the "children of Hashem". Then he spoke about the different kinds of love that one might have for a child.

"... When a parent loves a baby, it is a pure love that comes from just the simple fact that this is the child of the parent" Mr Benson was saying.

"Does that mean G-d loves all of us even if we do bad things just because we are His children?" one of the boys had asked.

Mr Benson said "Yes, you could say, that is like the love one has for a baby."
Then he went on.

"For the older child, however, there is a different kind of love. There is included in it all the years of knowledge and respect and trust and expectation that come from a real relationship with the child as a person. So although you don't normally see a parent kissing their twenty year old son good night, there is still a deep and strong love for that child. So in this week's Sedra, G-d calls us 'My son, My firstborn Israel' showing us that the love that G-d has for us goes deeper than just – 'oh he's so cute'. It is a love that G-d has for us because He wants us to work on ourselves and achieve".

Adam hadn't realized that he could actually take something practical out of the Sedra class. He knew that he would remember today's lesson.

"You are actually a very cute baby" Adam said that evening, as he gazed down at his new friend in her crib, wrapped in a pink blanket. "Sorry for being jealous", he whispered.

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