


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 12 December 2008 - 15 Kislev 5769
Sedra Vayishlach

RESISTERS AND AFFIRMERS

A PSYCHOLOGIST WHO WAS RESEARCHING RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN THE JEWISH community, some years ago, came to the conclusion that some people could be termed ‘resisters’ while others are ‘affirmers’. The resisters resist being told what to do. When considering the details of some aspect of traditional Jewish life, and all its dos and don’ts, the typical resistor often feels it is too much and too difficult, and has to struggle to comply.

By contrast the affirmers feel inspired and encouraged. They love hearing what Jewish teachings tell them. If they hear that they have to go to a lot of trouble in order to ensure that some aspect of daily life is more closely in accordance with Jewish law, they cheerfully accept this. “No problem, yes, of course....”

A further subtlety is that the resistors often turn into affirmers. A man or woman who starts off resisting the idea that traditional Jewish laws might have a role to play in their lives often ends up affirming enthusiastically that these teachings in all their details provide the most meaningful way to live. There also exist people who move from being enthusiasts to becoming resistors. Yet, for everyone, the story is still in progress.



In Memory of ARYEH (LOUIS) LITTMAN ~~vng~~ who
passed away on 16th Kislev 5748 (1987). Dedicated by
his wife and family and family, with love

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Indeed, in any one individual there can nestle both a resistor and an affirmer, at the same time. At one point the resistor is dominant, at another, the affirmer. Yet, in a sense, the fact that the resistor resisted helps make the enthusiastic affirmation more whole-hearted, at least at that point in time. Later, the resistor might well come back into play.

These two aspects of a person relate to a theme in our Sedra¹, as explained by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. There is a striking passage in which Jacob wrestles with an angel, which the Sages tell us was the spiritual force of Esau². Although Jacob was temporarily harmed in the struggle, the angel was not able to overcome him. Then the angel tells Jacob that since he has been successful in the struggle he will have a new name: Israel³.

The name Jacob relates to the Hebrew word *ekev* meaning ‘heel’. When Jacob was born his hand was clutching the heel of his older twin brother Esau. Jacob had to struggle with Esau and also with his uncle Laban. The name Jacob suggests struggle and facing opposition and being in a difficult situation. By contrast Israel relates to *sar*, a prince, suggesting leadership, and includes the letters of the word *rosh* meaning ‘head’.

Earlier in the Torah⁵, when Abraham and Sarah were given new names by G-d, the old names are never used again. However, in the case of Jacob the Torah continues to use both names for him, Jacob and Israel. The Rebbe explains that this is because both Jacob and Israel exist within each Jew⁶. On the one hand, there is the resistor, who still has to struggle, on the other there is the affirmer, who is inspired.

For many of us, much of our lives are spent in some form of struggle, and inspiration is rare. Yet for G-d, our struggle too is precious: the times when it is *not* easy. However, both dimensions exist within our hearts. At any moment, prompted who knows by what, we might move from Jacob to Israel, from inner struggle to inspired illumination.

1. Genesis 32:4-36:43. 2. See Rashi to Gen.32:25. 3. Gen.32:29. 5. Gen.17:5,15.
6. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.3. pp.795-8.

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SEDRA VAYISHLACH

NO MORE WISH LIST!

Rebecca gazed out of the large bay window, and sighed. “If only I were a princess,” she said, thinking out loud, “then I would be able to ask the King for anything I wished.”

Her mother, Mrs. Benson, who was passing by while carrying a load of laundry, overheard Rebecca’s comment. She placed the laundry basket on the floor, and lovingly put her hand on her daughter’s head. “Rebecca – don’t you know that you *are* a princess?”

Rebecca looked up at her mother, making sure she wasn’t pulling her leg. “What do you mean?” Mrs. Benson pointed upward. “G-d is our King, and you, and all the Jewish mothers and daughters in the world are His princesses!”

Rebecca smiled. “Do you mean that G-d will do anything I ask? Wow! That’s great news! Why don’t I take advantage of it, and put my requests before G-d. In fact, I will give Him my entire wish list----”

“Well, you are doing that every time you pray to G-d. You are saying you are dedicated to G-d and asking Him to help you”.

“I don’t mean that kind of important thing,” said Rebecca. “I know G-d is giving us that. What I mean is, you know, fun things. Things a princess would ask her father the King to give her.”

Mrs. Benson held up her hand, as if to say stop. She then walked over to the bookshelf and took the book of the Torah off the shelf. “Where was that again...hmmmm....oh wow! It is in this week’s Torah portion – Sedra Vayishlach!”

Rebecca walked across the room to join her mother, curious as to what she was looking for. “Mom – you are at the part when Jacob is about to meet his brother Esau. He is praying really hard to G-d, because the last time they were together, Esau wanted to kill him!”

Mrs. Benson nodded proudly. “Yup – that is exactly right! Jacob begins praying to G-d to spare him from Esau, his brother. Do you remember what Jacob said?”

“Didn’t Jacob tell G-d how small he felt, and how few good deeds he thought he had?” Rebecca asked. “Jacob was asking G-d to help him, even though he thought he didn’t deserve it.”

Mrs. Benson nodded as she put the book of the Torah back in its spot on the shelf. “That’s right. Jacob was teaching us a lesson. Of course Jacob was deserving of G-d’s help. Yet, he was very humble, and did not expect anything from G-d on account of his merit. And in the end, G-d did help him, and saved him from Esau.”

Rebecca smiled. “So you mean that when I, as a princess, don’t ask G-d to give me things because I think I deserve them, then He will be much more generous and much more giving. Away with the wish list!”

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