



THE BODY IS ALSO HOLY

MOST OF THE TIME WE LIVE ON A VERY PHYSICAL LEVEL - concerned about food and drink, clothing, comfort, pleasure. Occasionally we become aware of a spiritual side to our nature as well: the soul.

When we think of the idea of holiness, we generally associate that with the soul rather than the body. The soul, the spiritual side of our being, seeks meaning in life, and a sense of direction. As it continues on this quest, it will discover that it is seeking closeness with G-d. By contrast it seems that the body generally just wants to have a good time...

Yet this is not the way that Jewish teaching views our lives. The soul is holy, and so too is the body. The soul comes close to G-d, and so too does the physical part of our being. But in order for us to express the holiness of the body, we have to guard carefully its behaviour. We have to limit it, and in some ways change it.

For example, the Torah tells us that we should eat only kosher food. Obviously the food we eat becomes part of the body. In other ways too we modify the natural tendencies of the body, and through this we enable it to reach its Divine potential.

Torah teachings about Abraham and Sarah describe the transformation of the physical aspect of life from something neutral to

something positively holy. This concerns particularly the quest to bear a child.

For Abraham and Sarah, the idea of having a child was something absolutely central to their hopes and yearning. Yet many years had gone by and they had not been blessed with children. Then G-d told Abraham that he and Sarah would undergo a spiritual transformation, through which they would enter into a special Covenant with G-d. Then they would bear a child together. This child, Isaac, would become the ancestor of the Jewish people, through whom ultimately all families of the earth would be blessed.

There were two aspects to the transformation of Abraham and Sarah. One concerns their names. Originally called Abram and Sarai, G-d said that now they would be called Abraham and Sarah. The change of name would mean a profound change of being. The Sages explain that the Hebrew name Abraham has the numerical value 248, the number of limbs in the body. Not just the soul, but also the body was now being called into the direct service of G-d.

This was also expressed by the second aspect of their transformation: the Covenant of Circumcision. Through this, the physical body of the Jew would attain positive holiness. Only then would Abraham and Sarah be able to bring a child into the world.

These instructions were given at the end of last week's Sedra. In this week's Sedra¹, Sarah is told that despite the fact that she is ninety years old, she will bear a child. She laughs, and indeed the child was to be called Isaac, meaning laughter.

The Sages tell us that a Jewish woman has from birth the spiritual status of being circumcised. A man has to acquire it. Both have the continual need to discover the power of their holiness, as soul and body together: a discovery which is always surprising, time and again, bringing laughter and joy.

1. Genesis chs.18-22.

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SEDRA VAYERA

INVITING GUESTS

The kitchen smelled wonderful. Chicken soup was bubbling on the stove, the potato kugel was baking in the oven and a chocolate cake sat on the counter, topped with icing sugar.

Mrs. Baker and her two daughters were hard at work, cooking, chopping, peeling, mixing - getting all the delicious food ready for Shabbat.

"We have to make more food than usual," Mrs. Baker informed Talia and Beth. "We're having Mr and Mrs Pearson for dinner tonight and their five children."

"Great! It'll be one fun meal!" Talia smiled in anticipation.

Beth frowned. "Seven extra people tonight?" She didn't look very happy.

"What's up?" Talia asked her younger sister. "Why do you look so upset?"

"Why do we always need to have so many guests?" Beth burst out angrily. "It's not fair! We can never have a quiet family meal. Why? Why do we always have guests?" she asked again.

Mrs. Baker put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Beth, dear, you really shouldn't think of guests as a bother," she said softly. "I love having guests! You know, having guests is a special teaching in the Torah? And it's a lot of fun. Company is great!"

“You know something?” Talia added, a thoughtful look on her face. “I was just learning in class this week that Abraham, our forefather, loved inviting guests. He was so full of kindness. He would wait at the door all day to look for a visitor. Even after he circumcised himself at the age of 99 and he was in real pain, he sat at the door and hoped with all his heart that someone would come to his home. So G-d sent the three angels, who looked like ordinary visitors, to make him feel good.”

“That’s right Talia,” Mrs. Baker said, nodding. “Abraham loved having guests. So, Beth, what do you say? If Abraham could do it, can you?”

Beth looked uncertain. “Well, if Abraham did ...” she said slowly. “I guess it’s OK.”

“We’re very lucky that we get to have so many guests for Shabbat,” Mrs. Baker said. “It’s a privilege.”

Beth’s eyes widened at the word privilege. She had never seen it as a privilege before.

“Think about it,” her mother urged. “All those lovely people out there in the world, wanting to have a nice Shabbat meal with good food and nice songs - and out of all the families in town, they pick us! Isn’t that a privilege, Beth?”

Beth thought about it. She thought about the different people who would come to their home. Yes, they were all very special, each in their own way. *Mommy’s right. It is a privilege.*

“You know, I never thought of it like that before,” she said, brightening up. “You’re right. It is a privilege. So let’s cook up a storm for our seven guests tonight!”

“That’s the spirit!” Mrs. Baker said, laughing and she, along with her two happy daughters, continued cooking for Shabbat.

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