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RISK ALL TO GAIN ALL

WHEN EVERYTHING IS COMFORTABLE WE THANK G-D FOR THE PEACE AND THE CALM, we are relaxed and contented and so is everyone else around us. However, there are times in our history when there is tension and trouble. For the sake of our ideals, we put our lives at risk. This brings out our deepest qualities. This idea relates to the Sedra¹ of the week, which tells the story of Joseph and his brothers. It also helps us understand the festival of Chanukah which begins on Friday night, with one candle (lit before the Shabbat candles).

The Sedra begins with the description of Joseph's relationship with his brothers. He was the second youngest son, and their father Jacob favoured him, which led to serious conflict in the family. Then Joseph began having mysterious dreams, which both he and others too understood as signifying future power over his brothers. When he recounted these dreams they made his brothers hate him even more.

At this point his father Jacob asked him to travel to the distant place where his brothers were grazing their flocks, to bring back news about them. This was a strange request. Jacob knew clearly the attitude of his older sons towards Joseph. Even if he did not expect the disastrous events which actually took place, he knew that the relationship among his sons was very tense. Why put his beloved Joseph through such an ordeal?

The Sages tell us that there was a supernatural aspect to Jacob's instruction to Joseph. It was not prompted by ordinary human concerns, but was the product of a Divine impulse. It was in this way

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that G-d chose to put in motion the promise given to Abraham, concerning the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus: “for your descendants will be strangers in a land which is not theirs; they will be enslaved... but after that they will come out with great wealth”².

Now let us consider the events from Joseph’s point of view. His father had instructed him to do something which he could see was dangerous. Further, while searching for his brothers he met a man who (according to Rashi) told him they were in a menacing mood and were seeking a means to kill him³. He knew he was putting his life at risk, yet he felt that he must do so. This was his father Jacob’s command, and Joseph felt that he must be ready for self-sacrifice in order to carry it out.

The power of self-sacrifice is that it reaches to the very essence of a person’s being, and also to the essence of the Divine. Joseph became a symbol of dedication to G-d, even while in the house of Potiphar in Egypt, even when becoming Viceroy and manager of a vast enterprise supplying food to the entire region.

This brings us to Chanuka, which likewise celebrates the power of self-sacrifice. The Jews were not forced to battle against the Syrian Greeks. Indeed, many Jews happily accepted Greek culture. The determination to stand up for the unique Jewish values of monotheism and the laws of the Torah came from the small group of the Macabbees, sons of the High Priest. They put their lives at risk for the sake of authentic Judaism. The Sages tell us that the miracle of the lights was a Divine response to their self-sacrifice.

For both Joseph and the Macabbees, the step of self-sacrifice, called *mesirat nefesh*, connected the essence of the person with the essence of G-dliness⁴. Through this they were able to fulfil their role as true emissaries of the Divine. For all subsequent generations there is the ideal figure of Joseph the Zaddik, and the unconquerable lights of Chanuka, guiding and inspiring our own daily lives...

1. Genesis chs.37-40. 2. Genesis 15:13-14. See Rashi to Gen.37:14. The selling of Joseph resulted in his being taken to Egypt; there he became Viceroy, and this eventually led to the entire family of Jacob settling there and, much later, being enslaved. 3. See Rashi to Gen. 37:17. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.1.35, pp. 169-175.

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SEDRA VAYESHEV - CHANUKAH

A SUPERHERO

Eli slumped against the couch. His brothers and sisters sat around the table. There were piles of chocolate chips in front of each one. They were playing dreidel. Several Chanuka Lamps lined the window-sill and there was one in the doorway. The aroma of latkes drifted in from the kitchen.

“Why so glum, Eli?” Yudit called to her brother as she spun her dreidel. The dreidel landed on “nun,” and Yudit passed it on to her sister sitting next to her.

“Those kids at the playground were so mean!” Eli pouted. “They just wouldn’t stop teasing me about my Tzitzit and Kippah!”

“What are you going to do about it?” Yudit watched out of the corner of her eye as her brother collected half the pile of chocolate chips.

Eli imagined those boys teasing him. Then he saw himself swooping in. He was about five times taller and bigger than he really was. And...was that a superhero cape he was wearing??

Eli jumped up on the couch and stretched to his full height. He lifted one hand in the air. “Why, I’m going to get them!!!” He leapt off the couch and feigned a punch in the air before him.

“Whoa! Slow down buddy! You really think that’s going to work?”

Eli looked down at himself, five times smaller than he had imagined. “Maybe not,” he said.

“Eli, you just lit your Chanukah lamp, right?” Eli looked at the little flames dancing against the black window. “Do you see how the little flames create so much light even though it is so dark outside? That’s how you get rid of darkness.” Yudit pushed her entire pile of chocolate chips back into the center pile. Her brothers and sisters cheered, and she rolled her eyes. “Imagine,” Yudit sat back in her chair, “if you went out at night, and instead of taking a light with you, you tried to chase away the darkness with a broom!”

Yudit suddenly jumped up and ran to the door. She flung it open and gave a karate chop. “I’m going to get you darkness!” Yudit grabbed an umbrella from near the door and shook it at the black night. “Whack! Whack!” Yudit hit the air with her umbrella, as if there was something there. Behind her, all her brothers and sisters were clutching their sides and laughing hysterically. Yudit came back to the table, out of breath from her war with the night.

“Do you understand, Eli? Each mitzvah you do and word of Torah you learn creates more light. That’s how we win!”

Eli looked down at his Tzitzit. They were constant reminders that G-d was with him and that he, Eli, had a mission to fill for Him. Eli stood up tall. Maybe superheros didn’t need to wear capes after all.

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