



RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A CENTRAL ISSUE IN THE SEDRA¹ IS THE “BIRTHRIGHT”, THE SPECIAL right of the firstborn son. Our great-great grandparents Isaac and Rebecca had twins: Jacob and Esau. One was to be a gentle scholar, the other a powerful and violent hunter. Yet it was Esau the hunter who was born first. He had the birthright, meaning that he would inherit his father’s role with the task to reveal recognition of G-d to the world.

Did the fact of Esau’s birth give him a right or a responsibility? The Sedra tells how he agreed to sell his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of food. He had the birthright but he gave it up².

A similar event took place in the next generation. Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob. He should have inherited the leading role among his brothers. Yet he did not live up to this responsibility, and the mantle of leadership went to Judah instead³.

We see this happening yet again after the Jewish people had left Egypt. The firstborn sons were considered to have a special spiritual power and were intended to function as the ‘Priests’. However, they lost this special quality because they served the Golden Calf. The Tribe of Levi, which did not serve the Calf at all, was given this power instead. From them would come the Priests⁴ and the attendants at the Temple. The message is an emphasis not on one’s natural right, but on one’s responsibility from birth. This helps us understand the nature of the Jewish people, whom G-d terms ‘My son, My firstborn’⁵.

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The Jew has a unique quality among the nations. Yet each of us has to strive to live up to that responsibility. The Torah gives us the guidance about how to do this both as individuals and as a nation. Through truly being ourselves, and living up to our birthright, we will achieve the fulfilment of G-d's blessing to our ancestors: through you will be blessed all families of the earth⁶.

SANCTIFYING THE NEW MOON

There is a beautiful custom which is becoming more popular in general Jewish society. This is "Sanctifying the New Moon", *Kiddush Levanah*. The ceremony is a special blessing to G-d for creating the moon. It is said at night in the open air during the first half of the Jewish month⁷, when the moon is visible.

The Talmud⁸ says that this ceremony is like "receiving the Presence of the Divine". It is said standing. One looks at the moon briefly, then one says the blessing, which is in the Prayerbook. The full service includes greeting three other people in turn with the warm words "Shalom Aleichem", reminding us how in ancient times we would greet the messenger from Jerusalem who would tell us that a new month had been declared.

The idea of the rejuvenation of the moon also signifies the rejuvenation of the Jewish people. Hence we also declaim the words of the famous Jewish song: David Melech Yisrael Chai Vekayom: "David King of Israel Lives". Originally this was a password to prove that the message about the new Jewish month was genuine⁹.

It is customary to try to carry out this ceremony at the conclusion of Shabbat. However, if the moon is not visible, any weekday evening is suitable. It is a beautiful way to express our thanks to G-d for His wondrous creation of the world, and to experience something of the spirituality of Jewish teaching.

1. Genesis 25:19-28:9. 2. See Gen.25:34. 3. See Gen.35:22, 49:3-4. 4. See Numbers 8:6-7, and Rashi. The actual Priests, the Kohanim, are considered a subgroup of the tribe of Levi. 5. Exodus 4:22. 6. Gen.12:3, and also Gen.28:14. 7. From the third day after the 'birth' of the moon, usually the 3rd of the Jewish month. Some have the custom to wait till the 7th of the month, when the moon is larger, as a greater sign of blessing. 8. Sanhedrin 42b. 9. See Rosh Hashana 25a.

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SEDRA TOLEDOT

VOICES

Ever since Shifra heard about Perek Shira, the song sung to G-d by all of creation everyday, Shifra longed to sing. She thought of the sky and the earth, the frogs and the fish, the birds and the worms all singing praises, and here she was with nothing to sing. She didn't even know how.

So when Mrs. Kaplan, the principal, came into her classroom one day after recess, and announced that they were starting a school choir, Shifra was ecstatic. She imagined herself in the forest, or near the ocean with the birds and the fish and lions and bears sitting around, and there she was among them, lifting her voice up and emitting the sweetest of sounds, singing her praise to the One who created her.

That day after school, Shifra waited in line outside the choir room with her friend Miriam. Miriam was also trying out for the choir. Shifra was so excited she could barely contain herself and was hopping from foot to foot. When it was time, she and Miriam went into the room together and stood before the choir instructor and several girls from the older classes. Miriam went first. She sang her favourite song. Her voice was clear and pure, and for a moment Shifra forgot that she was next. When Miriam finished, the judges looked at each other and smiled. "You're in!" they said together.

Now it was Shifra's turn. Shifra lifted up her chin and started....croaking!! Really, it sounded as if she had swallowed a frog. She cleared her throat and imagined

herself surrounded by all the animals of creation, trilling to a beautiful tune in harmony....and then she let out...a squawk!! There was a moment of uncomfortable silence and then Shifra burst out laughing, nervously. The judges also began laughing, perhaps because they were embarrassed. "Oh dear," Shifra said between gasps, "I'm not any good, am I?"

"I'm afraid not," one of the judges responded. "At least, at the moment. Maybe try again next term..."

Outside, Miriam looked at Shifra and saw that despite her laughter, she was actually devastated. "You really wanted to sing in the choir, didn't you?" Shifra sighed and looked at the ground, to hide the tears in her eyes.

"Well, first of all," Miriam said, "you can always improve. Maybe you can take lessons or something." Shifra pouted. "And secondly," Miriam added quickly, "do you remember what Isaac said to Jacob in the Sedra when he came to get the blessings, pretending to be Esau?"

"Yes, he said 'the voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau.'"

"Right," Miriam said. "And it says 'voice' twice because Jacob has two special voices, the voice of prayer and the voice of Torah. This is how the Jewish people relate to G-d! In prayer our voice draws us up to G-d, and in Torah, our voice draws G-dliness down to us. Even if you are not in the choir, your voice in your prayer and your Torah study is connecting you with G-d!"

Shifra smiled. She liked the idea that her prayer and study were special communications with G-d, like her personal song. She also thought that if G-d enjoyed the voice of the frog, He just might enjoy her's as well. Suddenly that meant more to her than being in the choir. Even if she croaked or squawked, her voice was the voice of Jacob.

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