


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 8 January 2010 - 22 Tevet 5770
Sedra Shemot

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

WHO IS A JEW? WHAT IS THE SPIRITUAL IDENTITY OF A JEWISH PERSON? What gives the Jew his or her special relationship with G-d, with other nations, with the ultimate destiny of humanity? The Sedra¹, beginning the Book of Shemot (Exodus), provides some valuable perspectives on this topic.

The beginning of the Sedra describes a familiar process. The descendants of Jacob and his twelve sons formed a subtly alien group in the sophisticated society of ancient Egypt. Although the Pharaoh who appointed Joseph as Viceroy had welcomed the immigration of his father Jacob and all seventy members of his family, after a few generations attitudes changed. The Hebrews increased and multiplied, bringing a sense of mistrust and alarm to the Egyptians. One solution was to enslave them. In that way, thought the Egyptians, the alien Hebrews would be kept under control. Yet their numbers continued to increase. The Egyptians made the work more harsh. Cruel decrees were instituted, with the goal of reducing the growth of the Jewish population. Jewish children were thrown into the River Nile.

This is one aspect of the identity of the Jew: it is forced on him



In Memory of Menashy ben Yechezkel Ezra ע"ה
24 Tevet - Dedicated by his Family שי'

by others and is the product of persecution or threat. Yet the Sedra provides also more internal perspectives on being Jewish.

For example, when Moses and his wife Tziporah, herself a convert to Moses' Monotheistic Jewish belief, were travelling to Egypt, a striking event took place. Moses was attacked by a mysterious malady. Tziporah realised they had erred in not circumcising their young son. Moses had thought it would be better to wait till after the journey. Without delay, Tziporah took a flint knife and circumcised her baby. Moses was healed².

Here Jewish identity is seen as adherence to Jewish laws and teachings. The Covenant of Circumcision, and all other Jewish laws, bond each individual to the Jewish people and to G-d.

A third dimension of Jewish identity is seen in a remarkable verse in the Sedra. G-d tells Moses what he should say when he first meets Pharaoh: Israel, the Jewish people, are "My son, My first-born"³.

The idea that the Jew is called a child of G-d tells us something about his or her inner spiritual nature. This concept is explained by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi⁴ as meaning that there is an actual spark of the Divine implanted within each Jewish man and woman, called the Divine Soul. Every human being and indeed everything that exists has a spiritual essence within. The non-Jew attains spiritual fulfilment through observance of the Seven Noachide Laws, through which he or her can attain the World to Come⁵. The Jew however has a Divine Soul, which yearns to express itself in specifically Jewish ways.

This spiritual force within the Jew might be heavily concealed; yet it is always present as a latent power, with the goal to live as a Jew, ultimately bringing healing and goodness to all humanity. This is the innermost aspect of Jewish identity, which G-d revealed to Moses at the beginning of his task to change slavery to Redemption.

1. Exodus 1:1-6:1. 2. Ex. 4:24-26. 3. Es. 4:22. 4. The founder of Chabad, and author of Taya. See Part 1, ch.2. His Yahrzeit is 24 Tevet, Sunday 10 January. 5. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, 8:11.

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SEDRA SHEMOT

REVEALING MOSES

Michael was not being himself lately. He had told his teacher Mr Samuels that he would not do the assignment which he asked him to do, and as a result he got a detention. At home he didn't clean his room for three weeks, and he was not nice to his younger sister. He got into arguments with everybody. Back in school he got sent to the head teacher because he had flicked an elastic, and it had hit Mr Samuels.

Michael was given another assignment to do. The assignment was to read the Sedra of Shemot, define the main point of the whole Sedra, and explain it in a way which applies to a person living today.

In Michael's school there is a mentoring system, in which a boy can be helped by an older pupil. So Chaim his mentor was sitting with Michael in a corner of the school library. They were talking about the assignment. Michael had read through the Sedra and anyway remembered the story.

"It begins with the Jews living in Egypt, with this mighty king its ruler, his name was Pharaoh. But this king saw that the Jewish people were growing in large numbers, and he was worried perhaps they would take over the land. So he made all the Jews into slaves. Pharaoh was very cruel."

"Yes", said Chaim. "So what happened next?"

They went on talking about what happened in the Sedra. About a great person named Moses, or Moshe in Hebrew, who grew up in the palace of Pharaoh.

Michael was describing the life of Moses. "He cared very much about the plight of his brothers. Eventually he had to run away from Egypt to Midyan, because Pharaoh wanted to get rid of him. Then after many years in Midyan, G-d spoke to him from a burning bush, and told him to go and redeem the Jewish people. At first, Moses didn't want to go, but G-d convinced him, and he went back to Egypt."

"Very good," said Chaim. "You could write all that down and that would be your assignment."

"Yes, but what has it all got to do with a person living today?" asked Michael. After more discussion with Chaim, this is what Michael wrote at the end of the story of the Sedra:

"This is the story of every single one of us, we have this great strong Pharaoh inside of us, and he makes us slaves. The Pharaoh inside makes us argue and fight, he makes us be rude to people and not do our homework. He could even convince us to do really nasty things. But we also have a little Moses inside of us, he needs some convincing to be active, but if you get him active he could do a good job in setting you free from slavery".

Michael handed the assignment in to his teacher. The teacher liked it very much, and put a green MERIT sticker on the essay.

The next week Michael was working very well at school and he was also happy at home. His inner Moses had been revealed.

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