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WHO ARE WE? JACOB, JOSEPH OR BOTH?

IN JEWISH TEACHING, LIFE IS ETERNAL: IF NOT IN THIS WORLD, THEN BEYOND it. Perhaps for this reason the Hebrew name of the Sedra¹ concerns 'life' despite the fact that in the course of the Sedra two great people pass away: Jacob and Joseph.

After he passed away, Jacob's body was carried to the Land of Israel where he was buried in the ancestral grave of the Patriarchs, in Hebron². By contrast, Joseph's body was embalmed and put in a coffin which was sunk in the Nile river in Egypt. Only much later would it be carried to Israel by the Jewish people during the Exodus³.

This difference between Jacob and Joseph expresses two different kinds of Jewish spiritual leadership and two contrasting aspects within each of us as an individual.

The ideal state for the Jewish people is to be free, settled and happily serving G-d in the Land of Israel. By contrast the time we spent in ancient Egypt represented exile, slavery and a sense of being remote from holiness.

Jacob spent much of his life in the Land of Israel and was distinctly uncomfortable when he was not there, such as the period of time in Laban's household. By force of circumstances the last years of his life were spent in Egypt. However, he did not live in the central part of the country, but in its eastern region, the Land of Goshen, close to the Holy Land.

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This was far from the glittering and distasteful main centres of commerce and hedonistic living. Goshen was mainly open, under-populated, sheep-farming land. There Jacob lived, surrounded by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, studying Torah. He was, in a sense, beyond the exile of Egypt; he had succeeded in creating around him the spiritual atmosphere of Israel.

This helps us understand why Jacob was so insistent⁴ that he should not be buried in Egypt. He made his son Joseph vow to bury him in the Land of Israel. This, felt Jacob, was his rightful place.

Joseph, by contrast, was a man who succeeded in being close to G-d, a righteous Tzaddik, even though he was fully active in Egyptian society. When he died, his body remained in Egypt, so that his spiritual merit would reflect on the Jewish people enslaved there.

The figures of Jacob and Joseph in the Sedra present us with two examples of spiritual leadership through the ages. One can only function in a secluded atmosphere of holiness. The other has the power to descend into Egypt for the benefit of those who are forced to be there.

These two figures also tell us something about ourselves. On the one hand we have a Joseph within us, who necessarily gets involved in the material dimension of life, while striving – hopefully successfully - to preserve one's spiritual integrity. At the same time, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, we should recognise that we also have an inner Jacob. The Jacob within wants holiness pure and simple, prompting each person towards the sanctity of Jewish home life, Torah study, and the synagogue.

Ultimately the inner Jacob wants the Redemption, when the Jewish people as a whole will return to the Land of Israel and the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, for the benefit of humanity as a whole. We may not always be aware of it, but as Jews this is our deepest wish. Hence, following the lead of his father Jacob, Joseph too is eventually brought to the Holy Land⁵.

1. Genesis 47:28-50:26. The Sages tell us that the name of the Sedra suggests something about its general content. 2. See Gen.47:29-30. 50:4-13. 3. See Gen.50:24-26. Exodus 13:19. 4. Gen. 47:29. 5. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.25 pp.272-4.

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SEDRA VAYECHI

KEEPING YOUR BALANCE

Leah sat there, paintbrush in hand, staring at the beautiful vase in front of her. She examined it from every angle, trying to decide exactly which one would look best on the canvas. She knew, either way, it would come out a masterpiece.

Everyone would constantly tell Leah just how great an artist she was and she'd envision her paintings being worth thousands of pounds. One day she'd be a famous artist and her mere signature would be sold for a fortune – she was sure of that.

For Leah, art was the one subject in school that she didn't have to slog through to get good marks. Always a hard worker, art was that breath of fresh air where work wasn't work but a most enjoyable pastime.

Suddenly her mother's voice broke through her fantasy. "Leah!" she called, "have you done your homework yet?"

Leah groaned, but without looking up, she just continued her painting. Why should she stop something she actually enjoyed doing, to go learn algebra which was as boring to her as, well... as algebra. But after her mother repeatedly called her a number of times, Leah dropped the paintbrush, and turned to her, a look of exasperation on her face.

"Mum," she complained, "why do I need to do homework for subjects that I'm rubbish at, when I could be painting that pretty vase with the flowers?"

“Well, for a start, you’re not rubbish. You just need to work hard to do well. But anyway that’s not the point. You’ve got to do your schoolwork.”

Suddenly Leah’s eyes sparkled as an idea popped into her head. She knew exactly how she’d get her mother to agree with her. “We learnt in school, that in this week’s Sedra it talks about the blessings Jacob gave to each of his sons. He gave each one a blessing that was specific to him, that had to do with his individual talent and personality – not everyone got the same. So it’s the same thing – since I’m good at art, I should concentrate on art and all the other stuff... well I’ll let them drop.” Leah smiled at her little speech with satisfaction. It was pretty good, if she could say so herself.

But Mrs Kahn just laughed, “Quite an impressive argument there Leah. But, you left something out. Rashi tells us that after Jacob gave each one their individual blessing; he went on to repeat all of them to every one of his sons. It’s not just enough to do what you enjoy doing and what comes easy to you and leave everything else aside, a person has responsibilities to do other things as well.”

Leah’s face fell, “So does that mean I can’t just concentrate on art?” she asked.

“Of course you can, but you can’t just let everything else drop – a person has to have a balance. Develop your special talent but also try to strengthen every aspect of your mind, and be physically healthy as well...!”

As she took out her maths book from her bag, Leah smiled. All she had to do was tackle her work, and make sure she wasn’t abandoning other things in life, and then she could go on and finish that beautiful painting.

Ahh, she could almost see the people queuing up in the art gallery, waiting to buy an example of her work...

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