


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 5 December 2008 - 8 Kislev 5769
Sedra Vayeitzei

DEALING WITH THE WORLD

A CONSTANT CHALLENGE FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL, AND ALSO for the Jewish people as a whole, is how one balances the spiritual dimension of life with worldly, materialist activities. On the one hand there is prayer, Torah study, spiritual Mitzvot like lighting candles for Shabbat and a contemplative approach to life, on the other there are the humdrum practicalities, material pursuits and more earthy aspects of living in the daily world.

Another version of this divide is that between the Jewish people and other nations. This too represents a delicate balance. On the one hand there is the need to preserve Jewish identity and the singular nature of Jewish values and culture, on the other there is the wish to play a useful part in society as a whole.

A passage in the Sedra¹ helps us understand the subtlety of these relationships. Jacob was living in the home of his idolatrous uncle Laban. He married Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, and worked for his uncle as a shepherd. Yet at every stage Laban tried to cheat him. As a result, Jacob and his wives determined to run away.

Laban and his men pursue Jacob. When they meet, they agree to create a clear border between them, and build a pile of stones to mark the boundary². Laban's territory will be to the east of the pile of stones, and Jacob's to the west. They declare that neither they nor their

descendants will ever cross that border for war. Rashi comments: but they can cross it for business dealings³.

In Chassidic teachings the border between Jacob and Laban is seen as the divide between the sacred and the profane. This distinction is important. One has to know clearly what represents the Jewish dimension of holiness, and what does not.

Yet here comes a subtlety. The Hebrew word for the pile of stones is *gal*. This word also means “reveal”. There is a border, but sometimes, with care, one crosses the border. The purpose for doing so is in order to reveal and establish holiness in a realm which until now has been ordinary, non-holy, secular.

How can this be done? Through the Mitzvot of the Torah, which involve the practical world yet connect it with infinite G-dliness. One earns money - that is surely a worldly, mundane activity. Yet from the money one has earned, one donates a proportion to charity. This is a Mitzvah of the highest order of sanctity. Through this *all* the money one earns is elevated to connect with the Divine.

The laws of the Torah help one understand on which side of the pile of stones one should be. So too do Torah teachings, especially those which express the spiritual, inner dimension of Jewish teaching. Hence the word *gal*, a pile of stones, also has the numerical value (gematria) of 33, hinting at the 33rd Day of the Omer. This commemorates the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the famous author of the Zohar, the source-book of the kabbalistic side of Judaism.

Knowledge of Torah teachings, and especially of their inner aspect, helps the person in his or her path through life, providing a sense of balance. One knows when to go forward, and when to withdraw; when Jacob must remain in his own territory, and when his or her task is to advance into that of Laban, and reveal the latent holiness and goodness which is hidden in all existence⁴.

For this is the true task of every Jew...

1. Genesis 28:10-32:3. 2. See Gen. 31:46-53. 3. Rashi to 31:52. 4. Based feely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.3 p.794 and *Sefer HaMaamarim Melukat*, p.271-8.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

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SEDRA VAYEITZEI

PRAY BEFORE SKIING?!

Year Four could barely contain their excitement within the four walls of their classroom. They were all sitting, during their break, with their teacher, Mr Benson, and discussing their forthcoming ski trip. They had worked hard for this ski trip, and now – it was finally happening.

“Everyone should come to school on time on the day of the trip,” Mr Benson was saying, “so we will have enough time to pray before the coach comes to collect us.”

Benjy gasped in outrage, as did some of his classmates. “Mr Benson – we can’t pray before our trip! That will waste time - and we want to spend the entire day on the slopes!”

Mr Benson held up his hand to stop the barrage of complaints. “Hold it boys – we just learned this week’s Sedra together – Sedra Vayeitzei. What does it tell us about Jacob?”

Adam ventured a reply. “Well, Jacob leaves his birthplace, and his family. He leaves the holy land of Israel, and travels to Haran – a difficult and harsh

place to live, where there were lots of idol worshippers.”

Mr Benson smiled. “Good. Now listen, boys – Jacob is leaving his family. How many of you have left your family for a time longer than a week or two?”

No one raised their hand.

Mr. Benson continued. “Jacob is travelling to place which would be extremely challenging for him to live in and keep G-d’s commandments. Have you ever been in a place which is really difficult and challenging?”

The boys began thinking about different challenging places they had visited, but no one raised their hand.

Mr. Benson was looking really serious. “Boys – Jacob was going to a strange land, and was going to have to learn how to cope with it. However - the first thing he did was pray – yup – pray!”

Benjy nodded. “You mean when he dreamt about the ladder, which is sometimes called the ladder of prayer? I thought that was when he slept!”

Mr. Benson shook his head. “No, it was just before he lay down to sleep. Rashi tells us. He invented the evening prayer, and he prayed.”

Benjy smiled. “Hey...I guess we should take a lesson from Jacob. He was going for much longer than a day trip and he made sure to pray first.”

David, in a quiet voice, summed it up for everyone. “No matter what we do, and where we are, the first thing to do as Jews is – pray to G-d!”

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