


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 16 January 2009 - 20 Tevet 5769
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 Moses appeared among them with his message of Redemption, the people responded wholeheartedly².



In Memory of Menashy ben Yechezkel Ezra v"g
24 Tevet - Dedicated by his Wife ח'j , and Family ח'א

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Looking around the world today, one may well feel that comparable issues are still relevant. 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 already known³. 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. Freely based on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.6, pp.7-12.

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SEDRA SHEMOT

NAMES UNCHANGED

Rebecca could barely contain herself! She kept on pinching her arm, just to make sure that she wasn't dreaming. Did her mother really give birth to a baby boy? Was she really standing in her family's Synagogue, dressed in her favourite purple dress, with all her friends and relatives? Why, even grandma and grandpa had flown in from the USA - it was such a treat to see them!

Rebecca watched as her mother passed the baby to Helen, their next door neighbour. She knew that Helen would pass the baby to her husband, who would take the baby among the men, and then Mr Simpson the Mohel, would circumcise her little brother, give him Brit Milah. After that, her baby brother would be given a name. She could barely wait! Was it going to be Samuel? She knew that Samuel was just such a beautiful name - she just loved that name!

After impatiently waiting for the Brit to be over, and covering her ears as the baby wailed, Rebecca leaned forward, as she listened to the announcement.

"The name of this baby boy will be Yechezkel."

Rebecca could feel her eyes burning. Yechezkel? Why did her parents choose that name? Especially because it would be so difficult to say! Samuel is so common - everyone can pronounce that! But Yechezkel - how odd! What would she tell her friends?

Rebecca saw her father make his way towards the podium. What was he going to say? "Friends and family," Rebecca's father began. "Valerie and I are so proud to name our son Yechezkel. Many of you may be thinking - what a difficult

name to pronounce! Completely uncommon! I would like to share with you all why we chose the name Yechezkel. This week's Torah portion is Sedra Shemot. The Sedra begins with listing the names of the Jewish people who went down to Egypt.

“The Midrash explains that during the entire time the Jewish people were exiled in Egypt, they kept their Jewish names. Now, isn't that very strange? Why didn't they take Egyptian names? Wouldn't that be more normal? Well, the Sages tell us that although their bodies were suffering in Egyptian slavery, their souls were, in fact, not in exile! So their souls gave them the inspiration to keep their Jewish names.”

Rebecca listened intently. She remembered a discussion at the supper table some weeks ago, when she and her older brother Alan were talking about names. Their father said he had begun to like real traditional Jewish names. Alan's Jewish name was Eliezer, but no-one called him that, except when he got called up to the Torah in the Synagogue. Rebecca knew that there was a Jewish way to pronounce her own name, Rifka, but no one ever did.

“My wife Valerie, or Gavriela, and I feel that we are at a difficult time in history”, said her father. “There is war and there is danger. The Sages tell us because the Jews in Egypt kept their Jewish names, eventually they were redeemed and went free from slavery. So we feel that today as well, Jewish names are important. So we are giving our little boy the name Yechezkel, which is the Jewish way to pronounce Ezekiel, who was a great prophet. We hope that soon we too will be redeemed!”

There was a little buzz of discussion of what her father had said. Rebecca felt better about the name. In fact she was excited to have baby brother with a real Jewish name! She couldn't wait to practice saying it in front of her mirror, and thought maybe she would think of a cute nickname!

Rebecca ran over to her mother and gave her a big hug. “Mom! I love the name! And my name is really Rifka, isn't it? Can you call me Rifka?”

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