



58

DEALING WITH ADVERSITY

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH AN UNFAMILIAR AND EVEN HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT? You try to survive, yes. But in addition to that, a person also tries to preserve his or her sense of self, one's own identity. "Don't let the conditions here make you forget who you are", you tell yourself.

The next step is something more. You try to find a way to develop and grow, precisely in that unfamiliar environment. In fact, you discover ways to transform negativity into something wholesome. Finding the balance between preserving one's identity and positive interaction with the environment is a subtle issue, which closely relates to the long experience of the Jewish people.

In order to keep one's Jewish identity strong and healthy a fair measure of restraint is needed. One may have to refuse that important dinner invitation - for any of a variety of reasons. (Such as, the event will be on Yom Kippur - and so on). On the other hand, in order to be a creative and positive force in society, transforming attitudes and opening up new frontiers, this restraint has to be combined with boldness, assertiveness and daring.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that an intriguing scene in our Sedra¹ can be understood in terms of these two pathways: struggling to preserve one's own identity, and positively interacting with society.

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Joseph has brought his two sons to his father, the elderly and blind Jacob, so that he could put a hand on the head of each youth and give them his blessing. Joseph thought it would be appropriate that his father's right hand would be on the older son's head, and the left hand on that of the younger brother. Surprisingly, Jacob crossed his arms so that his right hand was on the head of the younger son, named Efraim. When Joseph protested at this, his father insisted this was correct².

What was the disagreement between Joseph and his father Jacob? The Rebbe provides an explanation based on the meaning of the names of the two youths.

Joseph had named his older son Menasheh saying "G-d has dislodged me from my father's house"³. The name Menasheh signifies Joseph's attempt to preserve his identity as the son of his father Jacob. He was now in the immoral Egyptian environment, but was determined to retain his religious and moral identity - as we see in the incident involving Potiphar's wife.

The firstborn Menasheh signifies *restraint*. By contrast he gave his second son the name Efraim, saying "G-d has made me flourish in the land of my affliction"⁴. Efraim represents the second path of creative interaction: flourishing.

Which approach is the most important? Joseph, whose own life was indeed one of struggle to preserve his identity, thought that Menasheh should be dominant. Jacob, looking ahead to the future, thought that Efraim was more important. Certainly, the restraint of Menasheh is essential and even must come first. But the ultimate goal is the positive transformation of the world - which is achieved through Efraim⁵.

Thus the traditional Jewish blessing is: "May G-d make you as Efraim and Menasheh". Menasheh, preserving one's spiritual and moral identity, is essential. But Efraim is the goal: to flourish and have a positive effect on the world.

1. Genesis 47:28-50:26. 2. Gen. 48:13-14, 18-20. 3. Gen.41:51. For this translation, see Rashi to Gen.32:33. 4. Gen.41:52. 5. Based on *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 15, 432-38.

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SEDRA VAYECHI

PARTNERSHIP

Chava flung down her much-chewed pencil, tore the paper out of her notepad, scrunched it up, and threw it across the room into the rubbish bin. "We are just never going to figure this out!" Her classmates Rachel and Miriam shrugged. The three of them sat cross-legged on the rug in Rachel's bedroom.

That day had been a grand day for the three girls - they had been chosen to head and co-ordinate the school Purim play. They had about eight weeks to get it all organised. The problem right now was that they could not all agree on any one topic. Whatever one girl suggested, whether concerning the main theme, the script, or the music, the others contradicted.

Miriam looked up finally and said, "I have to go home and start my homework. Perhaps some other group of girls will have to head the Purim play."

"Well! Perhaps we can each go home, think it over, and call each other later on tonight to see if we can work something out" Rachel said thoughtfully. The others nodded their heads in agreement and packed their schoolbags quietly.

Chava sat at the living room table, her head buried in her arms. Her brother Joel walked into the room. "Chava! What's wrong?" he exclaimed.

She looked up. “Nothing, just..” She explained to her older brother the whole dilemma. “Hmmm. Well, it sounds as though you three have all had your heads so busy with your play that you have not really listened to this week’s Sedra. I think you can really learn a lesson and a solution from it.”

“How?” asked Chava.

“Basically, it speaks about the twelve brothers, the sons of Jacob. Jacob is giving each of them a blessing. Now, there were two of the brothers, Yissachar and Zevulun, who had a partnership. Yissachar would devote himself to studying Torah, because that was what he was good at. Meanwhile, his brother Zevulun would do business and support his brother Yissachar and his family. It worked well both ways. They were both doing what they liked and what they were good at, and while the merit of Yissachar’s learning went also to Zevulun, Yissachar and his family were also being supported.”

Chava looked confused. “But what has that got to do with our play?” she asked.

Joel rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you split the work! Surely you are each good at different things? And enjoy doing different things? Divide up the tasks and let each person get on with her own responsibility. That way you won’t all be stepping on each other’s toes the whole time!”

Chava’s eyes lit up. “That’s an idea! Miriam can write the script, because she’s really good at writing and characterisation, and Rachel can organise the music. And I’ll decide on a theme and the basic plot... Of course, we will have to link together. But each person will have her own job. I think this way it will actually work. Just pass me the phone please!”

‘It just shows what we can learn from the Sedra,’ thought Joel. ‘I bet our ancestor Jacob is pleased...’

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