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### TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

**J**ACOB AND HIS CHILDREN ARE THE DIRECT ANCESTORS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE. The sons of Jacob become the leaders of the Twelve Tribes; their history is, directly, the early history of the Jews. The Sedra<sup>1</sup> recounts how Joseph was sold as a slave and was brought to Egypt. As a result, eventually Jacob and all his descendants will move to Egypt and there they will become the Jewish nation.

Just before the beginning of our Sedra, the Torah gives a list of the descendants of Esau<sup>2</sup>. We learn of the leaders of Esau's people, the Edomites, through several generations. Why does the Torah go into such detail? How does it relate to the main theme of the Torah which is, surely, the Jewish people themselves?

Long ago, the Sages commented on this juxtaposition<sup>3</sup>. One way their words have been understood is as saying that the Torah lists the kings of Edom in order to clear the way for the history of Jacob and his descendants which, from this point on, forms the main narrative of the Torah. However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe gives another perspective, in terms of the overall task of Jacob and the Jewish people.

It is true that the focus of the Torah is the special nature and task of the Jewish people. However, an important aspect of that task is their effect on humanity as a whole. The Torah therefore presents the series

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of the kings of Edom representing, in general, the power of the Gentile nations: the Sages tell us that the power of Edom became that of Rome<sup>4</sup>, which became that of our contemporary western world.

It is in terms of this context of the kings of Edom that the life of Jacob and the Jewish people unfold, as is then described by the Torah from this point on. Our task as Jews is to have a positive, transformative effect on the world.

This takes place in a spiritual way, through our own study of Torah and dedicated observance of its laws, and also in more direct terms. Maimonides tells us that G-d has entrusted to us the duty to communicate the Seven Noachide Laws to the Gentiles. Through observance of these teachings every human being can aspire to righteousness (to be a “Righteous Gentile”) and to inherit the World to Come<sup>5</sup>.

The fulfilment of the global responsibility of the Jewish people will be fully realised with the coming of Moshiach, when finally our task to elevate and positively transform the descendants of Esau, and all humanity, will be achieved<sup>6</sup>.

### **ILLUMINATING THE DARKNESS**

This too is the message of the Chanukah lights which we will begin lighting on Tuesday evening. The inner theme of Chanukah is that there is a spiritual radiance which radiates outwards from the Jewish home and the Jewish people. This radiance illuminates the darkness of the surrounding world: it reaches into the darkness and transforms it, so that “the darkness itself shines”<sup>7</sup>. The light of Chanukah has this power because it expresses the depth of the dedication of each Jew to Judaism and to G-d. Through our intense, inner bond with the Infinite, we draw the radiance of the Infinite into the world, changing darkness and pain into light and joy.

1. Genesis chs.37-40. 2. Gen.36:1-43. 3. See Rashi at the beginning of our Sedra. 4. See Rashi to Gen.36:43. 5. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, 8:10-11. 6. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 15, pp.302-9. 7. See R.Dov Ber’s *Sha’arei Orah* 43b.

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SEDRA VAYESHEV

**BIG PICTURE**

Rebecca sat by her supper table with her parents and siblings, Michelle and Daniel, but her mind was far away. She was thinking about her Sedra lesson at school that day where they had learned about the story of Joseph and his brothers, who had thrown him in a pit and sold him to merchants as a slave. 'What's on your mind?' asked her father.

'Well I was just wondering, how could the children of Jacob, who was such a great man, do such a terrible thing, to their very own brother?'

'You mean when they sold him to the merchants as a slave?' her father asked. 'Yes,' said Rebecca. 'It was terrible!'

'They were jealous of him', said her brother Daniel. 'Joseph told them his dream how they would all bow down to him one day'. 'Yes,' said Michelle, 'and also Jacob favoured Joseph, and made him a special coat, so they were jealous of him because of that'.

'But that still doesn't explain it', said Rebecca, almost emotionally.

'You are right', said her father. 'But,' he continued, 'in order to understand how G-d should let such tragic things happen you have to look at the big picture'.

The three children waited for him to explain what he meant by 'big picture'.

'You see, if the brothers had not sold Joseph to the merchants as a slave, then he would not have ended up in the land of Egypt, and then Joseph would not have been appointed as second to the king, and he would not have been able to warn Pharaoh about the famine, and then Jacob and all his brothers would not have come down to Egypt later on, because Egypt would not have stored up all the food in time for the famine...'

'But then the Jews would not have landed up in Egypt at all! That would have been a good thing, no?' Rebecca didn't see the sense.

'True,' her father replied, 'but had they not gone into Egypt they would not have had food during the famine. That's one point. But another is that they would not have been able to receive the Torah'.

'Why not?!' asked Rebecca.

Her father smiled. 'You see,' he explained, 'Egypt was the most impure land, and the children of Israel had to enter and face that impurity in order to be able to experience the giving of the Torah – which is the most pure thing in the world. They had to face and go through the darkness of Egypt in order to receive the light of the Torah.'

'You could say that it's the same with us being in Exile now,' said Michelle, 'and coming closer to the time of the Messiah.'

'Wow,' said Daniel, drumming his fingers on the table, 'That's deep!'

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