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ACTION AND MEANING

WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT, THE SIMPLE ACTION, OR THE MEANING behind the action? This is one of the topics hidden in this week's Sedra¹. Joseph is the Viceroy of all Egypt. His brothers who sold him into slavery are now standing before him, pleading for the life of Benjamin, the only full brother of Joseph. How was Benjamin saved? The Sedra begins "And Judah drew near to him", that is, to Joseph.

Judah and Joseph represent two aspects of the Jewish people, two different lines of power. King Saul, the first Jewish King, was descended from Benjamin, the full brother of Joseph. But Saul's line of kingship was replaced by that of King David and his son Solomon, the descendants of Judah.

Then at a later stage there was again a division. When Solomon passed away the kingdom split in two: the Northern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah. The Southern Kingdom was focused on Jerusalem and the descendants of David and Solomon who reigned there, representing Judah. By contrast the Northern Kingdom relates to Joseph². Eventually the divisive behaviour of the Jewish people led to the destruction of the two Temples and the dispersion of the Jews.

A further idea is that Judah and Joseph express two different kinds of approach to life. This is based on kabbalistic concepts. Joseph, the

117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF
cru@lubavitchuk.com - www.chabadresearch.org

ninth Sefirah (Divine Attribute), “Foundation”, represents overt feeling and responsiveness, a sense of meaning. Judah, the tenth Sefirah, “Kingship” of “Fulfilment”, expresses simple action.

Which is more important? We need feeling and responsiveness. We are constantly searching for a sense of meaning and for sincere emotion. The problem is that if we base our lives only on the things to which we can easily respond we may miss some very important connections.

Chassidic teachings explain that when a person carries out a good deed, a Mitzva, the inner soul always *does* respond. The soul is in touch with the Divine and can relate directly to the Divine quality of the Mitzva. But the conscious mind of the person may be far away; it is as yet not sensitive enough. Nonetheless, the Mitzva must be carried out, for the sake of the person’s inner reality and his or her purpose in the universe.

This shows us the power of Judah: simple action. Judah has to draw near to Joseph and in fact he has to be stronger than Joseph. The simple power of action has to be seen and has to operate in our lives. Then, gradually, we can educate our conscious mind to understand and to respond, to reach the quality of Joseph³.

The Haftorah⁴ speaks of the time when the two kingdoms of ancient Israel will again be joined: Judah and Joseph will be one. This means, on one level, that in the time of the Messiah, the Jewish people will be truly united.

On another level, it means that action and meaning will be joined. The dislocation between the body and soul will be healed. This points the way to bring freedom for Benjamin and for everyone else. When there is the right balance between action and meaning, there is unity within any one person. From being unified as individuals, we can more easily join with others. And unity among the Jewish people will ultimately bring unity and peace to the entire world.

1. Genesis 44:18-47:27. 2. The first King of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam, was from the tribe of Ephraim, the son of Joseph. 3. See the discussion of this Sedra in Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Torah Or*. 4. Ezekiel 37:15-28.

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SEDRA VAYIGASH

FOREVER AS ONE

Leah could barely contain her excitement! Her older brother, Gerry, was due to arrive back home later on this afternoon.

The entire family was planning on piling into the family car to pick him up from the airport. Gerry had just spent three months studying abroad in the USA. The house had seemed so empty and quiet the whole time, and Leah, especially, missed her older brother sorely.

Gerry was the type to give up an afternoon of studying, and instead go biking with the family. Even though his studies were really serious, he always felt that his family - parents, Leah, and younger brother Ben - were what counted most. And now he was coming back home!!

Later on that evening, after the excitement of the reunion had somewhat abated, Leah quietly tiptoed down the hallway and knocked on her older brother's door.

"Come in," Gerry called.

With the same smile lighting up her face since earlier on that day, Leah walked in shyly. "Gerry – you're home – you're really home! Everything seems so complete now that you are home!"

Gerry smiled back, and then settled down in the old familiar armchair in his room, while Leah came and sat on the chair by his desk. "Leah, do you realize that this week's Torah portion, Vayigash, talks about a rather similar reunion?"

Leah loved it when Gerry would engage her in long conversations. She was proud that she knew what he was referring to, as well.

“Sure – Judah comes over to Joseph, viceroy to the king, in defence of his younger brother Benjamin, who is falsely accused of theft. Joseph, who until now, was hiding his identity from his brothers, could no longer contain himself, and revealed who he was.”

Gerry became very animated. “The very place that tore the twelve brothers apart, Egypt, now became the grounds for a very emotional gathering. When the ten brothers sold Joseph years before, he was taken to Egypt and they were divided. But now in Egypt itself all twelve brothers were reunited! Afterwards, Jacob, the father of the family, decides to move to Egypt as well with the entire family, all his children and grandchildren. They came to seventy people altogether. Now they were all one, united.”

Leah smiled again. “I understand why the brothers were so happy at being together again. You weren’t away for years, and no one sold you to the Egyptians. You just had a student exchange scheme so you could study in America. But I suppose the fact that everyone is so happy to be reunited shows how important unity is. It really draws everyone together.”

“Well,” said Gerry. “You are right. Being together really is special. I had a wonderful time in the USA, where I saw some of our relatives as well – so I was together with them. It is certainly something special to be back, with you and the whole family. But even when I am away from you, I am still your brother, and I still care about you!”

“Yes,” said Leah, “you sent me a nice birthday email. I was so pleased you remembered!”

“So the Sedra is telling us that it is good to be together and reunited. But in fact, we are united anyway.”

“Yes,” smiled Leah, getting up to leave. “Always one”.

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